ARGUING THE INARGUABLE:

IDEOLOGY AND ETHOS IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICAL NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

In "Arguing the Inarguable: Ideology and Ethos in the Twentieth-Century Political Novel," I examine novels by twentieth-century British and postcolonial writers whose longstanding interest in political ethos was stimulated by Communist and other far-left movements in Britain and the Commonwealth. In both fiction and non-fiction by George Orwell, Wyndham Lewis, and Doris Lessing, the exceptional persona of the left-wing political dissident stimulates these writers' contemplation of what it means to have political beliefs at all. The Marxist tradition of ideology critique thus proves crucial for them despite their varied attempts at distancing themselves from Marxist politics. Late-twentieth and twenty-first century developments in literary and political theory illuminate these novels' contemporary relevance to debates about identity and belief.

In examining Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I consider how Orwell's interest in impersonal modes of political engagement challenges characterizations of his work as anti-intellectual and typological. Rather, I argue, the acquirable powers of ideology critique and abstract analysis are essential for his brand of democratic socialism, because they are separable from personality, taste, and comportment. In *The Revenge for Love* by Wyndham Lewis, long noted for his anti-Communism, the working-class Communist protagonist enables the novel's satirical insights rather than serving as the target of them, as I show. By focalizing his criticism of the British bourgeois left through a committed Communist, Lewis is able to advance a political critique that defies most categorizations of Lewis as reactionary. Rather, Lewis is committed to an intellectually rigorous, unflinchingly

modern ethos that compels him to deny the feasibility of an apolitical or anti-political

posture of personal authenticity. Doris Lessing's fiction, by contrast, suggests that

separation of private life from political engagement is impossible; rather, their

inevitable influence on each other in the far-left tends to be corrosive. From *The Golden

Notebook* to "The Temptation of Jack Orkney*"* to *The Good Terrorist* (set in the

Thatcher era), Lessing shows Marxism's decline in the British political ethos, from its

height during Orwell's career.

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Introduction

Like a nimble dialectician, the political novelist must be able to handle several ideas at once, to see them in their hostile yet interdependent relations and to grasp the way in which ideas *in the novel* are transformed into something other than the ideas of a political program. The ideas of actual life, which may have prompted the writer to compose his novel, must be left inviolate; the novelist has no business tampering with them in their own domain, nor does he generally have the qualifications for doing so. But once these ideas are set to work within the novel they cannot long remain mere lumps of abstraction. At its best, the political novel generates such intense heat that the ideas it appropriates are melted into its movement and fused with the emotions of its characters. [...] This is one of the great problems, but also one of the supreme challenges, for the political novelist: to make ideas or ideologies come to life, to endow them with the capacity for stirring characters into passionate gestures and sacrifices, and even more, to create the illusion that they have a kind of independent motion, so that they themselves—those abstract weights of idea or ideology—seem to become active characters in the political novel.[1]

This dissertation considers how a series of writers with differing but intense interests in communism[2] theorized and narrated the dialectic between *political beliefs themselves* and the *experience of holding them*. More specifically, it shows how these writers drew on the intellectual resources of *ideology critique* to explore and advance a public ethos appropriate to their political moment. In this introduction, I outline the

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[1] Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), 21.

[2] Like some of the texts it discusses, this work takes an intuitive, *ad hoc* approach to the terms *communism, Communism, revolutionary socialism, Marxism, and leftism*. To emphasize the official partisan, institutional, and geopolitical dimensions of the body of thought constituting *communism*, *Communism/Communist* will be used. *Revolutionary socialism* will tend to refer to similar or related movements not allied with Communism. *Socialism* will refer to less overtly revolutionary or militarized ideas about left alternatives to capitalism. *Left* and *Marxist/Marxian* will carry their own familiarly ambivalent meanings.

general shape of this argument, its scholarly and disciplinary influences, and the body of established views about these authors; in the individual chapters, I chart how the development of politically committed characters—often in the course of dialogue, argument, or other markedly rhetorical situations—structures the development of ethe whose stakes these authors regard as especially high.

In both literary and critical works spanning from the 1930s to the 1980s, the postcolonial–British writers George Orwell, Wyndham Lewis, and Doris Lessing grapple—sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes ambivalently, sometimes with repulsion—with the emergence of communist movements in their countries. The three were all aware of each other's writing, and if they do not constitute a tradition, they may nonetheless be understood as creating a self-conscious current of thought. In considering their works, I attend to their own positing of a distinction between the ins and outs of communist political goals and theories, on the one hand, and the experience of communist dissent within a larger political environment, on the other. Communism, revolutionary socialism, and intellectual Marxism not only captured these writers' attention in and of themselves but also compelled them to think about the nature of political commitment more generally and abstractly, beyond the particulars of official Communist strategy or formal Marxist theorizing.

Furthermore, these writers take up political beliefs, their expression, and the experience of them through characters who are themselves leftists of one kind or another. Their novels figure their characters—and in turn invite the reader to figure them—as case studies in political engagement, first, and as embedded actors in specific left movements, second. These characters, and their novels' treatment of them, form an

essential part of each author's public intellectual persona—not that their characters are reflections of them or that they become like their characters, but that where these authors sought to intervene in the political field widely, their characters crystallize key aspects of their political thought. It would be true but awkward to say that these authors wrote "committed literature"; more precisely, they produced a body of work *about* commitment as such.

Unlike the works of canonical modernism or postmodernism, these texts retain ordinary realistic conventions. But they add to them certain formal or generic tweaks that register their authors' effort to clarify their views about the nature of political belief. While these works may thematize ideas like artistic autonomy, then, the works themselves make no such explicit claim; they are overtly political interventions on the part of high-profile, public, professional writers. My aim here is to bring to light different features of these authors' intended meanings, and to fill out our understanding of the explicitly political dispensations in their literary work.[3] In

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[3] For a cogent and clarifying account of the relation between intentionality and argument in fiction, see Patrick Fessenbecker, "In Defense of Paraphrase," in which he seeks to

> point out that there is another way in which novels are formally engaged in the project of moral philosophy. Perceiving this way involves the realization that the act of telling a story involving characters and events at a certain level of complexity necessarily requires the depiction of decision, deliberation, and action. To the extent that authors depict such things, they develop theses about how such psychological processes work, and these theses have philosophical content. And in this way, understanding the literary text requires an understanding of its philosophical content, or developing a theoretically nuanced paraphrase (121).

In contrasting his call for paraphrase with both deconstructive proscriptions of intention, and Jamesonian accounts of texts' ideological symptoms, Fessenbecker is especially revivifying:

> But there is nevertheless an implicit agreement among all these ways of approaching a text that the ideas are not worthy of analysis in themselves, and that the literary critic must in some sense look past them. This, ultimately, is the interpretive impulse I want to resist. I want to defend reading "with," as opposed to reading "against," the "grain" of

pursuing this line, however, I work against the grain of much in these authors' public personas and reputations. Orwell, Lessing, and Lewis have all been seen not only as anti-communist (this is true but inconsistently so), but also as in one way or another unmasking political pretensions for a public they see as already disillusioned or in the process of being disillusioned by *them*. Likewise, all three have been seen as settling on a notion of human existential density that would be posed *against* political argument, or that would give the lie to argument. In other words, all of these writers have been considered by some to be, in varying but important senses, anti-politics, in their careful attendance to the vicissitudes of individual psychology and in their purported valuation of the individual mind as the seat of all moral knowledge.

Not only does this dissertation reject the notion that Orwell, Lewis, and Lessing's work has so clear an anti-political gist; it also aims to show how their works shed light on ongoing theoretical debates. In the remaining sections of this introduction, I will introduce some key contemporary approaches to problems of political belief and experience even as I argue for the utility of deploying *ethos* (in relation to ideology critique) in addressing these problems. I begin with the subfield of political psychology, whose animating methods offer an analytical advantage over some forms of affect theory, in my view, but fail to offer a coherent account of *ideology* on the other hand. Then, from a consideration of vectors of *ideology* that exceed psychological

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the text, and to do so in a way that does not dismiss formal considerations, but instead recognizes their contribution to a text's paraphrasable content. And though I have emphasized moral-philosophical claims, obviously narratives offer assertions recognizable in many fields, so this general approach might perhaps better be described—though with a hint of oxymoron—as a "content formalism." (134)

measurement, I suggest why ideology critique and ethos offer an especially handy vocabulary both for grasping these writers' works and for understanding how these works illuminate some contemporary theoretical controversies.

Political psychology, affect, and ideology

Getting into questions of personality and political position in literature requires, at the very least, a glance over one's shoulder at other disciplines' findings on these matters. The discipline of political psychology has, intermittently since at least the 1950s, taken on the task of studying the relationship between individual personality and political position and behavior. In *The Authoritarian Personality,* Theodor Adorno and his collaborators spearheaded an ongoing investigation into conservative and authoritarian political personalities, in particular. Although its implicit biases and methodology have been critiqued in subsequent social science, the work's basic claims have more or less endured scientific scrutiny: studies show that people identifying as liberal are more open to new experience, and are more willing to take on systematic rather than personal frames of criticism in arguing about controversial issues; conservatives are drawn to order and authority, perceive the world to be more dangerous, and seek explanations that justify the hierarchies and inequalities of the status quo.[4] A more recent example of this kind of research, *Personality and the*

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[4] The original claims of *The Authoritarian Personality* are not different from political-psychological research's findings today:

> A basically hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitative parent-child relationship is apt to carry over into a power-oriented, exploitively dependent attitude towards one's sex partner and one's God and may well culminate in a political philosophy and social outlook which has no room for anything but a desperate clinging to what appears to be

Foundations of Political Behavior by Jeffrey J. Mondak,[5] models political positions and behaviors along the "Big Five" personality traits—openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability—which have emerged in psychology as the most enduring and valid measurable aspects of personality.

Political psychology has not, however, emerged on the scene as a major critical resource in the study of literature or political theory; other scientific—or perhaps scientistic—inquiries have prevailed instead. Both the theoretical "turn to affect" and an emerging interest in neuroscience among humanities scholars signal an ongoing commitment to the critique of reason and intention. Both seek to uncover the ways in which affect (either as a category defying reasoned analysis and thereby dissolving it, or as a set of scientifically knowable processes that preempt conscious deliberation) undermines both argument and ideology critique as authoritative paradigms for assessing cultural experience and production. These are recent forms of post-ideological thinking, although they do not partake of the particular geopolitical analysis that originally accompanied this particular term. Rather than arriving at a post-ideological moment by means of ideological consensus or hegemony, a post-ideological

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strong and a disdainful rejection of whatever is relegated to the bottom [and] the formation of stereotypes and of ingroup-outgroup cleavages. Conventionality, rigidity, repressive denial, and the ensuing break-through of one's weakness, fear and dependence are but other aspects of the same fundamental personality pattern, and they can be observed in personal life as well as in attitudes toward religion and social issues. (971)

[5] Jeffrey J. Mondak, *Personality and the Foundations of Political Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

theory may deny the authority of intention and instead suggest that affect gives the lie to deliberative rationality.

In a formidable appraisal of affect theory's sway in the humanities, Ruth Leys offers a concise summary of its more problematic features. In her account, affect humanities theorists

> suggest that the affects must be viewed as independent of, and in an important sense prior to, ideology—that is, prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs— because they are nonsignifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning. For the theorists in question, affects are "inhuman," "pre-subjective," "visceral" forces and intensities that influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these. Whatever else may be meant by the terms affect and emotion—more on this in a moment—it seems […] that the affects must be noncognitive, corporeal processes or states. For such theorists, affect is, as [Brian] Massumi asserts, "irreducibly bodily and autonomic."[6]

My interest here is to suggest that political psychology offers an account of, if not exactly the pre-cognitive vicissitudes of affect, then of the *kind* of experience to which affect seems connected: habits of mind that are non-deliberative, non-rational, and difficult to excise from a holistic view of one's mental life. Through the measurement of attitudes that constitute personality, political psychology can clarify how, say, one's political opinions are correlated with feelings and stances not overtly political. To put it another way, inasmuch as political beliefs are derived from intention, political psychology can measure the distance between that intention and the cruder, conversational sense of what a person "is like." By contrast, affect theory and "neuropolitics" actually deny intentionality, to their detriment, according to Leys:

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[6] Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011), 436–437.

A related question is why anti-intentionalism exerts such a fascination over the cultural critics and theorists whose work I have been criticizing in this essay—especially since one price their views exact is to imply such a radical separation between affect and reason as to make disagreement about meaning, or ideological dispute, irrelevant to cultural analysis. But that is a topic for another occasion. [I]n the name of a theory of affect divorced from cognition and meaning, critical thinking is condemned as scornful cynicism, and readers are encouraged instead to undertake a mode of affective criticism in which "caring" and "empathetic" attachment to the objects of inquiry take the place of judgment and critique.[7]

The measurement of personality, by contrast, poses no threat to the validity or comprehension of beliefs as such. Even in *The Authoritarian Personality*, there is not a presumption that the psychological correlates to fascism are somehow the disproof of fascism. In fact, the chief criticism of the study—that it was politically motivated and overdetermined, set up in advance to offer a means with which to detect and avert fascist ideology—could be considered part of a defense of political belief *as* intention.

Yet psychology has had just as rocky a relationship with ideology as political or literary theory. In "The End of the End of Ideology," John T. Jost offers an account of how the "end of ideology" thesis of the mid-twentieth century caused the discipline of psychology to suspend its investigations into politics and personality, by eliding political belief as a knowable subject of psychological inquiry:

There were four related claims that led to the end-of- ideology conclusion, and in conjunction they have cast a long shadow over political psychology. The first claim has arguably had the greatest impact within psychology, and it grew out of [Philip] Converse's famous argument that ordinary citizens' political attitudes lack the kind of logical consistency and internal coherence that would be expected if they were neatly organized according to ideological schemata. A second

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[7] Ibid., 472.

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and related claim is that most people are unmoved by ideological appeals and that abstract credos associated with liberalism and conservatism lack motivational potency and behavioral significance. The third claim is that there are really no substantive differences in terms of philosophical or ideological content between liberal and conservative points of view. A fourth claim, which first emerged as a criticism of Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford's (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, is that there are no fundamental psychological differences between proponents of left-wing and right-wing ideologies. The deadening impact of these conclusions on the study of ideology in social, personality, and political psychology can scarcely be exaggerated. In many ways, psychologists were well primed to accept the end-of-ideology thesis, because it coincided with crises of theoretical and methodological confidence surrounding disciplinary staples such as personality, attitudes, and human nature.[8]

I would suggest here that psychology's own turn away from ideology—as something both unreal and unknowable—is just as much a product of the end-of-ideology consensus as it is a form of assent to its major claims. In other words, the discipline of psychology's post-ideological turn is itself an ideological maneuver of the most familiar kind. Jost stops short of making this claim, though it seems to be there for his sympathetic readers to see for themselves. This narrative about an academic discipline suspending the category of ideology—and in this acting ideologically— should be familiar to us: Walter Benn Michaels and Timothy Brennan have said much the same thing about the privileged canons of theory in the humanities. Literary critics interested in ideology may be tempted to dismiss political psychology out of hand, as engaging in maneuvers parallel to the affective turn. Dismissing social scientific findings about politics and personality, however, would be a mistake. Jost's account

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[8] John T. Jost, "The End of the End of Ideology," *American Psychologist* 61 (2006), 651–652.

shows that political psychology's inquiry into these matters is itself an affirmation of ideology as a real force in the world, and unlike the affective turn's more aggressive claims, political psychology's do not reduce either the content, or the validity, of political views to their psychological origins or correlates:

> Insights that emerge from critical and value-neutral inquiries have frequently been juxtaposed and assumed to be incompatible with one another, and scholars from the two traditions seem rarely (if ever) to communicate with one another. However, we propose that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive insofar as the same belief systems can simultaneously serve multiple (i.e., epistemic, existential, and relational) functions. That is, we propose that a given ideology can reflect both genuine (and even highly accurate) attempts to understand, interpret, and organize information about the political world as well as conscious or unconscious tendencies to rationalize the way things are or, alternatively, the desire for them to be different.[9]

Theory in literary studies has yet to absorb or respond to empirical claims about the origins and manifestations of political ideas. (A similar point could be made about social scientific research in to the human faculty of language: linguistics, which most literary critics have dutifully ignored since Saussure's Course in General Linguistics in 1916.) The main "instruments" of political psychology—surveys and questionnaires—are easy to dismiss as facile or limiting, while some of our own forms of social constructivism claim to explain human behavior with even greater confidence and bravura. Nevertheless, their findings, across dozens of studies over the past decade or so, show a meaningful and direct relationship between political affiliation and personality, temperament, and outlook.

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[9] John T. Jost, Christopher M. Federico, and Jaime L. Napier, "Political Ideology: Its Structure, Functions, and Elective Affinities," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (2009), 310.

The works I'm considering in this study engage with the same questions as political psychology, but they do so in reference to a specific political formation that is absent from the range of possible affiliations that political psychology explores: revolutionary socialism–communism–Marxism. And it's here that we come to a crucial limitation of most political-psychological studies to date: their limitation to a familiar "liberal–conservative" spectrum of political identification, as evidenced, in a uniquely American context, in the elision of "left" and "liberal," and the privileging of a particularly constrained form of political behavior, namely, voting in presidential elections. Most political science accounts of ideological affiliation treat such affiliation as a series of positions on a catalogued set of issues, which are themselves derived from a limited and limiting array of controversial "issues" in the news media. Not only does this approach exclude ideological affiliations at the extreme ends of this spectrum; it also fails to measure or account for the varying concepts of political ideology as such held by different camps of political opinion.

To clarify this point: political psychology uses the term "ideology" in a neutral, descriptive sense, referring to a measurably coherent body of opinions and attitudes; absent from these studies is any opportunity for respondents to report their own senses of "ideology" in its more critical sense, as the dominant body of thought generated by the dominating forms of social relations. For example: "liberal" and "conservative" opinions on welfare can be described as emerging from a systematic understanding of what generates poverty, and an individual, moral account of personal work ethics, respectively. What is not present is, say, a measure of respondents' theories as to where their opponents' opinions come from (why they think what they do), and why they are

more than just incorrect (how what they think is bound up with the issue under discussion). Such a theory would be a form of ideology critique in the more critical sense of "ideology."

These limitations do not make political psychology's findings any less valid or important, but they do, in a sense, reproduce the post-ideological assumption that political psychology seeks to overcome. This is the assumption that political ideology consists of differing opinions (which have psychological correlates) on a familiar set of issues, while different accounts of where opinions come from and what they do in the world remain theoretical questions, not subject to empirical investigation. To put it ungenerously: *theories of ideology are for the political psychologist, not for the survey respondent.*

Socialism is a doubly tricky "ideology" to measure, as it often entails *ideology critique* as part of its actual content, whereas "liberalism" and "conservatism"— especially in their popular American formations—often do not.[10] For these and other reasons, socialism emerges in the advanced capitalist west as a distinctly *intellectual* political formation, in that it requires a considerable degree of abstraction to emerge against the backdrop of "bourgeois" everyday politics in the first place. The liberal and conservative responses to capitalism have traditionally been conciliatory: how to best modify, mitigate, or compromise capitalism in such a way as to shore up other liberal or conservative priorities. Inasmuch as capitalist property relations are the common

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[10] Forms of leftist populism often take up socialist accounts of property relations and of a more just social order, without getting into the meta-descriptive account of "bourgeois ideology." Furthermore, in Communist states, this terrain shifts considerably.

denominator of all political systems and movements in the West, liberal and conservative political orientations may be seen as both natural and naturalizing vis-à-vis those relations.[11] The emergence of capitalism in liberal societies, furthermore, has been experienced as natural and self-naturalizing, rather than as an enforcement or enactment of a previous body of thought.

Communism, as one might expect, reverses these arrangements. Existing *first* as a body of thought at odds with its setting, communist or revolutionary socialist political visions aim not only to denaturalize capitalism but also to denaturalize its attendant political identities (liberal, conservative, nationalist, cosmopolitan); to determine friend from foe; and to transform fundamentally the bases of political agreement and affiliation, for the sake of changing the working class' political identity to a revolutionary class in and for itself. Further: as communism is experienced first and often foremost as a body of thought, rather than as a way of relating to and within capitalist property relations, to be a communist is not just another option among competing political identities. Rather, inasmuch as it retains revolutionary ambitions, communism in the West redefines political belief as such, and compels a new sense of how *who one is* relates to *what one believes*. This is not to say that liberal and conservative thought are silent on these issues, but instead to suggest that communism is something of a special case for a few notable reasons: its essentially intellectual demands in its critique of capitalism and capitalist political order (without which we're

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[11] There is no reason why this must sound like a reductive Marxist account of liberalism and conservatism; liberal and conservative accounts of their own relationship to capitalism are, in fact, more interesting and important.

left with a much vaguer utopianism or humanitarianism); the severity of its break with what it sees as the dominant mode of social organization; the intensity of its opposition and marginalization in the West; the unambiguous degeneracy of its enactment the Eastern Bloc (especially with Stalin); and its association with ideology critique as an intellectual and polemical operation that is internal to its political ambitions even as it claims explanatory purchase on other bodies of political thought and rhetoric. Communism and anti-Communism are thus not just opposing sides on questions of what comprises the political good. Rather, they are caught in a mutually-defining tangle about what it means to have a political belief, to hold organized political convictions, and to have a political ethos.

Ideology and its critique

For all their differences, Orwell, Lewis, and Lessing shared an intense ambivalence about the appeal of personal authenticity in the public sphere; more specifically, they sought to advance a debate about the psychological dimensions of political activity and the merits of what may seem two slightly contradictory concepts. First, they adapt from Marxism, despite all their antipathies to Marxist intellectual fashions of the time, an important, career-defining commitment to *ideology critique*. Although this term is not exactly foremost in these writers' accounts of their projects, when we consider what the term entails, or can entail, we can trace its high import throughout their bodies of work.

There is no shortage of scholarly discussion of the concept of ideology. For a series of definitions, "more or less at random," Terry Eagleton offers:

(a) the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life; (b) a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class; (c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; (d) false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power; (e) systematically distorted communication; (f) that which offers a position for a subject; (g) forms of thought motivated by social interests; (h) identity thinking; (i) socially necessary illusion; (j) the conjuncture of discourse and power; (k) the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world; (l) action-oriented sets of beliefs; (m) the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality; (n) semiotic closure; (o) the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure; (p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality.[12]

Furthermore, the concept itself contains its own set of ambivalences and tensions, all of which are relevant to these authors' intellectual commitments. Eagleton usefully summarizes this problem as follows:

The critique of ideology claims at once that certain forms of consciousness are false and that this falsity is somehow structural and necessary to a specific social order. The falsity of the ideas, we might say, is part of the "truth" of a whole material condition. But the theory which identifies this falsehood therefore undercuts itself at a stroke, exposing a situation which simply *as a theory* it is powerless to resolve. The critique of ideology, that is to say, is at the same moment the critique of the critique of ideology. Moreover, it is not as though ideology critique proposes to put something true in the place of the falsity. In one sense, this critique retains something of a rationalist or Enlightenment structure: truth, or theory, will shed light on false conceptions. But it is anti-rationalist in so far as what it then proposes is not a set of true conceptions, but *just* the thesis that all ideas, true or false, are grounded in practical social activity, and more particularly in the contradictions which that activity generates.[13]

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[12] Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), 2.

[13] Ibid., 72, emphasis added.

Eagleton's slight equivocations here are profoundly illustrative. The qualification of "as a theory" and the false modesty of "just," succeeded by a self-consciously powerful insight, slyly demonstrate the ambivalence Eagleton describes. And it's the divided or split operation of ideology critique that leads us to the second concept obtaining on both authors' work, *ethos*.

The first step (or phase or mode) of ideology critique, the dismantling of false or damaging ideas, constitutes what we might consider the substantive logical argument (or *logos*) of the critique moment.[14] But one may be disabused of an ideological falsehood—that, say, Barack Obama is advancing a socialist agenda; or that cutting top marginal income tax rates leads to job creation—without the kind of interpersonal or psychological *conflict* that usually finds expression in narrative art or in rhetorical situations. It is possible that, through analytical rigor and commitment to some higher norm, truth will out, and an improved public sphere will develop because of it. Such, at any rate, is the appeal of ideology critique's rationalist mode.

The second mode involves the discovering the social relations subtending or sustaining a dubious belief or ideological value. Necessarily, this discovery points back to power of some particular mind to see the social relations at work in the realm of ideas. One may know the "truth" about some topic or event of public concern that others for ideological reasons do not know, but this knowledge on its own has, as Eagleton indicates, little to no purchase on public or private life. Rather, the mode of

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[14] Loosely, we might say that a figure like Noam Chomsky embodies this mode of ideology critique. Exposure and analysis of publicly available facts will give the lie to autocracy, and one need only have a commitment to truth and logic to perform this critique. Though, no doubt, one must probably have some normative motive for doing so: democracy, libertarian socialism, progressivism, and so on.

thought that occasions the discovery and propagation of such "truth" will likely show a habit of mind, temperament, or disposition inclined not only to bring such "truths" to the surface but also to turn such "truths" to account in the advancement of a politically dissident notion of knowledge itself. The moment of ideology critique, then, is hardly limited to the refuting of a false or misguided idea; it tends to mark the arrival of a new way of thinking altogether, from one mind to another.

Therefore, ideology critique must be performed in a rhetorical situation, in which the *characters* or *personalities* of the one critiquing and the one being exposed to the critique become intensely relevant. *Ethos*, as Orwell, Lewis, and Lessing come to understand, is not *displaced* by the austere impersonal rigor of ideology critique's rationalist mode, nor is "character" a *refuge* from the bad news that political engagement and critique can bring. Rather, these writers are committed to thinking through and testing the possibilities for a synthesis of ethos and ideology critique—a synthesis that strains to be both experiential and logical.

Ethos against "political religion"

While not a conspicuous or privileged term for the authors in this study, *ethos* may be said to name both their animating concern and their chief mode of appeal. Orwell, Lewis, and Lessing all dwell on the topic of ethos while claiming moral and intellectual authority for their works through their own public, writerly ethos. But what is ethos exactly?

The concept itself is both normative and descriptive, and has longstanding conceptual interest in both political theory and literary study. Most famously defined in

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (and discussed in passing in the *Poetics*), ethos is conventionally defined as rhetorical "proof" by means of appeal to the character or nature of the speaker. With logos and pathos, it forms a longstanding trio of concepts from Aristotle that have survived into current study and pedagogy. But the relatively narrow definition of ethos has been expanded—and, at times, virtually reversed—over the course of the word's history in English. The *Oxford English Dictionary* attests to this expansion:

> 1: Character or characterization as revealed in action or its representation; the quality of the permanent, as opposed to the transient or emotional. Contrasted with *pathos*. Chiefly with reference to ancient Greek rhetoric and art. 2a: The characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations; the prevailing character of an institution or system. 2b: The character of an individual as represented by his or her values and beliefs; the moral or practical code by which a person lives.

The term connotes, simultaneously: a type of rhetorical appeal; an individual's quality, which may or may not happen to be the referent of a rhetorical appeal; an aspect of an individual *as* an individual; an aspect of some group *as* as group, whether in a rhetorical situation or not; and ideas or norms that may exist independently of any person or persons. An ethos may be knowable in advance of a given person's existence (someone born into a community with a distinctive ethos), or in fact consist *in* a person's existence (without someone living by it, an ethos is merely a "code").

Despite its obvious connection to *ethics*, *ethos* would seem to be less normatively freighted in contemporary English use than *character*, which (outside of the analysis of a narrative) is almost always a moral judgement in itself, or a sign that a moral judgement is in the offing. *Ethos*, by contrast, remains more exacting and analytical. Nearly any mention of *ethos*, even a casual one, suggests the result of some

observation that has undergone abstraction and refinement, whereas *character* can be, and often is, a snap judgement.

It is in this reflective, considered mode that the later work of Michel Foucault presents ethos as an area of theoretical interest to the humanities. He connects the concept to a "care of the self," adapted from antiquity, that, he argues, can form an alternative ethical and political dispensation based on purposive selfhood, rather than power:

> For the Greeks, *ethos* was the concrete form of freedom; this was the way they problematized their freedom. A man possessed of a splendid ethos, who could be admired and put forth as an example, was someone who practiced freedom in a certain way. [E]xtensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an ethos that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable, and exemplary.[15]

Foucault's investment in ethos has had far-reaching effects in political theory. William E. Connolly has put the concept of *ethos* to work in his efforts at sustaining a personally *felt*, personally *transformative* dimension of political pluralism, thus producing an ethos that promises to transform the project of pluralism itself.[16] In a similar post-structuralist, philosophically ontological endeavor, Stephen K. White argues in *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* that "an opposition between rationality

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[15] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. (New York: The New Press, 1997). 286.

[16] "If the risky, disruptive politics of enactment is, as I contend, indispensable to the identification and redress of social injuries, one of its conditions of possibility is the cultivation of an *ethos of critical responsiveness* to social movements seeking to define their relational identities. Another way of putting this is to say that the recurrent distinction between the injuries suffered by particular constituencies and the barriers to their rectification posed by cultural *codes* of morality and normality requires mediation by an *ethos* of critical responsiveness never entirely reducible to a code. [...] To alter your recognition of difference, therefore, is to revise your own terms of self-recognition as well." William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xvi.

and ethos is unnecessary."[17] In a subtle deployment of the phrase, "*Be reasonable*,"

White aims to model "an ethos that is oriented around the urging of citizens to be

reasonable in how well they negotiate certain distinctive challenges emerging on the

contemporary ethical-political landscape." White's project works towards a

contemporary brand of "moral self-restraint" that defies apprehension through mere

argument.[18] Anne-Lise François invokes a similarly restraining form of ethos when

attending to the salutary possibilities of "recessive action" in Romantic literature: "the

ethos of minimal realization [...] by figures whose passivity with respect to what it is in

their power to do and ask for flies in the face of Enlightenment rationalism."[19] *Ethos*,

then, has tremendous versatility. It extends conceptually from a rhetorical appeal to the

character of the speaker, to the character of the speaker itself, to a guide for individual

and public excellence, to a privately-held commitment to what may at times be a kind

of silence or withdrawal.

In fact, the recessive modes of ethos affirmed by White and Francois, and even

Foucault's late interest in the term, could be said to retrace the debates of another very

different intellectual milieu, one anxious about the relationship between norms and

rationality, virtue and argument: the Oxford Movement of the 1830s–40s. In the wake of

Catholic emancipation in 1829, High Church Anglicans strove toward the development

of what would be called "Anglo-Catholicism," with John Henry Newman famously

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[17] Stephen K. White, *The Ethos of a Late-Modern Citizen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

[18] White, 5.

[19] Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), xviii.

converting to Catholicism outright. *Ethos* and a related concept, *reserve*, were valorized

terms in the Oxford Movement, though as James Pereiro notes, the Oxford Movement's

churchmen never defined them systematically or unanimously:

> In the case of Oxford, this was the Catholic *ethos*, one in which **holiness and learning met in continuous interplay**; a moral temper poles apart from the utilitarian spirit prevalent at the time in both politics and religion. (88) They claimed that they wanted to generate an *ethos* rather than a system. In their understanding, however, although *ethos* is not a system in itself, one of its proper fruits is to generate one. [*E*]*thos* serves as a light to identify true principles, and then as a guide in drawing the right conclusions or corollaries which follow from them. At another level, the Tractarians also pointed out that **people might be better or worse than their principles. Newman even suggested that a good man under a defective religious system would joyfully and promptly accept a more perfect one when coming into contact with it**[.] As a matter of fact, different systems would produce similar results if acted upon by the same ethos. [...] The theory went a step further. Ideas have their own proper *ethos*. It might happen that those holding a particular idea may personally be possessed of an *ethos* which is quite distinct from that of the idea they uphold and, as a result of this inner tension, the idea in question might be corrupted by the influence upon it of an unsympathetic *ethos*. It might also happen that a personal *ethos* was progressively transformed by the pressure exerted on it by the idea's *ethos*.[20]

For Newman especially, the institution of the university (like the church) would

become essential to building a proper ethos; a university's situation in a particular

place, with that place's particular qualities, would have far-reaching effects on its

people and ideas. Furthermore, the concept of ethos, in Periero's account of this

tradition, is not only the consonance of people and their ideas; ethos *itself* can

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[20] James Pereiro, *Ethos and the Oxford Movement: At the Heart of Tractarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 103–104, emphasis added.

interpose *between* people and ideas, even while consisting of the interplay of them. It is not surprising then, that such a theory of ethos, unsystematic as it is, could come to endorse a kind of discursive withholding. *Reserve* became the term for this esoteric mode of revelation or expression, which is motivated by a (rhetorically savvy) feeling of compassion:

> God's infinite desire to communicate the knowledge of himself without any limit or measure is hampered by the unfitness of mankind to receive divine truth. The principle of reserve represents an accommodation on God's part to the nature of the recipient, and the Scriptures clearly showed how God had employed it in revealing himself to man. Withholding knowledge is, paradoxically, an act of divine mercy, given that this knowledge would be injurious to those who were not in possession of a certain disposition [or ethos] to receive it.[21]

God's practice of reserve would find its analogue among the faithful, in the course of religious instruction or guidance and even in other spheres of life among High Church Anglicans. It is not hard to see how these concepts from the Oxford Movement—*ethos* as both consisting *in* people and distinct from them, and a *reserve* of benevolently withheld wisdom or goodness—may be inviting concepts for contemporary theory. Both terms lend themselves to notions of *performativity* rather than human *essence*. These concepts also problematize, or at least attend to the intractable problems of, the relation between norms, knowledge, and their communication.

The Oxford Movement's theory of ethos is of additional use to this study in that it sought to help bring into a being a movement and community—Catholic in

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[21] Ibid., 117–118.

inclination—through a commitment to orthodoxy of doctrine combined with a keen

interest in the mediation of that doctrine's human expression. Comparisons between

Communism and the Catholic Church have long been common, quite often but not

always in the form of jokes; there is no shortage of litanies of their parallels. In a piece

that shows his more mature contempt for both, the Australian humanist and social

critic Phillip Adams recounts his youthful experiences leaving communism and

converting to Catholicism, hitting all the notes of this particular genre:

> In the Fifties, I learnt that communists looked to Moscow for direction just as Catholics look to Rome. [...] Both isms derive from a Judaic tradition and both have their Old and New Testaments. For Moses, read Marx. For Christ, read Lenin. [...] Both isms have striking symbols. One the cross, the other the hammer and sickle. Lenin, like Christ, achieved his place in history by identifying with the meek and the humble. Their means were, of course, profoundly different with Christ teaching peace while Lenin argued for revolution. But then, one was offering heaven in Heaven while the other thought it possible to achieve heaven on Earth. Communism has borrowed the notion of instruction from the Catholic Church, requiring would-be members to be prepared for admission to the organisation by inquiries into their motives, sincerity and readiness. And communism, like Catholicism, uses the weapon of spiritual exile. [...] In Moscow, there's a bureaucratic class who enjoy a wealth of privileges, just as Rome has its cardinals who arrive at the Cavaliere Hilton in their chauffeur-driven Rolls.[22]

A more sober and influential text, *The God that Failed*, published in 1949,

collected prominent writers' recanting of their communist convictions or leanings.

They included Richard Wright, Arthur Koestler, Andre Gide, and Stephen Spender. The

conceit in the title, that Communism amounted to a religion that has become

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[22] Phillip Adams, "The Twin Religions," *Adams vs God* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), ebook.

manifestly false, is somewhat more reductive than the pieces the book offers. However, in the introduction, the Labour M.P. Richard Crossman offers an especially exerted comparison of Communism and Catholicism, with an ambitious claim for Protestantism's latent democratic ethos:

> How could these intellectuals accept the dogmatism of Stalinism? [...] For the intellectual, material comforts are relatively unimportant; what he cares most about is spiritual freedom. The strength of the Catholic Church has always been that it demands sacrifice of that freedom uncompromisingly, and condemns spiritual pride as a deadly sin. The Communist novice, subjecting his soul to the canon law of the Kremlin, felt something of the release which Catholicism also brings to the intellectual, wearied and worried by the privilege of freedom. Once the renunciation has been made, the mind, instead of operating freely, becomes the servant of a higher and unquestioned purpose. [...] This may be one reason why Communism has had much more success in Catholic than Protestant countries. The Protestant is, at least in origin, a conscientious objector against spiritual subjection to any hierarchy. He claims to know what is right or wrong by the inner light, and democracy for him is not merely convenient or a just form of government, but a necessity of human dignity.[23]

While uncharitable (to say the least), the comparison is not merely a reflex of post-war anti-Communism. In earlier periods, especially Britain in the 1930s, Communism and Catholicism were seen as the two outer orbits into which those disaffected with bourgeois liberalism spiraled.[24] To intellectuals looking for an escape

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[23] Richard Crossman, *The God that Failed*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 6–7. Given Crossman's tendentious and still widely-held comparison, we might consider an alternative account, in which the parallels might be between *Trotskyism* and Protestantism, with their shared tendency toward schisms, and their willingness to sacrifice institutional robustness for philosophical correctness. Likewise, it would be easy to identify significant strains of Protestantism which allow for *less*, rather than more, "freedom" than actual Catholic pastoralism, with doctrinal strictures far less forgiving of doubt and personal spiritual shortcomings.

[24] In a pivotal argument in George Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, discussed in Chapter 1, Gordon Comstock and his friend, Ravelston, refer to this centrifugal process:

from liberal democracy's crisis-ridden endgame, both Catholicism and Communism

espoused, or claimed to enact, internationalism, intellectual density and rigor, aesthetic

excellence, an antidote to patriotism, and moral authority over the British

establishment. Nevertheless, Crossman's comparison is belied easily enough by even

the local history of Catholicism in Britain, which—one's ultimate evaluation of either

Communism or Catholicism notwithstanding—is marked by its intellectual dynamism

and even agonism. Communism too, whether one seeks to affirm it or not, is manifestly

not reducible to a kind of bad-faith intellectual surrender. Crossman himself

acknowledges as much:

> It so happens that, in the years between the October Revolution and the
> Stalin-Hitler Pact, numberless men of letters, both in Europe and
> America, were attracted to Communism. They were not "typical"
> converts. Indeed, being people of quite unusual sensitivity, they made
> most abnormal Communists, just as the literary Catholic is a most
> abnormal Catholic. They had a heightened perception of the spirit of the

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"God knows. All we know is what we don't want. That's what's wrong with us nowadays. We're stuck, like Buridan's donkey. Only there are three alternatives instead of two, and all three of them make us spew. Socialism's only one of them."

"And what are the other two?"

"Oh, I suppose suicide and the Catholic Church."

Ravelston smiled, anticlerically shocked. "The Catholic Church! Do you consider that an alternative?"

"Well, it's a standing temptation to the intelligentsia, isn't it?"

"Not what I should call the intelligentsia. Though there was Eliot, of course," Ravelston admitted.

"And there'll be plenty more, you bet. I dare say it's fairly insanitary, of course—but you'd feel safe there, anyway."

Ravelston rubbed his nose reflectively. "It seems to me that's only another form of suicide."

"In a way. But so's Socialism."

Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, 88.

age, and felt more acutely than others both its frustrations and its hopes.[25]

We might note a key tension in Crossman's analogy. The comparison relies on the "atypicality" of the "converts" in question, which could be said to be a *formal* property. The mere fact of being an intellectual and taken up with a minority body of thought reveals next to nothing about that thought's content or the experience of holding it, save of course, for a sense of marginality, of being on the fringes both of society at large and of the (non-intellectual) community of the "faithful." But the eccentricity of the intellectual convert undermines the comparison between the two institutions' stupefying orthodoxy, inasmuch as these intellectual converts are especially attuned to what's happening around them. In fact, the "they" of the last sentence is ambiguous, referring either to Communist converts, or Communist *and* Catholic converts. Comparisons like Crossman's are nevertheless helpful because, especially as viewed against the backdrop of the Oxford Movement, they present ethos as a concept that mediates between individual variousness and systemic thought.

The apprehension of Communism, British Communism in particular, as a kind of *religion* (Catholic or otherwise), requires some further consideration, however. In an overview of more recent scholarship on the question of British Communism as "political religion," Gidon Cohen offers a suggestive critique of the notion of "political religion":

> Establishing the possibility of talking of communism as a religion, and the potential independence of such questions from a discourse of totalitarianism, is a necessary but far from sufficient condition for

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[25] Crossman, 2–3.

establishing the rather more controversial proposition that it is helpful to do so. Indeed, there can be no single answer to such a question because any answer necessarily depends on the further question "helpful for what." [...] Precisely because the language of political religion "*seems credible*" it can too quickly be accepted. The ability to translate the most salient aspects of communism into familiar religious terms then prevents us from probing the differences between religion and communism.[26]

To put the point more directly: it may well be that Communism and Catholicism are comparable, but for the writers in this study, at least one significant point of comparison would seem to be the *opposite* of a verdict like that delivered by *The God that Failed*. For both Anglo-Catholicism and (so I argue) British Communism, personal variousness and abstract thought were seen as crucially—and even *beneficially*—separate. The concept of *ethos* is an index of this interest, rather than a name for the lock-step orthodoxy that the heuristic of political religion *presumes in advance*. Ethos names an area of inquiry in which personal variousness is always already *in* the picture, so to speak, exercising a dynamic influence on the movement itself.

Additionally, recent historical scholarship shows that the social and cultural life of the Communist Party of Great Britain was more eccentric and open-ended than Communism's usual stereotypes would suggest. In *Communists in British Society: 1920–1991*, Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn make the case for a renewed understanding of the CPGB as more various and less conforming than its continental counterparts. Rather than a homogenizing, static orthodoxy, British Communism

represents a relatively high level of interaction with a variety of radical and labour movement milieux. [The] diverse influence of its sources of recruitment and fields of activity was not simply negated by joining the

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[26] Gidon Cohen, "Political Religion and British Communism," *20th Century Communism* 2010: 197–214, 207.

party, but helped determine both its patterns of adhesion and defection and the character of the relationship which party membership represented. The "complex transaction" [...] between member and party was on ongoing one in which the balance between different issues of social and political identity was subject to incalculable variations, in each case shifting over time.[27]

In a similar vein, Philip Bounds's invaluable *British Communism and the Politics of Literature, 1928–1939* reveals that "Party theorists tried to develop Soviet ideas in distinctive ways, often by drawing on broader English and European traditions of cultural theory. The adaptation," Bounds summarizes, "of Soviet ideas often had unorthodox consequences" which put many writers and critics within the CPGB (including Christopher Caudwell, Alick West, and Ralph Fox) at odds with Moscow's cultural agenda, while enhancing their own local appeal.[28] While evidence of the USSR's stultification of intellectual and cultural life is easy to find, a broader view makes a heuristic like *political religion*, much less Crossman's more specific comparison of Catholicism's and Communism's repressive natures, less and less tenable. If one wishes to compare British Communism and Catholicism, such a comparison must include an account of both dissident movements' reflections on ethos, which in large part *qualifies* a characterization of either as rigidly doctrinaire. And with ethos in mind, we may approach a new theoretical appreciation of the literary legacies of British

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[27] Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society, 1920–1921* (London: Rivers Oram, 2007), 273.

[28] Philip Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature, 1928–1939* (Pontypool, UK: Merlin, 2012), 232. Bounds goes on to ask, "Why should so many British communists have turned to the study of literature in a decade as hazardous as the 1930s? Perhaps the main reason was that the world communist movement has one of the most obsessively cerebral cultures in the whole of human history. [...] The communist parties took thousands of men and women who lacked all but the most rudimentary education and told them that omniscience was a perfectly reasonable goal" (238–239).

communism: an appreciation of a Marxian ethos of argument itself, borne of ideology critique.

Ethos, argument, belief, identity

Ethos and *ethos of ideology critique* are but two of many terms one could use to describe what this study apprehends as a central concern of Orwell's, Lewis's, and Lessing's political novels: again, the dynamic between *political beliefs themselves* and the *experience of holding them*. *Ethos* is a useful term, as I've argued above, because of its flexibility and conceptual complexity. *Ideology critique,* as we have seen, has a long history of naming an intellectual dynamic within Marxist political movements and thought—a dynamic that relates in subtle but far-reaching ways to ethos. Neither spontaneous nor duplicitous, and neither natural nor imaginary, ethos may be said to mark both the skillful *mode* and the potential *object* of ideology critique: one must have an ethos appropriate to performing an ideology critique, just as an ethos may be an ideological effect in need of critique. Like *character, ethos* can be both nominal and connotatively affirming, even at the same time. But unlike *character, ethos* points towards something in the middle distance between the individual and society, and it is a term appropriate to a *rhetorical situation* rather than a *narrative.* Inasmuch as the political novels under discussion here tend to foreground ideas and dialogue over plot to a relatively high degree, *ethos* is all the more useful because it is *not* reducible to *character.*

These novels also form a rich and self-reflexive archive that has the potential to illuminate some contemporary theoretical debates. The varied investments of Orwell,

Lewis, and Lessing in ethos, I hope to show, are not only of crucial importance for scholarly understanding of these writers' own work; analysis of their investments may also advance ongoing inquiries in literary and theoretical scholarship. Specifically, questions of ethos in the political novel touch on Amanda Anderson's synthesis of an *ethos of argument* that adapts Lionel Trilling's concepts of sincerity and authenticity, Walter Benn Michaels's severance of *identity* and *belief*, and Timothy Brennan's recovery of a left-Hegelian *culture of belief*.

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Trilling uses *sincerity* to mark an "ideal of substantial importance" to "those who make it their business to scrutinize the polity, the class of men we now call intellectuals. The purpose of their examination is not understanding alone but understanding as it may lead to action: the idea of society includes the assumption that a given society can be changed if the judgement passed on it is adverse."[29] Sincerity, then, requires a dialectic between the critic and the world, such that one's intended meanings are measured against public knowledge and norms.

Authenticity, by contrast, suggests a "more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life." In its turn away from intentional, public utterances with communicative, practical, or argumentative uptake, authenticity names that which denies the possibilities of clear communication, resists practicality

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[29] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 26–27.

however broadly conceived, and abjures argument. In the cultural sphere, authenticity can "deny art itself, yet at the same time it figures as the source of art."[30]

Much of Trilling's study is given over to precisely this dialectical process of authenticity in art and literature. And although he has a deep, abiding interest in authenticity and its formative powers in art, Trilling notes with tart exasperation that it

> was not inevitable that this line of thought should issue in the view that insanity is a state of human existence which is to be esteemed for its commanding authenticity. [...] That is to say, insanity [per contemporary usage] is not only a condition inflicted by the demands of society and passively endured; it is also an act, expressing the intention of the insane person to meet and overcome the coercive situation."[31] As a concept commanding a growing share of public assent and deference, the phenomenon of insanity-as-authenticity "may be characterized as being in an intellectual mode to which analytical argument is not appropriate. This is the intellectual mode that once went under the name of cant. The disappearance of this word from the modern vocabulary is worth remarking."[32]

In order to adapt Lionel Trilling's conceptual distinction between sincerity and authenticity to more recent theoretical stalemates, Amanda Anderson suggests that an "ethos of argument and reason" promises to renew universalism and proceduralism, by incorporating the experiences and frames of mind which Trilling identified under the sign of authenticity. Anderson notes that many of the privileged categories and discursive modes of post-structuralism and postmodernism would appear to be adaptations of "authenticity, while in the same theoretical field, notions aligned with "sincerity" are disparaged as naive, obtuse, or weakly liberal against authenticity's more

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[30] Ibid., 11.

[31] Ibid., 168.

[32] Ibid., 169.

radical, transgressive potential. A proceduralist, argumentative, rationalist, and at times impersonal ethos, Anderson suggests, might retain the ethical and aesthetic force of authenticity while not undercutting its normative authority in a democratic society.

> The polemical relation to received opinion that Trilling assigns to authenticity, which in his account always insists on that which exceeds the social (nature, fate, the unconscious), operates in proceduralism as the progressive expansion of horizons and enlargement of perspective that defines universalist argument. The "excess" here is a spirit of critique that cannot rest within any embedded practice, nor can it ever be simply conventionalized (though procedure ideally acts as a facilitating spring). [P]roceduralism recasts the sincerity paradigm in ways that render the critique of proceduralism by means of the authenticity perspective misguided.[33]

Anderson turns Trilling's authenticity to account, one might say, by putting it in the service of a robust and multivalent sincerity. "Because it so fully understands itself as an ongoing enactment," Anderson seeks to "characterize this procedural dynamic as an ethos."[34] In putting forward an ethos of ideology critique, I am borrowing from Anderson's effort to find a dialectic between sincerity and authenticity, but working in a different political register. For Orwell, Lewis, and Lessing, the crucial scene is the scene of overt, determined political persuasion, ideology critique, or revolutionary agitation, rather than the unfolding of procedure; for radical or insurgent political movements, which often lack robust institutional frameworks, the *polemical speech situation* is

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[33] Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 171.

[34] Anderson, 171. "Enactment" is shared term among Anderson, Connolly, White, and others. For Connolly and White, enactment itself—by virtue of its incommensurability with formal argument or received wisdom—contains political value; for Anderson, enactment would seem more instrumental towards the further development of an invigorated, democratic culture of argument.

more pertinent than the scene of institutional deliberation.[35] Because of this

distinction, it will be beneficial here to keep in mind the more explicitly *rhetorical*

meaning of the term *ethos*.[36]

Walter Benn Michaels' *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* can

be seen as retracing the authenticity/sincerity paradigm with uncompromising

polemical force . Whereas Anderson seeks to reconcile the existential thickness of

authenticity with an ethos of argument borne of sincerity, Michaels tries to

demonstrate their irreconcilability, along with sincerity's manifest rightness as an

interpretive mode. (These are, of course, not his terms, and his and Trilling's paradigms

are not precisely equivalent.) Where Anderson sees ethos as a way to imagine the

existential enactment of argument, Michaels sees in the distinction between identity

and belief the difference between existing and arguing. Both he and Anderson affirm

the political desirability of argument over poststructuralism's steadfast commitment to

the presumptive ethical worth of identity and ontology. According to Michaels, in both

literary theory and American politics—especially leftist and race politics—*intention*,

and the *belief* that an intentional text propounds, stands opposite and above both

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[35] In a somewhat abstract way, this study seeks to treat ethos as a node of liberal/radical dialectical inter-involvement that rewards scholarly attention. For a trenchant account of liberalism's ethos and the intellectual back-story of its suppression and denigration, see Amanda Anderson, "Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism," *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 209–229.

[36] For an intriguing provocation that rhetoric *constitutes* the scene of ideology critique, in the context of the Habermas–Gadamer debate, see Susan E. Shapiro, "Rhetoric as Ideology Critique: The Gadamber–Habermas Debate Revisited" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (1994): 123–150. In tracking the ways in which rhetoric is rendered as feminine (irrational, seductive, conniving) and therefore the repressed other to argument or ideology critique, Shapiro suggests that rhetoric offers a vital critical energy precisely because of its suppression.

deconstructive dissolution of intention, and quasi-left, multicultural politics grounded

in identity and otherness:

> So the argument, in miniature, is that if you think the intention of the author is what counts, then you don't think that the subject position of the reader is what counts, but if you don't think the intention of the author is what counts then the subject position of the reader will be the only thing that matters. [...] I am here interested in the historical simultaneity of (as well as the theoretical link between) the modern interest in the ontology of the text and the rise of [...] a distinctively modern notion of identity. [...] [T]hese aesthetic concerns are themselves produced in relation to the accompanying invention of racial identity and then of its transformation both into the pluralized form of cultural identity and into the privileging of the subject position as such.[37]

Michaels's penetrating account of this distinction between identity and belief is

both prefigured and illuminated by the rhetorical situations in this study's texts. This

compatibility with novels about communism is unsurprising, given Michaels's explicit

commitment to a left politics of redistribution and class antagonism rather than

multiculturalism. However, his argument's style and content leave little room for

consideration of the ethos of his own rhetorical position, or that of anyone who would

happen to agree with him and seek to popularize a left class politics. A concept like

ethos registers the ineffable interplay *between* Michaels's impersonal-but-intended

argument, on the one hand, and the inert solipsism of identity, on the other hand. Or,

to put it a different way, *ethos* names the site at which a text or speaker's *intention* and a

text or speaker's *existence* are made available for anyone else to interpret.

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[37] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 11–12.

Finally, and with some conceptual parallels with Michaels, Timothy Brennan, in

Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right, makes an overt appeal for

belief *as* identity—specifically, Marxist or democratic socialist belief as a *culture* that he

sees as unjustly suppressed. Although his main concern is contemporary academic

theory, the problematic Brennan identifies has far-reaching resonance. In *theory*—

which he adopts as the shorthand for a *selective tradition* of thought in the humanities,

more or less in the orbit of post-structuralism and postmodernism—Brennan traces a

damning series of unacknowledged intellectual debts to the left-Hegelian tradition, as

well as theory's (usually uncomprehending) complicity with American imperialist,

capitalist hegemony.

Undergirding theory, in Brennan's account, is a "hard ideological substratum"

that has been "identitarian from the start."[38]

> The terms of theory are, perversely, those of that inflexible mode of
> thought that acts as an unquestioned filiative bond[,] as though the
> recoil from fanatical belief and the shift to the innocent victims of
> prejudice was a safeguard against fundamentalism. What I am
> proposing—and I mean this to be a perfectly contrasting parallel—is that
> communities of political belief are themselves forms of identity. They are
> not merely chosen as a matter of taste or arrived at by a process of
> reasoning but are inherited; more to the point, they possess their own
> proper *cultures*, which, like all cultures, are apparent in one's style or
> manner even before one utters an opinion.[39]

Whereas Michaels sees a manifest intellectual benefit to separating identity and

belief, here, Brennan attends to the ways in which they come together in the concept

(conspicuously lacking in Michaels) of *culture*. Recent histories provide Brennan with

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[38] Brennan, 13.

[39] Ibid., 11.

his evidence for this location of Marxist politics in and as a culture: the marginalization of left-Hegelian or Marxist thought within the American academy and the longstanding tradition of violence to leftists in regimes around the world. Both intellectual suppression and violence to dissidents is possible, Brennan argues, precisely *because* beliefs can come to constitute a culture, and thereby be treated by those in power as a kind of person to be dispensed with, rather than as arguments to be refuted. Both academic hegemony and political violence share this same expedient distortion and preemption of argument:

> [B]elief can be stamped out so inhumanly only when belief itself is conceived as a cultural taint rather than a misbegotten choice. More pertinently, there is little effort to analyze what precisely these beliefs are [or] in what precise ways they are dangerous to the majority. In this approach typically, all beliefs are rendered formally equivalent, where formalism is summoned to establish a principle that relieves one from exploring the content of particular, contingent, or conjunctural beliefs.[40]

So, along Brennan's line of reasoning, we can infer that even if Marxism did not exist *as* a *culture of belief*, it would nevertheless become one as a *fait accompli*, when rulers treat it as only a *culture* in the narrowest identitarian sense, thereby recusing themselves from arguing with that culture's *beliefs*. In other words, even if Michaels were right about the conceptual opposition between identity and belief, the history of the suppression of left-Hegelian thought and politics would render that opposition *merely* conceptual. But Brennan goes further than this, outmaneuvering Michaels in arguing a positive case for Marxism/left-Hegelianism as a culture precisely because, in

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[40] Ibid., 35.

Brennan's account, culture is a system of meaning (or intention or sincerity), rather

than an inert assemblage of ontologies (or identities or authenticities).[41]

It's with Brennan's notion of a *culture of belief* on the left that I now turn to

George Orwell, a figure for whom questions of culture and left political commitment

were of the utmost urgency.

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[41] Brennan adopts theories of culture from Raymond Williams and Edward Said. It is to be contrasted with theory's reliance on "culture" as a coalescing of inviolate identities, as an end-run about political argument; this not of culture is more properly called, in Brennan's terms, *culturalism*.

Chapter 1

Minds at Work: George Orwell and the Politics of Personality

Orwellian identity and Orwell's beliefs

Both academic and non-academic writing on Orwell dwell on his characteristic inconsistency. His "Tory anarchism," his lingering class prejudices while advancing democratic socialism, the artificiality of the figure of "George Orwell" and the organic authenticity that figure is taken to represent, his disavowal of Marxism and simultaneous adaptation of it, his savvy intelligence and anti-intellectualism—these features of Orwell and his work have attracted sustained attention. Marking these inconsistencies has become the key critical move for both his fans and detractors, on both the left and the right: his anti-systematic sensibility has been the evidence of both his hypocrisy and his virtue, the paradox of both his political inertness and his work's unending timeliness, and the fount of both his exemplary command of English prose style and the clunkiness of his novels. Furthermore, writings about Orwell are in large proportion partisan; often he is either critiqued or recovered, either dissected or affirmed. The works that attract the most attention—*Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and "Politics and the English Language"—seem to demand readings that take positions, rather than readings that exfoliate meanings in traditional literary-interpretive terms. His stature in the academic study of literature is therefore both smaller than his command of the wider public's attention and idiosyncratic. He would be pleased.

Furthermore, these inconsistencies have caused questions of biography, temperament, and personal authenticity to dominate critical discussions of Orwell and his work—that is, both in general statements that critics have made about the oeuvre of "George Orwell" and in more local readings of his novels. In the former, we do not just have another author whose name and stature become objects of discussion; rather, Orwell is unique in the extent to which he is taken to personally embody the moral authority and political insight of his work. Inconsistencies or faults within Orwell's views are often resolved by his partisans not on his works' own terms, but through almost celebratory appeals to the unique virtues of his personality, and to his idiosyncratic transcendence of familiar political coordinates.[42]

My point is not to give an account of Orwell's cultural afterlife (this has been ably done by others), nor to referee the different valuations of Orwell that continue to circulate and collide (this has been done, too). My aim instead is to identify and chart the course of unspecified but crucial categories in Orwell's thinking, which may explain—and supervene on—his trademark ambivalences and inconsistencies. The payoff will, I hope, be a clearer grasp of Orwell's mind at work, and possibly a renegotiation of the terms of his current relevance.

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[42] The definitive account of Orwell's reception and the political uses to which Orwell has been posthumously put remains John Rodden's *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of "St George" Orwell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). As Rodden explains, Orwell presents challenges to literary criticism, which, while not unique to him, make him an especially fraught figure:

> Indeed the virtues cited as characteristic of the writer's style have all been claimed as the man's personal qualities: clarity, simplicity, honesty, plainness, vigor, passion. [...] The disarming candor, the fervent commitment, the innate decency, and always the living voice conspire so pardonably to rationalize such a critical judgement, even to demand it." (x)

In both his fiction and non-fiction, we find a shifting and evolving conception of the relationship between, on one hand, opinions, ideology, detached analysis of social class, and notions of justice; and on the other hand, personality, habits, nationality, and the cultural expressions of class. We can trace many of the key interpretive and argumentative tangles in Orwell's work along these lines. Much of Orwell's work, in other words, is an attempt to think through, and eventually undo, a perceived deterministic relationship between identity and belief. I will focus on three works which are representative of his fiction and nonfiction over the course of his evolving political ethos:

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, a novel Orwell later disowned and which critics have ridiculed with some justification, Orwell stages a standoff between anti-capitalist ideals and their personal embodiment, only to resolve this standoff through a famously unsatisfying surrender to the demands of personal family life. The novel's awkwardness (as well as its valuable intellectual interest) is the result, I argue, of Orwell's working-through of a relationship between ideals and personal enactment of those ideals. The putative aesthetic failure of the novel—the overweening monotony of the protagonist's complaints about money and the unsatisfying nullification of those complaints—is the result of Orwell's developing account of the relationship between identity and belief; the novel's clumsiness is neither attributable to the internal logic of the protagonist's anti-capitalism nor to Orwell's deficient grasp of the formal demands of novel-writing.

The Road to Wigan Pier, commissioned by the *Adelphi* in 1936 and released by the Left Book Club the following year, is part journalistic ethnography, part polemical manifesto; it is the clearest and most forceful articulation of Orwell's criticisms of the

British left, and the most frequently cited evidence of both his anti-intellectualism and his contorted snobbery. In his attack on the cultural posturing of middle-class leftist intellectuals, and in his call for authentic cross-class intersubjectivity, we see a more advanced account of the distinction between identity and belief—an account rhetorically undone by Orwell's ambitious desire to shock and claim a moral high-ground simultaneously.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we find an allegory of identitarian-performative and ideological approaches to political dissent in the characters of Julia and Winston, respectively. Both fail to bring about change and instead are psychologically destroyed. However, the value of ideological critique is both formally and thematically retained, while any political efficacy of personality or temperament is wholly denied—both by necessity, in the repressive, anti-humanistic world of the novel, and as a matter of principle, which is realizable only in light of the clear disentanglement of identity and belief.

In each of these works, and in Orwell's essays and book reviews, we find a shifting, uneasy stance on the proper role (if any) and beliefs (if any) of intellectuals. The various indictments of Orwell's anti-intellectualism, by Stefan Collini and others, are both well-deserved and under-represented in popular depictions and discussions of the writer. Nevertheless, just as Orwell's work wrestles with the categories of identity and belief, so too does it insist on the enduring value of intellection and abstract thought. It's in the rhetorical situation of the committed leftist that the status of the intellect is scrutinized, as the stakes are significantly higher than in other areas of erudition, such as the fine arts. As Michael Levenson notes: "Belief brought close to

feeling, theory as experience, this is something that Orwell thinks intellectuals fail to achieve and that he always admires".[43] It follows, then, that Orwell's anti-intellectualism is set against the cultural identity of intellectuals, while deferential to the intellectual's proper domain: ideas that are formally learned, at times abstract, and of general social interest to other thinking people. In the three books examined here (and across his prolific body of essays, book reviews, and columns), the unity of experience and theory may be the goal, but when this goal is out of reach, a moderated, humble, provisional separation of them retains significant political purchase.

Keep the Aspidistra Flying: Living the Critique

Drawing on his own experiences of working in a bookshop and breaking his way into literary prominence, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* demonstrates the ongoing concern in Orwell's work about the personal experience of political ideals. The protagonist, Gordon Comstock, rails against his own middle-class background and middle-class enthrallment to the "money god," while at the same time striving for recognition in London's literary intelligentsia. With both patrician culture and working-class authenticity unavailable to him, Gordon languishes as a kind of amateur, half-formed Marxist-humanist literary intellectual, having turned down a comfortable living writing advertising and instead working in bookshops and being generally miserable and self-pitying, choosing to accelerate his downward mobility to spite the "money-god." His friendship with his wealthy, Socialist editor, Ravelston, is put under considerable strain.

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[43] Michael Levenson, "The Fictional Realist: Novels of the 1930s" in *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell,* ed. John Rodden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 59–75, 68.

Upon realizing that his girlfriend, Rosemary, is pregnant with his child, Gordon does an about-face that is both easy to see coming, and rather unconvincing: he embraces petit-bourgeois respectability (symbolized throughout by the potted aspidistra plant), marries Rosemary, gives up his literary ambitions, and returns to his advertising job. Before this abrupt and speedy resolution, however, the novel is overfull of Gordon's repetitive rants about commercial culture, its decadence, and its sublime array of indignities, great and small. In his case, his awareness of money as a precondition to literary achievement is almost debilitating.

There are a range of plausible responses to this novel. On the one hand, one may suggest that *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* simply isn't very good. Orwell himself came to dislike the novel, and stipulated that it not be reprinted unless his heirs were particularly hard-up. The novel itself half-acknowledges the weakness of its own inspiration: "But this baby business had upset everything. It was a pretty banal predicament, after all. Private vices, public virtues—the dilemma is as old as the world."[44] On the other hand, some critics have suggested that the novel enacts the more endearing aspects of Orwell's thought: personal decency, responsibility, authenticity, modesty, and an endorsement of the ways in which interpersonal bonds trump intellectual abstraction. (This second response entails the reader's identification or sympathy with the protagonist—a point to which I shall return shortly.) These two responses, furthermore, can be made to cancel each other out: The novel's clumsy plot suggests that Orwell is out of his depth in the cultural-critical matters the novel

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[44] George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* 1936 (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1956), 231.

touches on; the bleakness of Gordon's outlook cannot be convincingly refuted, only dismissed by means of a marriage plot. Alternatively, it can be said that the homeliness of the novel's ending demonstrates the essential rightness of the middle-class values it celebrates. The current Harcourt paperback edition cites these conflicting accounts of the novel's worth. On the one hand, a blurb from Lionel Trilling: "a summa of all the criticisms of a commercial civilization that have ever been made." On the other hand, the promotional copy calls it "a poignant and ultimately hopeful look at class and society." More recently, Rita Felski finds Gordon's conversion "largely unmotivated and singularly unconvincing."[45]

Regardless of one's stance on the credibility of Gordon's narrative of suffering and redemption, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is to be noted as a theoretically significant work of Orwell's, in which he explores the ways in which political positions, visions, and affiliations are experienced through interpersonal bonds and, most of all, *personal conversations*. In this sense, the novel's character system is more interesting than the protagonist's inner conflict, and the situations in which political speech occurs is of as much significance as its content.

So, while the character of Gordon Comstock can credibly be said to voice a conflict of positions and intuitions, it is more through and with the character of Gordon's friend and editor, Ravelston, that *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* engages with Orwell's larger interests in the circulation of political ideas. Ravelston, rather than Gordon, seems to function as the proxy for the reader when he is Gordon's interlocutor;

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[45] Rita Felski, "Nothing to Declare: Shame, Identity, and the Lower-Middle Class," *PMLA* 115 (2000): 36.

he must respond to Gordon's self-absorbed litanies of despair and critique; at the same time, because of his own privilege, he can only present limited and largely self-censored counter-arguments. In a typical scene, Ravelston and Gordon are discussing socialism, with Ravelston trying to convince Gordon of its manifest rightness and desirability, and Gordon refusing to be impressed. Gordon's contempt for socialism—or, more to the point, socialist *talk*—is almost as intense as his contempt for commercial culture.

> "This is all b——s that we've been talking." "What's all b——s?" "All this about Socialism and Capitalism and the state of the modern world and God knows what. I don't give a —— for the state of the modern world. If the whole of England was starving except myself and the people I care about, I wouldn't give a damn." "Don't you exaggerate just a little?" "No. All this talk we make-we're only objectifying our own feelings. It's all dictated by what we've got in our pockets. I go up and down London saying it's a city of the dead, and our civilisation's dying, and I wish war would break out, and God knows what; and all it means is that my wages are two quid a week and I wish they were five." Ravelston, once again reminded obliquely of his income, stroked his nose slowly with the knuckle of his left forefinger. "Of course, I'm with you up to a point. After all, it's only what Marx said. Every ideology is a reflection of economic circumstances." "Ah, but you only understand it out of Marx! You don't know what it means to have to crawl along on two quid a week. It isn't a question of hardship—it's nothing so decent as hardship. It's the bloody, sneaking, squalid meanness of it. Living alone for weeks on end because when you've no money you've no friends. Calling yourself a writer and never even producing anything because you're always too washed out to write. It's a sort of filthy sub-world one lives in. A sort of spiritual sewer." He had started now. They were never together long without Gordon beginning to talk in this strain. It was the vilest manners. It embarrassed Ravelston horribly. And yet somehow Gordon could not help it.[46]

What, one may ask, does it mean to "*only* objectify one's feelings"? Surely, Gordon is trying to convey an objective account of his own feelings and experiences,

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[46] Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, 89–90.

just as Ravelston is suggesting (albeit awkwardly) that they are the results of objective

material processes. One could plausibly retort that talk about "Socialism" is less

"objectifying" than his own expressions of misery and, especially, his account of the

material contingencies which create that misery. More precisely, however, one could

infer from Gordon's comments that socialism, inasmuch as it reflects some high regard

for society and the people in it, is a form of magnanimity which he cannot *afford to*

share. Gordon, as an intellectual without the sinecure requisite for cultural

achievement, knows what is holding him back, poverty, and sees how poverty is a

shared condition, rather than his just desserts. But even more so, he can see how his

own stances on poverty, culture, and "the state of the modern world," are largely

determined by poverty. However, this meta-awareness of where his own ideas come

from is not enough to draw Gordon to socialism—Ravelston's ineptness

notwithstanding.

Instead, the affective intensity of his own poverty makes this connection to a

larger social movement impossible. This affective intensity is a state of *shame* which is

especially acute in the lower-middle class. In her discussion of *Keep the Aspidistra*

Flying and other novels' purchase on lower-middle class shame, Rita Felski explains

that

> Shame, then, is fundamentally connected to everyday sociability. This
> emotion comprises a painful experience of self-consciousness, resulting
> from a sudden recognition of discrepency between one's behavior and
> that of one's peers. [...] Furthermore, shame is often doubled by our
> recognition of its trivial cause.[47]

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[47] Felski, 39.

To be sure, Gordon's feelings of shame are of this type. He reads every possible slight from others as a rejection and humiliation. He knows intensely the ways in which poverty can make intimacy impossible:

> They had nowhere to go, except the open air. There are so many pairs of lovers in London with "nowhere to go"; only the streets and the parks, where there is no privacy and it is always cold. It is not easy to make love in a cold climate when you have no money. The "never the time and the place" motif is not made enough of in novels."[48]

But it would be a mistake to suggest that the feeling of shame alone explains Gordon's plight and its interest. Pushing against this shame is a feeling of defiance in his renouncing of money, a perverse and willful demonstration of the rightness of his own theories about money. After losing his second, lower-paying bookselling job because of a drunken debauch which made the newspapers, he seeks to slide further into poverty, below the torturous respectability of the lower-middle class and its defining shame.

> Before, he had fought against the money-code, and yet he had clung to his retched remnant of decency. But now it was precisely from decency that he wanted to escape. He wanted to go down, deep down, into some world where decency no longer mattered; to cut the strings of his self-respect, to submerge himself—to *sink*, as Rosemary had said.[49]

Gordon's contempt for the world of moneyed respectability, his awareness of where that contempt comes from, and his (now public) shaming all combine into a desire for a putatively liberating form of punishment. But Gordon theorizes this punishment as a form of consistency and fidelity to the awful truth of commercial

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[48] Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying, 120.

[49] Ibid., 203.

capitalism and lower-middle class aspirational culture. His next squalid apartment is

"suited to [his] station" because he has made it his station, because that is the only

station that has a canny disbelief in the money-god.[50] With a swift and clunky reversal

of gears, Rosemary's pregnancy compels him to pursue the exact opposite course.

Two—and only two—forms of damaged authenticity are available to Gordon:

one, adherence to his own ideology critique and consequent material suffering; two, the

demands of family life and upward mobility, but with a different form a self-abasement

before the money-god, namely, abandoning literature for fatuous advertising copy. The

novel's optimistic ending seems, in this regard—arguably the only regard that the novel

supports—cruel. In fact, one could describe Gordon's fealty to the money-god as a form

of cruel optimism, in Lauren Berlant's provocative definition of the term:

> Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.[51]

Gordon's cruel optimism, then, is doubly cruel, because he understands its

operation all too well. But in the constrained world of commercial capitalism, there is

[50] Ibid., 106.

[51] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

no alternative for Gordon.[52] His intellect's purchase on his culture and on himself can find no political expression, merely private surrender. To borrow Trilling's term, Gordon attempts to develop an ethos of *authenticity*, in which resistance to social norms finds true expression in the texture of one's life. But his feelings of reproductive obligation and his inherited class identity *shame* him into an ethos of *damaged sincerity*—damaged, that is, by the mendacity that defines commercial culture.

Speaking for others in *The Road to Wigan Pier*

My aim here is to show how Orwell navigates and demonstrates the different registers of ideology—as false consciousness, as the field of political opinion and affiliation, and as the social and political dimension of lived experience. To understand, and even appreciate, what Orwell is up to in *Wigan Pier*, it is first necessary to acknowledge and ultimately dispense with the obvious contradictions and inconsistencies of the book.

First, Orwell's basic vocabulary is suspiciously inconsistent. On one hand, he derides the Marxist vocabulary of "bourgeois" and "proletarian," while on the other hand, he uses these terms with vivid precision himself. "Probably we could do with a

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[52] Rob Breton suggests that

> between [Gordon's] total moral commitment and pragmatic strategies necessary to make a buck is an undialectical non-event, the surpassing of the moral limitations of pragmatism through a retreat to an inner, unassailable morality. [...] Capitalism turns out to be insurmountable in all ways but in its moral or subjective effects, and the radical criticisms of the text—not of marriage and paternity but of the rationalist concessions needed to support them—are withdrawn.

Rob Breton, *Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 202–203.

little less talk about "capitalist" and "proletarian" and a little more about robbers and the robbed" (227). Yet elsewhere, even in the same paragraph, Orwell uses these terms himself-at times ironically, frequently as a kind of free indirect discourse of the rest of the left, but also as straightforward descriptive and analytical terms. His vocabulary in defining socialism is also inconsistent, but in what must surely be a conscious, deliberate demonstration of the very unsystematic disposition he is talking about: "justice and common decency" (176), "justice and liberty" (216), "tyranny overthrown" (221). It's also worth noticing that Orwell uses the term "intelligentsia" quite straightforwardly; this is a *sui generis* term originating (of all places, given Orwell's distaste for Communist Russophilia) in Russia and eastern Europe. *Sui generis* too is Orwell's use of the term, as a member of the *intelligentsia* himself.

Orwell's accounts of popular intelligence and political inclinations are also varying. Depending on where he is in the course of his argument, Orwell's thinking man-in-the-street ranges from outright socialist, tacitly socialist, potentially socialist, to anti-socialist. "And all the while everyone who uses his brain knows that Socialism, as a world-system and wholeheartedly applied, is a way out," says Orwell, only to later explain in the same paragraph, that the "average thinking person nowadays is not merely not a Socialist, he is actively hostile to Socialism" (171). (We may well ask, what groups of people Orwell is referring to with "everyone who uses his brain" and the "average thinking person," and whether these groups overlap.) *The Road to Wigan Pier* also features conflicting accounts of the working-class intelligentsia itself, radical political parties and organizations, and the level of political awareness among working-class people and the credit due to the left for that awareness-witness Orwell's

ambivalence about the *Daily Worker*, which he accuses of "anti-genteel…bourgeois-baiting" (228): "As for the working class themselves, they have gained immensely in economic knowledge. I believe that the *Daily Worker* has accomplished a great deal here: its influence is out of all proportion to its circulation" (87). There is a related, and probably more important, quandary about working-class authenticity and intellectual potential. Orwell seems to praise certain kinds of working-class intellectual development, but this is a difficult needle to thread to his satisfaction:

> But the working-class intelligentsia is sharply divisible into two different types. There is the type who remains working-class—who goes on working as a mechanic or a dock-labourer or whatever it may be and does not bother to change his working-class accent and habits, but who "improves his mind" in his spare time and works for the I.L.P. or the Communist Party; and there is the type who does alter his way of life, at least externally, and who by means of State scholarships succeeds in climbing into the middle class. The first is one of the finest types of man we have. I can think of some I have met whom not even the most hidebound Tory could help liking and admiring. The other type, with exceptions—D. H. Lawrence, for example—is less admirable. (163)

Here, we see the alignment of a few different concepts related to approbation: likability, admirableness, self-improvement, authenticity, and continuity. We can also note Orwell's desire to contain the consequences of intellectual development. Learning is a fine thing, so long as it does not alter the texture of one's daily life. That this stance toward intellectual life is taken in relation to the *working-class autodidact* is not surprising. Orwell's anti-intellectualism is not sheer hypocrisy, as some have suggested, but rather a desire to keep the intellect and higher learning in their proper place.[53]

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[53] The most stringent and bracing indictment of Orwell's anti-intellectualism is Stephan Collini, "Other People: George Orwell" in *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Orwell has tremendous respect for sharp minds and their operation, so long as they do not overpower the humble reality of shared quotidian existence. The working-class autodidact is therefore in the best possible intellectual position, yet also, because of the nastiness of the genteel culture into which working-class intellectuals tend to ascend, the most fragile.

It does indeed seem like the conditions of being working-class, on one hand, and an orthodox Communist or intellectually-inclined Marxist, on the other, are mutually exclusive, for Orwell: "For it must be remembered that a working man, so long as he remains a *genuine* working man, is seldom or never a Socialist in the complete, logically consistent sense".[54] Furthermore, while the working man is both genuine in his incomprehension of, or indifference to, the finer points of socialist theory, he is not therefore reducible to an uncomprehending social type. Orwell does not say this outright; in the prose of *Wigan Pier,* rather, we find the basic conceit that working-class authenticity is self-evident in irreducible to anything but itself, but that middle-class intellectuals are of a type and can therefore be dissected and critiqued into irrelevance.

2006), 350–374. Apropos of Gordon Comstock and Orwell's shifting self-identification in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Collini suggest that germane to Orwell's individualism is an

> assumption that the view of the world held by the loner or misfit is in some way raw and unmediated, not guided by ideas, still less by theories. It is then a very short step indeed to regarding such a view as "objective" and, ultimately, true *precisely because* it is held by a recalcitrant non-joiner. (368–369)

While I share Collini's mistrust of this not uncommon trait in Orwell's work, my suggestion is that *The Road to Wigan Pier* is an exercise in *overcoming* something which constitutes a more respectable form of that "recalcitrant non-joining": middle-class aversion to socialism.

[54] Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier,* 176, emphasis added.

We can find a vivid example of this unstated notion but a few sentences after the passage just quoted:

> To the *ordinary working man*, the *sort* you would meet in *any* pub on a Saturday night, Socialism does not mean much more than better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about. To the more revolutionary *type*, the *type* who is a hunger-marcher and is *blacklisted* by employers, the word is a rallying-cry against the forces of oppression, a vague threat of future violence.[55]

In this passage and many others, we can see the limits of Orwell's typological thinking. The working class are numerous and similar; we may identify their characteristics and habits (sport, the pub, dialect). (But at the same time, Orwell seeks to redefine what consitutes a working class, as we shall see.) Such a notion of the working class is the conceptual precondition for the ethnography and reporting of Part I of *Wigan Pier*. Middle-class intellectuals, on the other hand, are fewer, but internally various (to be seen below: fruit-juice drinkers, orthodox Communists, Labour Party MPs, sentimental liberals, and so on—Orwell's *lists* are telling stylistic features on this point). However, they are almost always reducible to a *type* in Orwell's account. The working class is a mass of people you ought to know. Middle-class intellectuals are a gallery of cranks you already know all too well; we may speak of them in the most casual, typological terms. Orwell acknowledges at least two kinds of working-class intellectuals, and affirms one: the autodidact who keeps his old job—a rare but celebrated ethos which is immune to the middle-class pretentions and prejudices that seem to accompany intellectual excellence.

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[55] Ibid.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that Orwell idealizes the working class as such, and affirms its lack of knowledge. What the working-class Socialist "does not grasp is that Socialism cannot be narrowed down to mere economic justice and that a reform of that magnitude is bound to work immense changes in our civilization and his own way of life." (Ibid.) In an uncharacteristically ambiguous passage, Orwell seems to come close to equating the theoretically ignorant working-class socialist and the middle-class intellectual socialist:

> The fact is that Socialism, *in the form in which it is now presented*, appeals chiefly to unsatisfactory or even inhuman types. On the one hand you have the warm-hearted, unthinking Socialist, the typical working-class Socialist, who wants to abolish poverty and does not always grasp what this implies. On the other hand, you have the intellectual, book-trained Socialist, who understands that it is necessary to throw our present civilization down the sink and is quite willing to do so.[56]

In this passage, we have an unusual set of evaluations, and the tone is uneasily ambivalent. The "warm-hearted" (not always a compliment) Socialist is probably, we might infer, one of the "unsatisfactory types." The "intellectual, book-trained Socialist," lambasted throughout *Wigan Pier*, possesses the necessary understanding of socialist revolution, but his willingness to follow through with it is "inhuman." What's a socialist to do?

The Road to Wigan Pier functions as a crucial turning-point in Orwell's work and his reputation; it combines the dominant genres, modes, and topics that animate his nonfiction writing: vivid ethnographic journalism, documentary, analysis of popular

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[56] Ibid., 182.

and mass culture, anti-fascist polemic, internal criticism of the British Left, and calls

for popular (if not *populist*) socialism. If *Homage to Catalonia* solidified Orwell's

thinking on questions of revolutionary international geopolitics, *The Road to Wigan*

Pier secured for Orwell not a set of political positions as such, but a way of taking a

shifting set of intensely *relative* political positions, in his quest to popularize his vision

of socialism. True, in *Wigan Pier*, we are watching a mind at work, but this is a

discursive mind, not a personal one; the contrarian persona of *Wigan Pier* is less

important than the book's rhetorical range and versatility. *Wigan Pier* establishes

Orwell's abiding interesting in the interrelation of personality and political position—

and in the possibilities of their revolutionary separation.

This shifting position-taking by a shifty character largely determines reactions

to the book. Either it is upheld as an example of Orwell's intuitive humanism prevailing

over the disastrously cerebral and priggish middle-class leftist intelligentsia, or it is the

first exhibit in the left's case against Orwell's bad-tempered, hypocritical anti-

intellectualism. Two examples of the latter are especially relevant to my discussion here:

First, Richard Hoggart's 1965 introduction to the Heinemann edition is representative

of many reactions to the book. In *Wigan Pier*, Orwell was "intemperately violent" to the

"comic-grotesque gallery of cranks," and was motivated by a "puritanical mistrust of

self-indulgence, physical or mental." According to Hoggart, Orwell's ire was also

misdirected: "More than this, his attack purported to be an attack on the main body of

socialists. As such, it is fantastically inadequate in scope"[57] I will return to the question

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[57] Richard Hoggart, "Introduction to *The Road to Wigan Pier*" 1965, in *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Raymond Williams (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 34–51, 43–44.

of "scope" below; for the moment, the thing to notice about Hoggart's description is the "purported" quality of Orwell's attack, signaling what I take (for the moment) to be the indeterminacy of Orwell's intention, meaning, and intended audience.

Second, in his forward to the Left Book Club edition, Victor Gollancz provides an immediate rebuttal to the book's most inordinate insults, and furthermore attributes Orwell's outbursts to his anxious commitment to identify himself as a socialist, while feeling a "compulsion to conform to the mental habits of his class"[58]:

> The conflict of two compulsions is to be found again and again throughout the book. For instance, Mr. Orwell calls himself a "half-intellectual"; but the truth is that he as at one and the same time an extreme intellectual and a violent anti-intellectual. Similarly, he is a frightful snob-still (he must forgive me for saying this), and a genuine hater of every form of snobbery. For those who can read, the exhibition of this conflict is neither the least interesting nor the least valuable part of the book: for it shows the desperate struggle through which a man must go before, in our present society, his mind can really become free-if indeed that is ever possible.[59]

Gollancz's criticisms are convincing in their own right, but they proceed from what may be a too sincere, or direct, reading of the book's polemical sections. On one reading, "exhibition" suggests that readers are witnessing the workings of an ambivalent mind, largely unconscious of how many of its thoughts are attributable to a deeper "conflict of two compulsions"; for Gollancz, these parts of the book are interesting and valuable for what they demonstrate, but that demonstration is taken to be symptomatic, rather than diegetic. Part II of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, then, would be a

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[58] Victor Gollancz, Forward to Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, xv.

[59] Ibid., xvi.

case study in a middle-class thinker's struggle toward class-consciousness, a struggle

which is, according to Gollancz, likely abortive.

We might well ask why Orwell would open himself up to such easy accusations

from his savvy readers, such as those voiced by Gollancz. Or, conversely, why write such

a book that could be so easily misunderstood? Indeed, it can be hard to grasp what

would count as the book's success or failure. Presumably, *The Road to Wigan Pier* is

supposed to incite readers toward more unpretentious, clear-headed dialogue and

organization between working-class and middle-class socialists. This dialogue and

organization would be helped by a tactful, patient softening of the outward cultural

signs that distinguish what are surmountable but not unavoidable class differences

(accent, dress, manners, amusements). The threat of fascism in Britain, furthermore,

puts class-distinctions under tremendous pressure; either they will harden into a

degraded, Anglicized form of fascism, or they will diminished with the shared struggle

against it.[60] Why, then, devote so much of the book's rhetorical and stylistic energy

towards the snarky caricature of those differences in the first place? The answer, I am

arguing, is not reducible to Orwell's trademark wily inconsistency and contrarianism.

Rather, awareness of Orwell's shrewdness shows these chapters to be both more

exploratory—which is to say, ventriloquizing— and even a little indulgent;[61] Orwell is

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[60] Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 231–232.

[61] On this note, Alex Woloch's account of play and transparency in Orwell's writing is persuasive. Orwell's

> 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"

flexing his rhetorical muscles to show his mastery of the political-rhetorical field.

Again, in his introduction, Gollancz indexes this very ambiguity:

> Having criticised us in this way (for though Mr. Orwell insists that he is
> speaking merely as devil's advocate and saying what other people say,
> quite often and quite obviously he is really speaking in propria persona—
> or perhaps I had better say "in his own person," otherwise Mr. Orwell will
> class me with "the snobs who write in Latinised English" or words to that
> effect) Mr. Orwell joins us generously and whole-heartedly, but begs us
> to drop our present methods of propaganda, to base our appeal on
> freedom and liberty, and to see ourselves as a league of the oppressed
> against the oppressors.[62]

But again, the question of what Orwell actually believes, and what beliefs in

others he affirms and rejects, is deliberately avoided; his focus is on working out the

consequences of personality-driven reactions to Socialist politics, and in doing so,

Orwell is seen to be *advancing* those reactions himself, even as he half-heartedly

disavows them.

This schizophrenic, cat-and-mouse game with sincerity poses perhaps the

biggest interpretive challenge for the book; it seems to invite misunderstanding.

Consider the most famously intemperate passage, the famous "fruit-juice drinker"

litany:

> In addition to [teetotaling, Nonconformist background of many
> Socialists] is the horrible-the really disquieting-prevalence of **cranks**
> wherever Socialists are gathered together. **One** sometimes gets the
> impression that the mere words "Socialism" and "Communism" draw

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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.

See Alex Woloch, "Orwell and the Essay Form: Two Case Studies," *Republics of Letters* 4 (2014), 1.

[62] Gollancz, in Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, xix–xx, emphasis added.

towards them with magnetic force every fruit juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack, pacifist and feminist in England. One day this summer **I** was riding through Letchworth when the bus stopped and two dreadful-looking old men got on to it. They were both about sixty, both very short, *pink and chubby*, and both hatless. One of them was *obscenely bald*, the other had long grey hair bobbed in the Lloyd George style. They were dressed in pistachio-coloured shirts and khaki shorts into which their *huge bottoms were crammed so tightly that* **you** *could study every dimple*. Their appearance created a mild stir of horror on top of the bus. **The man next to me**, a commercial traveller I should say, glanced at me, at them, and back again at me, and murmured, "Socialists," as who should say, "Red Indians." He was probably right-the I.L.P. were holding their summer school at Letchworth. But the point is that *to him, as* **an ordinary man**, *a crank meant a Socialist and a Socialist meant a crank*. Any Socialist, he probably felt, could be counted on to have something eccentric about him. And some such notion seems to exist even among **Socialists themselves**. For instance, I have here a prospectus from another summer school which states its terms per week and then asks me to say "whether my diet is ordinary or vegetarian." **They** take it for granted, you see, that it is necessary to ask this question. *This kind of thing* is by itself sufficient to alienate **plenty of decent people**. And **their** instinct is perfectly sound, for the food-crank is by definition a person willing to cut himself off from **human society** in hopes of adding five years on to the life of his **carcase**; that is, a person *out of touch with* **common humanity**.[63]

One may as well just mark the hideous beauties of this passage: The qualities that mark the crank are almost entirely superficial, even bodily: "obscenely [!] bald"; fat, dimpled buttocks in tight shorts. By "stir of horror," Orwell is surely being churlish; the "horror" and "obscenity" he speaks of is surely no more than mild repulsion or-as the "Red Indian" moment would suggest—distant amusement. In fact, the use of "horrible" and "disquieting" to describe such eccentricities is surely itself a bit of middle-class

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[63] Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 174-175, emphases added.

priggishness in itself. Socialists' appearances are far from revolting or "obscene"—

merely tacky or tiresome offenses to conventional taste. It is precisely from the

standpoint of *taste* that *beliefs* (Quakerism, pacifism, feminism), *appearances* (beards,

sandles), and *lifestyles* (nudism, sex mania, fruit-juice drinking) become members of

the same set of turn-offs—"this kind of thing." Vegetarianism is especially problematic,

as it combines a belief, a habit, and an identity. Orwell elides fact that vegetarianism in

England shows not an aloof disconnection from the "common humanity" of meat

eating, but an intense awareness, criticism, and rejection of it. One may be haplessly

bald, fat, and drably dressed—but one cannot be haplessly vegetarian.

Another way to track the rhetorical shiftiness of such a passage is to ask who it

seems to be written *to*, and *whose perceptions* it claims to represent (emphasized with

bold type): *One, I, you, the man next to me, an ordinary man, plenty of decent people,*

human society, common humanity. Excluded are *cranks, Socialists themselves*, and the

possessors of (possibly dimpled-buttocked?) vegetarian *carcases*. Likewise, the passage

ranges from the most superficial (baldness) to the most essential and abstract

(common humanity) with astonishing ease—astonishing, that is, once the reader

remembers that he or she is reading something very craftily-written, rather than

listening to the candid, disorganized opinions of a confidante. The final praise might

be: Orwell gives you the former in the disguise of the latter, and thereby interpolates

you into common, decent humanity (even if some of his intended readers—maybe even

me or you—must be much-maligned chubby sex-maniacs). The final criticism might be

an echo of Gollancz: that Orwell mistakes the superficial, fragile sensibilities of his own

class for "common humanity."

This criticism brings us back to the book's explicitly autobiographical dimension. Where Orwell seems to be distinctly ungenerous, superficial, or reactive may be instances of cathartic release—if not for himself (who can say), then for his reader. In fact, the book's most bad-tempered sections, like the one above, seem to be almost a kind of permission for the reader, with the promise of progress. In fact, the bracketing of such ideas is clear enough:

> I have been looking at this from the point of view of the bourgeois who finds his secret beliefs challenged and is driven back to a frightened conservatism.[64]

Indeed, he aims to show "the temperamental conservatism which is latent in *all kinds of people* is easily mobilized against Socialism."[65]

> This, then, is the superficial aspect of the ordinary man's recoil from Socialism. I know the whole dreary argument very thoroughly, because I know it from both sides. Everything that I say here I have both said to ardent Socialists who were trying to convert me, and had said to me by bored non-Socialists whom I was trying to convert. The whole thing amounts to a kind of *malaise* produced by dislike of individual Socialists, especially of the cocksure Marx-quoting type. Is it childish to be influenced by that kind of thing? Is it silly? Is it even contemptible? It is all that, but the point is that it *happens*, and therefore it is important to keep it in mind.[66]

Orwell strikes a careful balance here, between critique of others' views and a pragmatic acceptance of their prevalence in the world. Few commentators have acknowledged that the middle-class recoil from socialism is here unambiguously characterized as "childish[,] silly[, and] even contemptible." To keep such ideological

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[64] Ibid., 166.

[65] Ibid., 190, emphasis added.

[66] Ibid., 184-185, emphasis in original.

dross "in mind," however, is to forgo bothering to critique it on logical grounds. Instead, keeping such contemptible childish silliness *in mind* means nothing more or less than to to approach the rhetorical situations of socialist organizing with a practical, unrigorous intellectual sensibility. For these situations, one has not only, in light of Orwell's advice, become aware of anti-socialist humbug, but you have also entertained it and inhabited it, even if only for the duration of reading *The Road to Wigan Pier*. To keep all this *in mind*, then, is to develop an ethos that neither chastises nor presumes the sufficient effectiveness of logical argument. "In mind," then, is both a casual and a precise formulation—hovering between critique and indulgence.

Given my analysis of *The Road to Wigan Pier* as a work of rhetorical dynamism and trickery, we might in making the aforementioned acknowledgments step back from the more rancorous arguments the book has given rise to, even as we see how the book sponsors a more considered, reflective line of thought on the origin of political beliefs and attitudes. *Wigan Pier* takes seriously the simultaneous, seemingly contradictory notions that our ideas are the products of our circumstances and that we may deliberately reshape our ideas in light of a cold, clear knowledge of material reality. In other words, *Wigan* Pier contributes to our understanding of social determinism and its overcoming, and in so doing picks up where Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* surrendered.

Although it takes pains to distance itself from Marxist theorizing about "ideology" and "class consciousness," *Wigan Pier* is an undoubted contribution to that body of thought. The book contains no actual criticism of the concepts of *class-consciousness* and *ideology*, but it does effectively rename and reinventthem

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throughout. These terms just don't *sound* right, for superficial—what we might call *cultural-ist*—reasons that *ideology* and *class-consciousness* can themselves name. In other words, the very conceptual blockage to Orwell's latent Marxist vocabulary are the phenomena that this vocabulary best describes.

A few years before writing the his tortured account of class attitudes in *Wigan Pier*, Orwell voiced a very different idea about what constitutes class and class feeling in *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

> Fear of the mob is a superstitious fear. It is based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor, as though they were two different races, like Negroes and white men. *But in reality there is no such difference. The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else, and the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit. Change places, and handy dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?* Everyone who has mixed on equal terms with the poor knows this quite well. But the trouble is that intelligent, cultivated people, the very people who might be expected to have liberal opinions, never do mix with the poor. For what do the majority of educated people know about poverty?[67]

By *Wigan Pier*, Orwell would come to see this view as naïve and uncomprehending of the thickly meaningful and determinative effects of class identities that become unmoored from money itself. One's class distorts one's faculty of class consciousness and political analysis, to be sure. In *Wigan Pier* and other works after *Down and Out*, we see that class can also determine one's entire lifeworld. A famous and subtly masterful paragraph on this question bears close examination:

> A middle-class person embraces Socialism and perhaps even joins the Communist Party. How much real difference does it make? Obviously,

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[67] George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* 1933 (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1972), 120, emphasis added.

living within the framework of capitalist society, he has got to go on earning his living, and one cannot blame him if he clings to his bourgeois economic status. But is there any change in his tastes, his habits, his manners, his imaginative background—his "ideology," in Communist jargon? Is there any change in him except that he now votes Labour, or, when possible, Communist at the elections? It is noticeable that he still habitually associates with his own class; he is vastly more at home with a member of his own class, who thinks him a dangerous Bolshie, than with a member of the working class who supposedly agrees with him; his tastes in food, wine, clothes, books, pictures, music, ballet, are still recognisably bourgeois tastes; most significant of all, he invariably marries into his own class. Look at any bourgeois Socialist. Look at Comrade X, member of the C.P.G.B. and author of *Marxism for Infants*. Comrade X, it so happens, is an old Etonian. He would be ready to die on the barricades, in theory anyway, but you notice that he still leaves his bottom waistcoat button undone. He idealises the proletariat, but it is remarkable how little his habits resemble theirs. Perhaps once, out of sheer bravado, he has smoked a cigar with the band on, but it would be almost physically impossible for him to put pieces of cheese into his mouth on the point of his knife, or to sit indoors with his cap on, or even to drink his tea out of the saucer. Perhaps table-manners are not a bad test of sincerity. I have known numbers of bourgeois Socialists, I have listened by the hour to their tirades against their own class, and yet never, not even once, have I met one who had picked up proletarian table-manners. Yet, after all, why not? Why should a man who thinks all virtue resides in the proletariat still take such pains to drink his soup silently? It can only be because in his heart he feels that proletarian manners are disgusting. So you see he is still responding to the training of his childhood, when he was taught to hate, fear, and despise the working class.[68]

To be sure, Orwell is talking about something quite real: the stickiness of middle-class Socialists' class personal habits, and their likely roots in hate and fear. However, in a characteristic contradiction that is so easy to miss, there is a tacit assumption that Socialist political ideals should—and *would*, in the absence of bogus

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[68] Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 135–136.

class prejudice—result in the adoption of particular proletarian table manners. Note too the slip from Socialism to lionizing working-class "virtue"—a real enough phenomenon on the left, but certainly not at the core of socialist thought. There is an uneasy conjunction of matters of high and low importance, profound and superficial, normative and preferential.

The passage starts with a series of didactic questions, which have Orwell's characteristic blend of bracing disclosure and nudging knowingness. We, the "you," already know the answers, and we recognize that answers with a weary sigh, which we share with Orwell himself. With the caricature of Comrade X, however, this passage switches from a saddening exposure of class alienation, effecting even who we may love, to a bathetic focus on the smallest everyday gestures. The shift in registers is comical and lightly mocking. The cigar band may in fact be a reliable class indicator, but the mock heroic image of leaving it on only makes it seem trivial. The tone here is easy to miss: Leaving the cigar band on is in itself indicative of a working-class sensibility, but the "bravado" of doing so is self-canceling, giving the game away. Orwell's rhetorical outflanking here leaves no room for a middle-class socialism to ask, *Do you think I should start leaving the band on my cigar as an aspiration to working-class solidarity?* Both the effort itself is ironized as "bravado," and the act itself is so small relative to the socialist aspirations which have motivated it.

Yet the paragraph uses this moment of levity to introduce a subtle and crucial idea, that table-manners may betray just as much by staying the same as by changing too enthusiastically. Logically, the middle-class socialist is in a lose-lose situation from Orwell's canny perspective, which has now become ours. Changing one's table-manners

out of a political motivation is perhaps trivial and reveals one as too eager and naive about the deeper changes necessary to overcome class snobbery. But, not changing one's table-manors is a sign of lingering snobbery. And, by the end of the paragraph, "disgusting" has taken on the moral baggage of hate, fear, and despising. The importance of personal habits at once stressed and undone, as the reader—the one to whom Orwell is giving this insight as a sort of *sotto voce* aside—is made to feel a vertiginous shift in scope and magnitude. "Perhaps table-manners are not a test of sincerity" has by the end of the paragraph, become a truly disorienting idea, not merely surprising or counter-intuitive.

What, then, is one to do?

> But unfortunately you get no further by merely wishing class-distinctions away. More exactly, it is necessary to wish them away, but your wish has no efficacy unless you grasp what it involves. The fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. Here am I, a typical member of the middle class. It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class-distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions. All my notions—notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of funny and serious, of ugly and beautiful—are essentially *middle-class* notions; my taste in books and food and clothes, my sense of honour, my table manners, my turns of speech, my accent, even the characteristic movements of my body, are the products of a special kind of upbringing and a special niche about half-way up the social hierarchy. When I grasp this I grasp that it is no use clapping a proletarian on the back and telling him that he is as good a man as I am; if I want real contact with him, I have got to make an effort for which very likely I am unprepared. For to get outside the class-racket I have got to suppress not merely my private snobbishness, but most of my other tastes and prejudices as well. I have got to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognisable as the same person. What is involved is not merely the amelioration of working-class conditions, nor an avoidance of the more stupid forms of snobbery, but a complete abandonment of the upper-

class and middle-class attitude to life. And whether I say Yes or No probably depends upon the extent to which I grasp what is demanded of me.[69]

At this point, the struggle of the middle-class socialist seems harder *still*, almost impossible, if one recalls Orwell's previous ironizing of outward changes of habit. As both a way to ease the reader into this project, and as a way to further refine and distill what it means, Orwell here presents the task as wholly negative: *abolishing a part of yourself, suppressing, altering beyond recognition* (*not* to recognize oneself as an earthy proletarian), *abandoning attitudes*. The process of developing a socialist ethos is *subtractive*, rather than *transgressive*. Whether you end up eating cheese off the point of a knife or not is less important than the conscious effort to remove *something* from yourself and thereby change yourself. It is not just the case that specifying what one is to do *instead* has been undermined above (though it has) or is simply too difficult. rather, the insight of this passage is that it matters less *what you're like*, and more your willingness to leave parts of yourself behind. In other words, *who you are, what you're like*, is important to socialist revolution, but only *minimally* so.

But there is always some romantic attachment that threatens to undo Orwell's work towards intellectual transparency and unpretentious ethos. The working class is indeed a source of unmatched value for Orwell, embodying a sense of tranquility and relaxed order characteristic of early 20th-century Britain. As the world of work itself cannot be the site of this value—as Part I of *Wigan Pier* so vividly explains—the home is instead:

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[69] Ibid., 184-185, emphasis in original.

> In a working-class home—I am not thinking at the moment of the
> unemployed, but of comparatively prosperous homes—you breathe a
> warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find
> elsewhere. [...] His home life seems to fall more naturally into a sane and
> comely shape. I have often been struck by the peculiar easy
> completeness, the perfect symmetry as it were, of a working-class
> interior at its best. [I]t is a good place to be in, provided that you can be
> not only in it but sufficiently *of* it to be taken for granted.[70]

Orwell's image of the working-class home is a pastoral one, to be sure; the working class lives more naturally and deeply than, presumably, anyone else. Furthermore, one's relationship to it should ideally be one of immanence—the very opposite of the distanced, diagnostic relationship to social spheres cultivated by the middle-class left-wing intelligentsia. Let us also pause to note Orwell's critical diction here: *fall more naturally into a sane and comely shape, peculiar easy completeness, perfect symmetry as it were, at its best*. In the very moment when Orwell stresses the importance of *belonging* to an uneducated, working-class milieu in order to fully appreciate it, his terms of approbation turn distinctly aesthetic and urbane. It's tempting to imagine Orwell starting to write this passage, grow uneasy about its sentimentalism, and strike such a tone in order to keep his eyes dry.

While open to a fair amount of criticism for being sentimental, patronizing, or romantic, Orwell's pastoral is to an exceptional degree tempered by awareness of historical contingency. There is nothing in this tableau that is not dependent on both a particular stage of capitalist historical development and the fortunes of individual material comfort: "I should say that a manual worker, if he is in steady work and

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[70] Ibid., 116-117, emphasis in original.

drawing good wages—an 'if' which gets bigger and bigger—has a better chance of being happy than an 'educated' man" (117).

> This scene is still reduplicated in a majority of English homes, though not in so many as before the war. Its happiness depends mainly upon one question—whether Father is in work. But notice that the picture I have called up, of a working-class family sitting round the *coal* fire after kippers and strong *tea*, belongs only to our own moment of time and could not belong either to the future or the past. Skip forward two hundred years into the Utopian future, and the scene is totally different. [...] But move backwards into the Middle Ages and you are in a world almost equally foreign.[71]

While Orwell's notions of justice and decency—and of Socialism—may lack the degree of definition that his implicit Marxian analysis demands, they are not universal notions that risk becoming banal or trite because of their broadness. Rather, the notion of the good we see in Orwell's working-class pastoral is clearly a function of a larger historical and political formation that includes British industry (coal) and the British Empire (tea).

A similarly materialist sensibility informs the book's stirring concluding paragraph, in which the realties of class antagonism and the outward trappings of class loyalties are held in a kind of parallax view, related, but distant, and only appearing close because of one's incomplete perspective.

> "Yet I believe there is some hope that when Socialism is a living issue, a thing that large numbers of Englishmen genuinely care about, the class-difficulty may solve itself more rapidly than now seems thinkable. In the next few years we shall either get that effective Socialist party that we need, or we shall not get it. If we do not get it, then Fascism is coming; probably a slimy Anglicised form of Fascism, with cultured policemen instead of Nazi gorillas and the lion and the unicorn instead of the

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[71] Ibid., 116-117, emphasis in original.

swastika. But if we do get it there will be a struggle, conceivably a physical one, for our plutocracy will not sit quiet under a genuinely revolutionary government. And when the widely separate classes who, necessarily, would form any real Socialist party have fought side by side, they may feel differently about one another. And then perhaps this misery of class-prejudice will fade away, and we of the sinking middle class—the private schoolmaster, the half-starved free-lance journalist, the colonel's spinster daughter with £75 a year, the jobless Cambridge graduate, the ship's officer without a ship, the clerks, the civil servants, the commercial travellers and the thrice-bankrupt drapers in the country towns—may sink without further struggles into the working class where we belong, and probably when we get there it will not be so dreadful as we feared, for, after all, we have nothing to lose but our aitches.[72]

As with the working-class home tableau, the details of this image (or more properly, montage) only point to an invigorated awareness of the material contingencies of private life—the contingencies that socialism, as Gordon Comstock could not bring himself to see, promises to make decent and just. The pitiful, shameful smallness of lower-middle-class life will be left behind—abolished—as decisively and with the surprising ease of changing one's accent. One's accent, like any other part of one's style, is both deliberate and natural, but neither intrinsically authentic nor fraudulent.

Nineteen Eighty-Four and forms of resistance

As a preface to this final discussion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we might stop to review where we have come so far. Orwell's work, I have argued, operates within, and is explicitly about, a dialectic between two approaches to political thinking. The first is

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[72] Ibid., 231–232.

evident in Orwell's characteristic appeals to instinct, intuition, and personal decency; most positive assessments of Orwell's work have also taken this line. Both the soundness of political thought and its fundamental virtue are inescapably personal, embedded in the accumulated habits and moral wisdom of individuals and national cultures. Individuals' decency, inasmuch as it supervenes on questions of politics, resists both systematic, philosophical abstraction (or, to put it another way, political "dogma" or "doctrine") and disciplined adherence to the positions and strategies of political organizations. The privileged terms of this first approach are *private* (as in the "essential privateness of English life" in *The Lion and the Unicorn*[73]), *habit, conscience, decency,* and *feeling*. When this approach keeps people at a minor distance from what Orwell knows to be the more correct or rigorous line, Orwell is famously forgiving and indulgent. For example, working-class Socialists, like working-class Catholics, are almost never wholly orthodox, to their credit and advantage.[74]

The second approach is characterized by dialogue, argument, persuasion, and the impersonal validity of political analysis. The personal faculties most conducive to this approach are perhaps clarity of vision, humility, and a willingness to suspend one's individual personality and tastes for a broader good: "nothing to lose but our aitches" in *Wigan Pier* (231), and Orwell's assertion that the end of the British Empire will entail a diminishment of international prominence and a downward turn in standard of

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[73] George Orwell, "England Your England" in *Facing Unpleasant Facts: Narrative Essays* ed. George Packer, 127.

[74] Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 231.

living.[75] This second approach, naturally enough, is more explicitly intellectual, as it demands both a detached view of social totality and the ability to synthesize competing viewpoints and pieces of information. If the guarantor of the success of the first approach is personal authenticity, then the test of the latter is the fidelity of thought to its object, a fidelity best and most often developed in agonistic dialogue and debate.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Ingsoc combines the worst of both of these intellectual faculties: adherence to Ingsoc, via doublethink, entails making impersonal orthodoxy habitual. The solipsistic indoctrination by O'Brien in the Ministry of Love in Part III is an exercise in arguing the inarguable, compelling assent through the coercion of the individual mind and body. Part III, it follows, feels the most artless and scripted, prompting disappointment in some critics. Or, to put it in a way that may help explain the inertness of novel's interrogation-torture scenes: Ingsoc is intellectual, argumentative lipstick on the pig of willful sadism.

As I have shown is the case in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, so too in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does Orwell stage, via disagreements between both the stated positions and temperaments of characters, a dialogue on the best forms of political resistance. In the characters of Winston Smith and Julia, we find two competing accounts of how to best defy and overturn the oppression of Oceania's Ingsoc system, with a particular eye to its limitations of their personal freedom. Over a series of conversations and

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[75] "The alternative is to throw the Empire overboard and reduce England to a cold and unimportant little island where we should all have to work very hard and live mainly on herrings and potatoes. That is the very last thing that any left-winger wants. Yet the left-winger continues to feel that he has no moral responsibility for imperialism. He is perfectly ready to accept the products of Empire and to save his soul by sneering at the people who hold the Empire together." Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 183.

interactions between Winston and Julia, we see an intractable disagreement about what forms of thought and action are worth pursuing in both long- and short-term dissidence with the Brotherhood. What Orwell is exploring, I argue, is a competing set of mindsets available to him and to the independent left in the struggle against totalitarianism. Although the Ministry of Love successfully breaks both characters' will to resist and capacities for autonomous thought and feeling, it is nevertheless the case that Winston's approach remains the dominant ethos of the novel; while *Nineteen Eighty-Four* no doubt epitomizes Orwell's pessimism for the political culture of the 20th century, the purchase of Winston's powers of analysis and capacities for historical consciousness are nevertheless upheld as the only site of hope or promise. In other words, the zero-sum game of political resistance does not preclude our discernment of better and worse approaches within the novel itself. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I argue, represents a culmination and resolution of Orwell's ambivalence on the question of the personal embeddedness of political thought, with a measured settlement on the side of argument, historical consciousness, and distanced discernment of the impersonal and institutional correlates to political imagination.

My approach here entails setting aside the aspects of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that most frequently attract critical attention (especially where critics try to trace how the novel fits into Orwell's political thinking): surveillance, "doublethink," the division of the world into super-states, propaganda, and the psychological terror of Room 101. Instead, I will concentrate on how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* partakes of an established tradition in the English novel, and in his own prior work, of using the individuated

experience and articulation of political thought by conflicting characters as a way to explore the relationship between character and political thought more generally.

We can begin with an understanding of Winston Smith as a thwarted but persistent intellectual. His intellectual modes or objects are antiquarianism, cool observation and discernment, and a formal or aesthetic concern with the arrangement of parts. We see the first, antiquarianism, in his purchase of a blank book and ink-pen, and in his delight and fascination with old and obsolete items in Charrington's antique/junk shop. We see his concern with the finer details of arrangement and appearance in his handling of the diary:

> As he put his hand to the door-knob Winston saw that he had left the diary open on the table. DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER was written all over it, in letters almost big enough to be legible across the room. It was an inconceivably stupid thing to have done. But, he realised, even in his panic he had not wanted to smudge the creamy paper by shutting the book while the ink was wet.[76]

> He went to the bathroom and carefully scrubbed the ink away with the gritty dark-brown soap, which rasped your skin like sandpaper *and was therefore well adapted for this purpose*. He put the diary away in the drawer. It was quite useless to think of hiding it, but he could at least make sure whether or not its existence had been discovered. A hair laid across the page-ends was too obvious. With the tip of his finger he picked *up an identifiable grain of whitish dust and deposited it on the corner of the cover*, where it was bound to be shaken off if the book was moved.[77]

Winston's penchant for precision and sensitivity to form are treated affectionately in the novel; these tendencies become signs of his humanity, which is, in

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[76] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty Four* 1949 (New York: Knopf, 1992), 22.

[77] Ibid., 31, emphasis added.

the world of Oceania, both dangerous and anachronistic. But we should also note that these same powers are operating in his work at the Ministry of Truth, the falsification of historical records. The novel would seem to invite readers to regard Winston's work with some horror and disgust. Winston, however, feels no such distaste for his job:

> Winston's greatest pleasure in life was in his work. Most of it was a tedious routine, but included in it there were also jobs so difficult and intricate that you could lose yourself in them as in the depths of a mathematical problem—delicate pieces of forgery in which you had nothing to guide you except your knowledge of the principles of Ingsoc and your estimate of what the Party wanted you to say. Winston was good at *this kind of thing*.[78] Immediately after lunch there arrived a delicate, difficult piece of work which would take several hours and necessitated putting everything else aside. It consisted in falsifying a series of production reports of two years ago, in such a way as to cast discredit on a prominent member of the Inner Party who was now under a cloud. *This was the kind of thing that Winston was good at*, and for more than two hours he succeeded in shutting the girl out of his mind altogether.[79] [...] In so far as he had time to remember it, he was not troubled by the fact that every word he murmured into the speakwrite, every stroke of his ink-pencil, was a deliberate lie. He was as anxious as anyone else in the Department that the forgery should be perfect.[80]

When Winston is not showing interest in the past as such or perceiving beauty (as in the coral paperweight that he purchases), his cognitive powers suit his role in Oceanic society. His interest in and grasp of social totality, furthermore, are what classify him as an intellectual in significant and consequential ways. Winston is able to notice patterns, not only in the stuff of everyday life, but in the types of Party members and their fates:

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[78] Ibid., 46, emphasis added.

[79] Ibid., 114, emphasis added.

[80] Ibid., 191.

For some reason Winston suddenly found himself thinking of Mrs Parsons, with her wispy hair and the dust in the creases of her face. Within two years those children would be denouncing her to the Thought Police. Mrs Parsons would be vaporized. Syme would be vaporized. Winston would be vaporized. O'Brien would be vaporized. Parsons, on the other hand, would never be vaporized. The eyeless creature with the quacking voice would never be vaporized. The little beetle-like men who scuttled so nimbly through the labyrinthine corridors of Ministries—they, too, would never be vaporized. And the girl with dark hair, the girl from the Fiction Department—she would never be vaporized either. It seemed to him that he knew instinctively who would survive and who would perish: though just what it was that made for survival, it was not easy to say.[81]

Winston's perceptions of doomed characters are almost sociological in their hypotheses, and Winston's main concerns are with how people's public presentations of themselves predict their legal and political destiny. In fact, one could think of Winston's prediction about Syme and reflections on the Chestnut Tree Café as minor instances of the "sociology of intellectuals."

As Winston comes to know Julia and be inducted into the Brotherhood by O'Brien, he searches for some context in which he can have meaningful discussion and dialogue about political issues. The meeting with O'Brien, however, is distinctly expedient; there is no discussion of what political analyses or norms guide the Brotherhood, only "sanity"—a troubled term in this novel, to say the least. His interested absorption in Goldstein's book (which it would seem we are to share, given the novel's reproduction of it) proves to be of only expository interest to the novel's

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[81] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, 64.

plot. But most of all, his relationship with Julia fails to satisfy his desire for meaningful

dialogue and testing of ideas.

Julia's approach to political dissent is, in contrast to his own, distinctly

embodied and visceral (which is to say, sexual), historically ignorant, intuitive, non-

normative, personal, and performative. The novel goes to considerable lengths to make

clear the coordinates of her political thinking. This is but a small sample of the novel's

many lengthy characterizations of her dissent.

> A thing that astonished him about her was the coarseness of her
> language. [...] It was merely one symptom of her revolt against the Party
> and all its ways, and somehow it seemed natural and healthy, like the
> sneeze of a horse that smells bad hay.[82] She 'didn't much care for reading',
> she said. Books were just a commodity that had to be produced, like jam
> or bootlaces.[83] Life as she saw it was quite simple. You wanted a good
> time; "they", meaning the Party, wanted to stop you having it; you broke
> the rules as best you could. She seemed to think it was just as natural
> that "they" should want to rob you of your pleasures as that you should
> want to avoid being caught. She hated the Party, and said so in the
> crudest words, but she made no general criticism of it. [...] He wondered
> vaguely how many others like her there might be in the younger
> generation—people who had grown up in the world of the Revolution,
> knowing nothing else, accepting the Party as something unalterable, like
> the sky, not rebelling against its authority but simply evading it, as a
> rabbit dodges a dog.[84]

It is quite clear that Julia is presented to us as an emblem of some body of

dissident thought or comportment, which is at odds with Winston's, and even Orwell's

own sense of what counts as political interest or activity. Julia's and Winston's political

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[82] Ibid., 128–129.

[83] Ibid., 136.

[84] Ibid., 137–138.

thought differ in both their content (what they think counts as politics) and form (how they are communicated). Julia tires of political discussion, and falls asleep (in case the message wasn't clear enough) during key moments when Winston would benefit from dialogue, and when he's reading Goldstein's book. With the notable exception of her more astute understanding of the Party's sexual repression, Julia's approach to politics is shown to be both deficient and incapable of meaningful engagement with others'. The inertness of her political thought—its recursion back to herself, its disregard for historical or empirical verification, and its rejection of political organization—would be immediately dismissible, were it not for the deep effectiveness of her sex with Winston at developing *his* political consciousness in new ways. Nevertheless, her solipsistic focus on her own private sphere of transgression and pleasure is analogous to O'Brien's relativism and sophistry. If the only thing between Winston's and O'Brien's intellect is a streak of sadism, the only thing separating Julia from O'Brien is a different, more richly developed notion of pleasure. And while this role for Julia is of a piece with Orwell's foreshortened comprehension of women's political savvy or potential, the conceptual differences between her political style—her ethos—and Winston and O'Brien's are not reducible to gender difference or her sexual availability.

On the basis of these two archetypes of political dissent, we can say with confidence that, against the often-justified charges of anti-intellectualism leveled against Orwell and his work, the human faculty most affirmed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is intelligence, rather than love, decency, or even solidarity. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* invites us to invest the most hope in the grasp of social totality by means of intellectual distance, rather than recognition of the commonality of human virtue and the shared

decency of ordinary folk. The worst tragedies of the novel occur within an *economy of intelligence*. Characters, and Oceania generally, suffer most when fidelity of thought to its object, debate, and mental agility are lost.

This is not to say that the novel lacks serious critiques of the moral and political failures of arid, bloodless mental calculation. Doublethink is little more than a systematic-sounding name given to the developed, but basically unexceptional, hypocrisy of the technical-managerial class and its cultural elites. As Goldstein's book, itself written by the Inner Party intelligentsia, suggests:

> It need hardly be said that the subtlest practitioners of doublethink are those who invented doublethink and know that it is a vast system of mental cheating. In our society, those who have the best knowledge of what is happening are also those who are furthest from seeing the world as it is. In general, the greater the understanding, the greater the delusion: the more intelligent, the less sane. One clear illustration of this is the fact that war hysteria increases in intensity as one rises in the social scale.[85] The splitting of the intelligence which the Party requires of its members, and which is more easily achieved in an atmosphere of war, is now almost universal, but the higher up the ranks one goes, the more marked it becomes. It is precisely in the Inner Party that war hysteria and hatred of the enemy are strongest.[86]

"Knowledge" here is to be distinguished from other kinds of intelligence, such as the capacity for abstraction or entertainment of counterfactuals—two of Winston's special strengths. Instead, we have here more pointed criticism by Orwell of mental prowess: namely, that mere access to facts is not enough. The Inner Party technocracy must as a matter of course accumulate positive knowledge, but this is in itself no guard

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[85] Ibid., 224.

[86] Ibid., 200.

against delusion; the "splitting of intelligence" is not the same as intelligence itself, nor

is it the same as intellectual distance or impersonality. In fact, Goldstein's book

maintains the importance of organized, cultivated ignorance to oligarchical

collectivism:

> For if leisure and security were enjoyed by all alike, the great mass of
> human beings who are normally stupefied by poverty would become
> literate and would learn to think for themselves; and when once they had
> done this, they would sooner or later realise that the privileged minority
> had no function, and they would sweep it away. In the long run, a
> hierarchical society was only possible on a basis of poverty and
> ignorance.[87]

The brutality of "Ignorance is Strength," then, is not the outcome of an overly

intellectualized political creed, but of the deliberate avoidance of such a creed. It is

through foreshortening the range of one's social vision (and not just propaganda and

distraction) that Ingsoc perpetuates itself. Likewise, the *immediacy* of Julia's dissent—

its location in her body and the bodies of those around her—makes her mode of

political subjectivity all the more compatible with the cultivated ignorance of Ingsoc;

her critique of the Inner Party stems from her instinct of its moral and sexual hypocrisy,

not her discernment of its true "function."

Similarly, the awful truth of O'Brien's function—Miniluv operative and

ideologue—does not negate the striking accuracy of Winston's initial perceptions of

him.

> He felt deeply drawn to him, and not solely because he was intrigued by
> the contrast between O'Brien's urbane manner and his prizefighter's
> physique. Much more it was because of a secretly-held belief—or
> perhaps not even a belief, merely a hope—that O'Brien's political

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[87]Ibid., 198.

orthodoxy was not perfect. Something in his face suggested it irresistibly. *And again, perhaps it was not even unorthodoxy that was written in his face, but simply intelligence.* But at any rate he had the appearance of being *a person that you could talk to*, if somehow you could cheat the telescreen and get him alone.[88]

We might note here a set of similarities between O'Brien and Winston: anachronism, refinement of comportment, appreciation of irony, and a propensity to conversation. These moments of description also hover between narrative omniscience ("if anyone had still thought in such terms") and free indirect discourse of Winston's thoughts ("someone you could talk to"). The voice sounds like a blend of the narrator, Winston, and O'Brien. We might even speculate that O'Brien is a version of Winston himself, with the benefit of Inner Party status, and, crucially, with more than a little sadism.

At another level, the novel seems to operate on the assumption that its readers are, to some extent, intellectually savvy—that they will be able to synthesize the acuity of Goldstein's book with its origin and function as Thought Police entrapment, that they will be unconfused by the facile logical games at play in O'Brien's interrogations, that they will not discount Winston for enjoying his work as a falsifier of records. Part of what may be chilling about the book, then, is a fear that, in the presence of a totalitarian threat the likes of Ingsoc, *others* may be taken in by its false erudition; the book's urgency comes from a desire that *others* read it and take warning.

In fact, much of Orwell's writing against political jargon, fashionable political conventional wisdom, and the excessively intellectual bent of much of the left, can be

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[88] Ibid., 13, emphasis added.

seen as expressing anxiety about the gullibility of other people. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, as we have seen, Orwell is in fact advocating that left intellectuals internalize and reenact, even if only as a method or experiment, the knee-jerk reactions of those unconverted to socialism. Within *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we have a passing mention of the political power of the fear of others' stupidity:

> Goldstein was delivering his usual venomous attack upon the doctrines of the Party—an attack so exaggerated and perverse that a child should have been able to see through it, and yet just plausible enough to fill one with an alarmed feeling that other people, less level-headed than oneself, might be taken in by it. He was abusing Big Brother, he was denouncing the dictatorship of the Party, he was demanding the immediate conclusion of peace with Eurasia, he was advocating freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of thought, he was crying hysterically that the revolution had been betrayed—and all this in rapid polysyllabic speech which was a sort of parody of the habitual style of the orators of the Party, and even contained Newspeak words: more Newspeak words, indeed, than any Party member would normally use in real life.[89]

This passage presents a number of fraught ambiguities, which might be most concisely expressed as questions: Is the "one" filled with "an alarmed feeling" Winston Smith, Party members generally, or the reader's imagined position in the world of the novel? Would the child who could "see through it" come to see Goldstein's attacks as themselves preposterous, having no descriptive purchase on the realities of the Party's operation? Or are Goldstein's attacks are so clearly contrived—by the Party itself, for the Hate functions—as not to warrant immanent critique? Conversely, is the fear that others "might be taken in by it" a fear that they would believe Goldstein's critiques to be

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[89] Ibid., 14.

true, or just that they constitute a real ideological threat to the integrity of Oceania? Or, does "taken in" merely refer to the intensity and focus with which one might listen to Goldstein's speech, rather than just hear it all as so much windy fanaticism? Is Goldstein's use of Newspeak a handy contrivance by the producers of the footage to get Party members more used to encountering Newspeak in political speech? Or is he supposed to be using it as a kind of mockery? If Newspeak is designed to preclude the ideas he's espousing (freedom, peace, fidelity to revolution) from being fully formulated, does his speech imply the insufficiency of Newspeak, or is his use of Newspeak a clever coopting of Newspeak's vocabulary? Are the producers of Hate media tapping into people's residual resistance to and contempt for Newspeak, or even just their sense of Newspeak as something alien and suspect?

This would seem to be a moment where, perhaps, the novel has bitten off more than it can chew, conceptually. For the contrived presentation of a reviled dissident raises all manner of formal and compositional challenges for the propagandist. In fact the question of how to represent the thoughts of one's enemies was itself at play in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, where the voicing of manifestly wrong beliefs was designed to be more congenial, even tempting, only for Orwell to pedagogically pull us away from it. The rhetorical problems of that book belong to liberal societies, however, and the world of Oceania makes the "keeping in mind" of opposing political sensibility both more urgent and more volatile mental exercise.

We might conclude that a signature move in doublethink is the internalization of others' real or perceived stupidity. By this I do not mean the intensification of mere conventional wisdom or group mentality, but instead the deliberate cultivation of crude

patterns of thought, a leveling-down of one's reasoning ability. We see this leveling-

down most clearly in Winston's brainwashing in the Ministry of Love, but we also find

suggestions that it guides the day-to-day functioning of Ingsoc ideology:

> A Party member is required to have not only the right opinions, but the
> right instincts. Many of the beliefs and attitudes demanded of him are
> never plainly stated, and could not be stated without laying bare the
> contradictions inherent in Ingsoc. If he is a person naturally orthodox (in
> Newspeak a goodthinker), he will in all circumstances know, without
> taking thought, what is the true belief or the desirable emotion. But in
> any case an elaborate mental training, undergone in childhood and
> grouping itself round the Newspeak words crimestop, blackwhite and
> doublethink, makes him unwilling and unable to think too deeply on any
> subject whatever.[90]

At the very least, the passage on Goldstein's speech during the Hate shows

Orwell's persistent concern with how differing real or perceived levels of intelligence

can shape political rhetoric and our critical discernment of it. The rhetorical situation

of mass-mediated propaganda is both more complicated than that of, say, the struggle

for socialism in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and simpler. More complicated, in that one

must calculate not only others' ideological mystifications, but a also their varying levels

of intelligence; simpler, in that the *rapport* one establishes through ethos is not

politically important.

The novel's repeated explanation of the dialectic of training and instinct among

Party members soon wears thin; there are only so many times in which the basic moves,

terms, and outcomes of doublethink can be reshuffled and re-explained without a sense

of tedium setting in. But what if, instead of stopping at this stylistic complaint, we

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[90] Ibid, 220.

imagine that in the concept of doublethink and its elaborations, Orwell is trying to think past the opposition between, on the one hand, one's supposedly authentic mental life, thoughts, and instincts, and, on the other, the artificial procedures a population is taught or conditioned into exercising upon this mental life? In the absence of any possibility of *authentic* life, all that matters—or all that could possibly matter—is intellectual acuity and distance. This is an admittedly bleak forced choice, but to see its formal and thematic importance, we might compare the richness of the book's passages dealing with the differences between Winston and Julia's modes of political engagement with the inertness of the "2+2=4" leitmotif in the course of Winston's torture.

The proles are decidedly not a useful counterexample to this claim, as their unconscious anachronism and ignorance sustain their transmission of undamaged emotional and interpersonal life rather than a deep understanding of that life itself. The proles, furthermore, lack the historical sensibility felt by Winston:

> Winston had taken up his spoon and was dabbling in the pale-coloured gravy that dribbled across the table, drawing a long streak of it out into a pattern. *He meditated resentfully on the physical texture of life. Had it always been like this? Had food always tasted like this?* He looked round the canteen. A low-ceilinged, crowded room, its walls grimy from the contact of innumerable bodies; battered metal tables and chairs, placed so close together that you sat with elbows touching; bent spoons, dented trays, coarse white mugs; all surfaces greasy, grime in every crack; and a sourish, composite smell of bad gin and bad coffee and metallic stew and dirty clothes. *Always in your stomach and in your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had a*

right to. It was true that he had no memories of anything greatly different.[91]

In an act of empty, formal (almost aesthetic) reverie—tracing the gravy across the table—Winston comes to something approximating a historical understanding of everyday life. From this vantage point, Winston is able to discern historical change with more intelligence than the prole he tries to converse with in the pub:

> A sense of helplessness took hold of Winston. The old man's memory was nothing but a rubbish-heap of details. One could question him all day without getting any real information. [...] Winston sat for a minute or two gazing at his empty glass, and hardly noticed when his feet carried him out into the street again. Within twenty years at the most, he reflected, the huge and simple question, "Was life better before the Revolution than it is now?' would have ceased once and for all to be answerable. But in effect it was unanswerable even now, since the few scattered survivors from the ancient world were incapable of comparing one age with another.[92]

(We might note again the idle fixation on an object before him, the beer glass, prompting Winston's historical insight.) While the proles may retain pre-revolutionary ways of life, they do so only through habit. Winston's analytical distance from his historical moment, on the other hand, reveals to *us*, through the novel's focalization through him, the significance of the proles' habit, rather than the proles themselves communicating some compelling, stubborn authenticity directly to the reader. Crucially, his way of perceiving and thinking is not reducible to a dichotomy of authentic instinct and artificial mental procedure. In fact, what actually happens to

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[91] Ibid., 62, emphasis added.

[92] Ibid., 96.

Winston, what he feels, and what he does, are far less important to the novel than what

he *thinks*.

Furthermore, while the crushing of his love for Julia is undoubtedly the most

remarkable feature of his demise at the Ministry of Love, his torture and confinement

also seem to rob him, at least intermittently, of the pleasures of minor bureaucratic

work:

> No one cared what he did any longer, no whistle woke him, no telescreen
> admonished him. Occasionally, perhaps twice a week, he went to a dusty,
> forgotten-looking office in the Ministry of Truth and did a little work, or
> what was called work. He had been appointed to a sub-committee of a
> subcommittee which had sprouted from one of the innumerable
> committees dealing with minor difficulties that arose in the compilation
> of the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary. They were engaged
> in producing something called an Interim Report, but what it was that
> they were reporting on he had never definitely found out. It was
> something to do with the question of whether commas should be placed
> inside brackets, or outside. There were four others on the committee, all
> of them persons similar to himself. There were days when they
> assembled and then promptly dispersed again, frankly admitting to one
> another that there was not really anything to be done. But there were
> other days when they settled down to their work almost eagerly, making
> a tremendous show of entering up their minutes and drafting long
> memoranda which were never finished—when the argument as to what
> they were supposedly arguing about grew extraordinarily involved and
> abstruse, with subtle hagglings over definitions, enormous digressions,
> quarrels—threats, even, to appeal to higher authority. And then
> suddenly the life would go out of them and they would sit round the
> table looking at one another with extinct eyes, like ghosts fading at cock-
> crow.[93]

This is surely one of the more unusual aspects of the Ministry of Love's

punishment for thoughtcrime, and it's a stage in Winston's life overlooked in most

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[93] Ibid., 307–308.

critical commentaries on the novel. It is comfortable and pitiful; it both plays to Winston's innate talents while at the same time demonstrating those talents' atrophy. The dry exactitude at which Winston was so good is now a flickering motif of his psychic defeat. Nevertheless, in a regime that uses forced labor, Winston "had always plenty of money nowadays. He even had a job, a sinecure, more highly-paid than his old job had been."[94] Surely, Orwell is slipping in a light parody of the civil service, or of the ways in which large organizations send its obsolete members out to pasture. In fact, the quiet comfort of Winston's life after imprisonment is perhaps the book's most puzzling aspect, as it gives considerable cushion to Winston's defeat, and makes his psychological reversal in the novel's final line—"He loved Big Brother"—seem almost like an accommodation to dotage, almost ordinary. In fact, what "love" would actually consist of is a question that is both tacitly posed to the reader—how *could* he feel love for Big Brother—and withdrawn as irrelevant. The destruction of Winston's intellectual talents leaves nothing behind but inert emotion of no narrative value whatsoever.

Another formal peculiarity of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* invites reflection on the relationship between the trauma inflicted by totalitarianism and decidedly more minor, dry areas of interest stimulated by totalitarianism as such. The appendix on Newspeak, apparent to the reader in the footnote in the novel's opening pages, strikes the reader with anticlimactic irony after the tragic defeat in the novel's last line, "He loved Big Brother."[95] The choice to present a short treatise on an artificial language at the end of a harrowing dystopian nightmare could not be more conspicuous. Given the inclusion of

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[94] Ibid., 302.

[95] Ibid.

long passages of Goldstein's book within the novel itself, it would have been easy enough to find another narrative excuse to present the content of the appendix in a similar manner. Instead, the appendix's tangential, almost quirky placement highlights something of the intellectual interest of Newspeak itself: a thought experiment, the elucidation of which proves irresistible, pleasurable and just a bit clever. The overall effect is one of distancing: a lowering of the novel's emotional temperature, and a vivid, renewed awareness of the artificiality of the book one is holding. Part novel, part political theory, part historical primary source from the future, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, like *The Road to Wigan Pier*, defies neat generic classification.

In closing, we might step back and recall Orwell's widespread non-academic popularity. This popularity owes itself, of course, to Orwell's legendary prose style, which can be easily taken as a manifest dedication to the truth, or as bad-faith anti-intellectualism. My contention in this chapter has been that something like *style itself*, rather than authentic feeling, is relevant to in the interpersonal dimension of political engagement. This style, at work in the scene of political discussion or activism, constitutes a politicized ethos. For this ethos, as for prose style, attempts to divide the authentic from the inauthentic inevitably fail to satisfy the demands of the rhetorical situation in which characters find themselves, and in which Orwell finds himself. The development of style, like the cultivation of ethos, requires detachment rather than earnestness. For Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, living according to one's principles has been made both impossible and unbearable. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, only a more casual, less immanent conception of oneself and one's loyalties can make socialist revolution possible. And even where the best possible ethos seemingly

must fail to be politically effective, as with Winston Smith in Oceania, the intellectual power of that ethos is nevertheless what makes critique possible and worthwhile. For Orwell, there is no outside to politics, nor any ultimate court of appeal in which political beliefs and moral values will be weighed against each other and settled once and for all; there is no existential core that can only be discovered through casting aside political thought. Orwell's canny understanding of how ideology works leaves only *critique* as its alternative.

Chapter 2

False Bottoms and True Faces in Wyndham Lewis's *The Revenge for Love*

Wyndham Lewis's unfinished ethos

> It is always a good thing to repeat [...] that the *individual* cannot signify one person because there is no such thing as one person. Intellectually, you and I are a great number of people, alive and dead. The individual, in the sense that you and I are individuals, is anything but an isolated speck, rigidly detached from all coeval minds. My opinion on most subjects is more or less shared by a respectable number of people. And however powerful a machine may be set to work to achieve a perfect conformity of opinion, there is never *one* opinion throughout a society, there are always a number of compartments or groups. So when I say that those who share my opinion represent a respectable number of people, I am saying that for all intents and purposes my opinions are those of a sizable group, that it is incorrect to regard me as an abstraction called the *individual*.[96]

In one of his last critical statements, *The Writer and the Absolute*, Wyndham Lewis charts a course between two competing and vexing historical processes: first, the totalitarian suppression of individuality and the crude simplifications inherent in what he sees as a hardening system of political extremism; second, a solipsistic and politically dubious privileging of individuality itself. The former promises a reduction in intellectual liberties at large, while the latter mistakes the individual mind *as such* for a source of moral authority, regardless of its claims. Existentialism, and especially Jean-Paul Sartre, shows how these two seemingly opposed trends can in fact cohere in a

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[96] Wyndham Lewis, *The Writer and the Absolute* (London: Methuen, 1952), 194–195. Whatever other disagreements they might have, Wyndham Lewis and Timothy Brennan would agree that opinions are never truly individual and always entail membership in some group or culture.

literary sensibility.[97] Literature and criticism, for Lewis, can either resist these

tendencies in a conscious effort at political engagement, or collaborate with them,

giving them unwarranted intellectual and cultural prestige.

Compelling for our purposes here is Lewis's assertion that his ideas are not and

cannot be fully his own. As we shall see, what gives his 1937 novel *The Revenge for Love*

its thematic interest is precisely the difference between himself and his characters—

characters who nonetheless give voice, from vastly different standpoints, to much of his

own political criticism. This may seem like a less-than-momentous claim: that an

author's characters differ from him while at the same time enacting or voicing his ideas.

But Lewis's more dramatic suggestion here is that his individual opinions are not his as

an individual. And in this light, a basic aspect of so much narrative—the non-identity

of an author and a character who expresses an author's views—takes on new interest.

For if Lewis's opinions are not his own in any simple sense because of the nature of

opinion itself, then fiction becomes not a distorting site for the formation and

expression of opinion but a natural, intuitive one. Moreover, the political novel, or the

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[97] Lewis's trademark contempt bears quoting:

> The kind of independence of mind which it is essential for the writer to possess cannot be secured in a society as is depicted by Sartre—and to which the case of Sartre himself bears exquisite witness. As one watches him feverishly attempting to arrange himself to the best advantage—in accord with the conditions of the post-war forties in France— upon the political scene, which is identical with the literary scene: as far Left as possible without being *extrémiste*: accepting many Communist attitudes but railing at the Communists: peddling an individualism of sorts in the collectivist camp: in a word, attempting to secure all the advantages of an all-out Left position without sacrificing his independence—watching him, one feels what a pity it is that a writer of great talent should have to deflect so much energy into this stupid game.

Lewis, *The Writer and the Absolute*, 78.

novel of ideas, would be where the full implications of Lewis's view can be tested and realized.

Given Lewis's reputation for polemical stridency and ungenerous accounting of others' ideological positions, his theory here seems a provocation to visit his fiction anew.[98] And indeed this chapter will argue that in both its character system and in the ethos of its protagonist, *The Revenge for Love* testifies to Lewis's embrace of the public self as a source of truth and of political decency. In this regard, it shares with Orwell's writings a fascination with the possibility of a self-consciously politicized, rather than spontaneous or authentic, ethos—an idea of ethos that can be measured against competing notions of a pre- or post-political selfhood.

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[98] Brett Neilson offers almost the opposite view, and would seem to proscribe the method at work in this chapter:

> *The Revenge for Love* carries a political meaning even though the novel's official rhetoric opposes the subservience of being to any form of political commitment. Although [Toby] Foshay is right to claim that the repeated lifting of "false bottoms" opens the text to the nihilistic operations of *ressentiment*, *The Revenge for Love* cannot simply be read as a straightforward critique of political engagement. Such a reading treats the novel as a formalist critique of ideology, and as such it implies that aesthetic categories circumscribe or master the novel's political discourses. This kind of interpretation risks replicating at the level of literary analysis the "aestheticization of politics" that Walter Benjamin finds constitutive of fascist ideology. In short, any attempt to declare Lewis's politics external to the narrative involves a reaffirmation of the autonomy of the aesthetic, a doctrine that the text itself holds up for scrutiny.

Brett Neilson, "History's Stamp: Wyndham Lewis's *The Revenge for Love* and the Heidegger Controversy" *Contemporary Literature* 51 (1999): 24–41, 37. My take on *The Revenge for Love*, as will be clear, could not be more different. Tyrus Miller, by contrast, suggests that

> Lewis rejected the modernist *politics of form*: the investment in form as the primary mediation between the writer and his or her political, ideological, and social environment. Accordingly, Lewis displaces many of the central concerns evinced by modernist writers to justify their concentration on form, an emphasis he saw as an obstacle to the writer's critical engagement of the intellect.

Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 84.

The ethos of The Revenge for Love

Wyndham Lewis's 1937 novel, *The Revenge for Love*, was originally titled *False Bottoms* and is replete with satirical, devastating critiques of the pretenses of 1930s bourgeois Communists and fellow-travelers (or "parlor pinks"). In seven "parts" (themselves divided into chapters) named after characters, the novel dissects the interpersonal and psychological workings of the upper-middle-class Communist milieu—most of whose members constitute something of a "false bottom" in themselves, with two crucial exceptions to be discussed in this chapter: Boilermaker's-son-turned-Communist-Party-cadre Percy Hardcaster, and Margot Stamp, the wife of Victor Stamp, an unsuccessful artist and casual friend of Communist artists and intellectuals.[99]

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[99] For readers not familiar with the novel, a rough sketch of the novel's plot: Percy Hardcaster, a committed British Communist in Spain, escapes from jail and returns to London, injured. Sean O'Hara, a prominent Communist, hosts a party in his honor. Attendees include: Victor, a struggling artist, and his wife, Margot; Tristram Phipps, a Marxist intellectual and artist, and his wife, Gillian; Jack Cruse, Tristy's accountant and an inveterate womanizer, whom Gillian seduces; and Hardcaster himself. In the course of the party, an impromptu attempt at an orgy disgusts and frightens Margot; she also discovers that O'Hara and others have been forging Victor's signature in a secluded room. Gillian and Hardcaster almost have a tryst, but she is repulsed when Hardcaster tells her that much in the horror stories of Spain he had been telling are false; they argue viciously. Jack arrives, and Gillian incites him to attack Hardcaster.

Victor is later persuaded by Tristram and other Communists to help forge paintings for the art dealer Freddie Salmon, the sale of which will help the Party's cause; he quits in disgust. Victor is then cajoled by Hardcaster and other Communists to go to the Spanish-French border, ostensibly to smuggle weapons into Spain. However, his forged signature is used to make him a decoy to the authorities, and the car he's driving is actually full of bricks, hidden in a secret panel in the floor (just one of many literal "false bottoms" in the novel). Margot goes to the border to save him from what she senses to be an exploitative and disastrous task. Hardcaster, also crossing the border in the attempted smuggling operation, discovers too late that Victor is a decoy, and fails to reach him in time. A chase scene in which Margot and Victor are pursued by the authorities comprises what is arguably the stylistic climax of the novel; it ends in their driving off a cliff to their sudden deaths. At the close, Percy, having been caught in the attempt at gun-running, is once again in jail in Spain.

Lewis himself would identify the novel's larger intellectual stakes many years

after its publication. In *Rude Assignment* (published in 1950), he submits numerous

plain clarifications of his ideas, and he responds directly to critics who have, he feels,

misunderstood or mischaracterized his literary, artistic, and political work. The chapter

dealing with *The Revenge for Love* is given over to quotation and summary of an

unpublished review of the novel by Rebecca Citkowitz, who had submitted her review

to *The New International*, only to have it rejected on the basis of Lewis's damaged

reputation as a fascist sympathizer. The left-wing press simply could not countenance

offering Lewis major publicity, much less a sympathetic review, so the story goes. Some

years later, Citkowitz (whose identity Lewis treats discreetly and affectionately) tells

Lewis that his novel caused a significant debate among her colleagues, which resulted

in her review's suppression. Lewis, more than a decade later, is eager to set the record

straight, both about Citkowitz's review and about the novel itself. Of both, he says:

> The "figure that unmasks" the bourgeois comedians of revolution,
> pretending to radical sentiments, is an authentic communist, Rebecca
> points out, one not playing with communism, but a militant
> professional. [The protagonist] Hardcaster comes from the people: he is
> fighting for the people, as naturally as a Macedonian hillsman fights for
> the isolated species of man he is; with this matter-of-factness,
> unselfconsciousness, craft, grotesqueness war entails. I was glad that
> Rebecca, who hates the communists, did not omit that point, which is
> one of obvious weight. When I met her I need not say that the generous
> friendship of youth was delightful, and though I met with much
> friendship in New York there was none I valued quite so much as hers
> and her brother's. What seemed to me astonishing was something like
> tolerance although it was not that-what I may describe as an ability to

withdraw herself *at once* from anything that repelled her and as it were from another dimension and see it without passion.[100]

In both his appraisals, of the critic and the character, Lewis privileges a certain kind of compromise between oneself and one's ideas. This compromise, however, is greater than the sum of its parts: it ennobles both the person and the cause, whether they are pleasant or not, and whether one identifies with them or not. Although Lewis does not specify here, we shall later see that Hardcaster is of the people in a very literal way, yet always ruminating on the unsuitability of his reactions and temperament to the people's cause. The redeeming quality of both Hardcaster and Citkowitz is what we might call committed ambivalence: in the case of Hardcaster, for the sake of communism, and in the case of Citkowitz, for the sake of seeing things as they really are.[101] Just as Orwell suggests that for the middle class, socialism entails "abolishing a part of yourself" in the service of "justice and common decency," Lewis here praises the contrast between one's more private impulses and what one believes to be right or true.[102]

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[100] Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Foshay, 1950, (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), 235.

[101] "Seeing things as they really are" is, of course, the Hellenic credo of Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. In an earlier piece on Arnold, Lewis states outright the contemporary salience and urgency of the Arnoldian ideal of criticism:

> In every country the most valuable men are those in disagreement—whether critical of America, critical of Germany, critical of Russia, critical of Spain, &c. There is nothing more valuable in a nation than a critic—a sincere upside-down man.

Wyndham Lewis, "Matthew Arnold," 1954, in *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature, and Society, 1914–1956*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 372–377, 374. In a moment like this, the intellectual lineage from Matthew Arnold to Lionel Trilling *and* to Wyndham Lewis becomes more evident.

[102] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1958), 176, 161.

The mode or comportment Lewis is praising here is anything but simply being oneself, transparent and true to one's inner feelings and convictions. Instead, both accuracy of insight and moral decency rely on a kind of role-playing that characters or real people perform in relatively discrete times and places. It follows, then, that rhetorical modulation and affective self-control are not acts of falsehood, equal to personal deception or public propaganda. A mediated, cultivated ethos of detachment, rather than fidelity to one's most intimate notions, enables both critical acumen and persuasive influence. And even in these relatively casual remarks by Lewis, we can see that the ethos he likes is not only divided against the argument it espouses, but also, in a way, divided against itself, assuming radically different traits at different moments. In the quote above, "grotesqueness" and "matter-of-factness," while certainly not antonyms, are dissonant qualities; "craft," furthermore, would seem to preclude "unselfconsciousness," or vice versa. Lewis intensifies this ambivalence when he notes that the desirability of Citkowitz's friendship is predicated not even on tolerance, but on withdrawing oneself in the course of criticizing.

But a moment such as this one—ambivalent without being contemptuous, interested in rhetorical situation rather than philosophical depth—is at odds with dominant characterizations of Lewis's thinking. Although it is in many ways a product of its own Althusserian moment (1979), Fredric Jameson's *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* is still influential in its confirmation of more casual assumptions about Lewis, and it may be seen as fielding the established view I wish to challenge in this chapter: that the political center-of-gravity for Lewis and his work, and for our consideration of both, is fascism. Although Jameson himself

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acknowledges that to read Lewis through his brief interest in Hitler is reductive, there

remains a kind of confirmation bias at work in the formal and thematic analysis that

Jameson pursues, in which protofascism remains the best, if not the only, heuristic line

we may trace through Lewis's astonishingly varied body of work:

> We will therefore want to complete Althusser's explanation of aesthetic value by a methodological proposition: namely, that great art distances ideology by the way in which, endowing the latter with figuration and with narrative articulation, the text frees its ideological content to demonstrate its own contradictions; by the sheer formal immanence with which an ideological system exhausts its permutations and ends up projecting its own ultimate structural closure. This is, however, precisely what we will observe Wyndham Lewis's work to do; and with it, I am content to rest my case for him. However embarrassing the content of his novels may be for liberal or modernist establishment thought, it cannot but be even more painful for protofascism itself, which must thereby contemplate its own unlovely image and hear blurted out in public speech what even in private was never meant to be more than tacitly understood. Indeed, at a time when new and as yet undeveloped forms of protofascism are in the making around us, the works of Wyndham Lewis may well have acquired an all too unwanted actuality.[103]

In the arguments that follow, I shall depart from both Jameson's Althusserian

(and elsewhere psychoanalytic) method and from this basic thematic supposition.

Inasmuch as Lewis *himself* is interested in methods of "unmasking"—that is, exposure

and critique of unstated norms and hypocrisy—and is willing to do so through an

openly Communist character, Jameson's method must entail considerable unearned

condescension and presume its findings far in advance.[104] Furthermore, one need not

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[103] Fredric Jameson, Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist, 1979 (London: Verso, 2008), 23.

[104] Jameson, on Victor and Margot's fate in *The Revenge for Love*:

> The political fantasy-structure (the Marxists are out to destroy "individuality") allows Lewis to dissociate himself from the aggressive impulse, which is now attributed to the

suggest that Lewis's true political sympathies were anything in particular in order to

appreciate the basic quality that, I shall argue, *The Revenge for Love* demonstrates: a

thoroughgoing interest in, and exploration of, the causes and nature of political beliefs

in themselves.[105] At work in this novel—a point substantiated by his nonfiction

writing—is an inquiry into such questions that does not *necessarily* or *immanently* have

protofascism in mind as its determining desideratum or its "political unconscious."

What licenses such a generous approach? First, the recent development of a less

suspicious account of Lewis's politics and sensibility, whereby we may see both as more

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> enemy (what we have previously identified as the "diabolical" term). With this transfer of guilt—the only successful such operation in Lewis—for the first and last time genuine emotion, a real sympathy and feeling for the victims, is unexpectedly released. (148)

My point here is to show that, contra Jameson's symptomatic reading, Lewis's stance toward Marxism is indeed more ambivalent, and that the sympathetic powers expressed in *The Revenge for Love* are *productively* occasioned by this ambivalence, rather than in spite of it.

[105] Jameson admits that Lewis is engaged in something like ideology critique in his analysis of Bergson and the "Time Cult": "What Lewis' implacable critique reveals is that Bergsonianism is also an *ideology*" (134). But this critique, according to Jameson, is limited by Lewis' own avowed superficiality:

> Meanwhile, thus effectively bracketed and reduced to its own surface by these procedures, "reality" takes its revenge and henceforth offers nothing but the shifting shapes and sheer exteriority of the raw materials of satiric production to the hypertrophied ego of the cultural critic, who, seeking to grapple with these surfaces, now is himself implacably transformed into the pure painterly eye of the satirist-enemy (135).

One wonders how a Jamesonian position would distinguish between its own psychoanalytic-Althusserian method and the critical superficiality imputed to Lewis here. Trevor Brent has argued for an understanding of Lewis closer to my own:

> For Although Lewis certainly shows the fragility and impotence of illusions in The Revenge for Love, this is not a sign of his "instinctive greatness," but rather a fictional admission of the inadequacy of his own philosophical position. Lewis did not see 'the Real' as 'ultimately inaccessible' but as dangerously close and unsurvivable, and *The Revenge for Love* is more concerned with the ultimate unavoidability of 'the Real' than with its inaccessibility, and with the tragi-comic uselessness of illusions rather than their spuriousness.

See Trevor Brent, "Keeping Up Appearances: Reality and Belief in Wyndham Lewis's Time and Western Man and the Revenge for Love," *Textual Practice* 22.3 (2008), 483.

deeply informed by—and in a sense continuous with—liberalism, for all Lewis's

weariness about liberalism's exhausted potential. Lisa Siraganian has persuasively

offered a "more contextualized and less obscured version of this difficult, satirical

modernist."[106] For Siraganian, Lewis's purported hostility to democracy was less a

rejection of democratic norms altogether than an antipathy to the mob mentality and

blundering incompetence of liberal and democratic institutions between the wars.[107]

Although he sympathized with fascism for a limited time, as expressed in works like

Hitler (1931), Lewis never left liberalism behind, according to this view. In fact, the most

consistent norms he espoused were, in one way or another, variations on a liberal,

rather than totalitarian, ideal—namely,

> that of the professional, cosmopolitan artist roaming abroad and
> supporting himself in openly democratic societies (such as the United
> States and Canada, where he lived for years). Indeed, Lewis openly and
> variously identified his political affiliation as internationalist,
> cosmopolitan, democratic, or even liberal, a point mostly ignored in the
> critical fascination with his moment of fascism.[108]

Second and relatedly, we can detect a palpable awareness in Lewis's work of the

specific intellectual purchase of Marxism beyond Marxism's own immediate norms and

desires. Lewis seeks to combine two competing, but not opposite, discourses of

"unmasking": rational disinterestedness, drawn from his own residual liberalism, and

Marxist ideology critique, availed to him by the intellectual provenance of the

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[106] Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 54.

[107] On this point, see also Douglas Mao, "A Shaman in Common: Lewis, Auden, and the Queerness of Liberalism," in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 206–237.

[108] Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work,* 68.

Communist movement he ridiculed. Ideology, broadly defined in the Marxian tradition, registers the bad-faith inter-involvement of widely shared ideas, on the one hand, and the obfuscating pieties of dominant interests, on the other. It is therefore fitting, rather than ironical, that Lewis should advance readers' grasp of ideology in a novel about a Communist fighter.

The Revenge for Love as ideology critique

By virtue both of its mode (ideology critique) and of its object (official Communism), *The Revenge for Love* belongs with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the canon of major satirical political fiction of the twentieth century.[109] Although Lewis's and Orwell's espoused politics are significantly different, they are not oppositional: their intellectual nearness to Marxism is just as revelatory as, if not more revelatory than, their distance. Furthermore, neither novel is a satire of the kind that permits exact identification of its real-world target. (*Animal Farm*, on the other hand, invites precisely such an analysis.) Both are the works of famously eccentric and independent writers who repudiated the more ready-made forms of political affiliation, racking up many enemies in the process. And most simply, both are stories of failed intimacy between members of an ineffectual revolutionary dissident group.

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[109] Lewis's own estimation of the novel confirms its status as a major literary statement on his part. In a letter to Desmond Flower, he says:

> And yet as I was reading my proofs I realised that the book that is thus about to be contemptuously flung upon the market is probably the best complete work of fiction I have written; and… that it will be considered one of the best books in English to appear during the current 12 months."

Quoted in Paul O'Keefe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2015), 368.

The expected course of such a narrative might be: Man and woman share a commitment to some cause and fall in love with each other; the historical or political forces at play break them apart, remove them from the scene of revolution, or both; all ends in either heartache or bliss. In such a case, the failure to unite romantic love and political commitment would presumably validate the ideal of romantic love, and cast into irrelevance the specificity of the historical-political conjuncture in which this love was formed and tested; the "human interest" love story would prevail, happily or sadly, over any staged arguments about social relationships in general.[110] But these novels reverse this pattern. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Revenge for Love*, the experience of political persuasion and conviction is of central importance; the romantic pairings that political engagement occasions are damaged in and of themselves, and are slightly out-of-focus in the text's overall concern. There can be no doubt that both authors aim to direct readers' emotional investments (sympathy, identification) away from the characters themselves and towards some larger problem. One may finish *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *The Revenge for Love* somewhat moved—not by the protagonist's own experience and emotions, but rather by the whole situation, and by one's own (and the narrator's) tragic comprehension of how and why the characters ended up where they are, feeling what they feel. We feel the pity and fear of the sociologist, or some other thinker trying to comprehend the social whole, not the catharsis of the dramatic

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[110] Inasmuch as the target of a satire is figured by a single character, satire becomes a form of allegory. For an authoritative account along these lines, see Jeffrey Meyers, "Orwell's Bestiary: The Political Allegory of Animal Farm" 1971, *Orwell: Life and Art* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 114–125.

spectator or sympathetic reader. Percy Hardcaster forms the centerpiece of this drama, and Margot Stamp marks the outer limits of its critical method.

The motif of the "false bottom" in *The Revenge for Love* would seem to the suggest that the novel operates in the rationalist mode of ideology critique. Underneath one professed motive operates another, for anyone with interpretive skill to see, just as looking behind this door or that panel shows the opposite of what was supposed to be there. More profoundly, however, the "false bottom" subtending much of the novel is the conceit of the parlor pinks: near the top of society, they enjoy imagining themselves on the bottom of it; from positions of unacknowledged (or absurdly disavowed) privilege, they claim to be the vanguard of the oppressed masses. The motif of the false bottom indeed seems to ground the novel itself as a whole and to serve as bait for the argumentative mode that its author might be guiding us towards: the exposure of falsehood and its replacement with truth, the recognition of which will settle once and for all where people's political sympathies really lie. This fundamental clarity would in turn make plain the desirability of this or that political alignment.

Yet in moments of pivotal insight in the novel—in which characters come to grasp the full force and import of what they've done and what's happening around them—this exposure of literal false bottoms is not as important as it may seem. One could even say that "false bottom" is itself a "false bottom" in the task of the novel's interpretation. In fact, the bare truth of what some character is doing, juxtaposed with ideological lies about it, is easily exposed in the novel, and such exposure comes to seem slapstick, bathetic, or comic. The false bottoms (so exposed) include the wicker basket a Spanish girl brings Hardcaster, with its hidden compartment used to smuggle

correspondence and foreign newspapers; a panel in Sean O'Hara's apartment, behind which he and others are practicing forging Victor's signature; and the floor of the car driven by Victor at the end of the novel, underneath which are packing-cases full of bricks, rather than guns.

The novel's character system also complicates the logic of the "false bottom." The worst false bottoms are, without a doubt, the parlor pinks, represented by Gillian and Tristram[111] Phipps: upper-class comsopolitian, cultured types who are Communists or fellow-travellers. Their affiliation with and reverence for the working-class are false, both as a sociological fact (they are dramatically distant from the working class), and as a political ideal with any purchase (when faced with the possibility of actual working-class revolt, they revert to class prejudice). This falseness arguably earns from Lewis greater scorn than the falseness of outright betrayal, which occurs in the novel's final scenes of attempted smuggling. False-bottoming is a significant worry for Lewis, not just because of the weaknesses of character it evinces (pride, delusion, self-satisfaction, self-pity), but also because the occlusion of who is actually on top and who at the bottom inhibits understanding of politics' actual operation. Furthermore, the substitution of real power for false vulnerability allows people to be baited into participating in their own self-destruction, sacrificing themselves for a cause in which they do not, or ought not, believe. The clear, unflinching, disenchanted understanding

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[111] This name, too, has its punning qualities. As a dilettante in middle-class Communism, Tristram could be said to be having a tryst with revolutionary socialist politics, all the while being certain of never really leaving his class position. His wife Gillian also has trysts with two men, almost right in front of him: Jack Cruse, who buys a nude portrait of her, at Tristy's own encouragement; and Percy Hardcaster, with whom Gillian is at first infatuated, but later comes to despise, only to have Tristy defend him to her.

of one's own relationship to political power—and the repudiation of sentimental, mystifying, or self-congratulatory notions of one's own privilege or abjection—are what constitute "the art of being ruled" with which Lewis titled his own political credo.

Were it not for the privileged characters of Percy and Margot (and, in a different way, Victor), *The Revenge for Love* would be a tightly organized, brittle set-piece of upper-class left-wingers' self-parodying naïveté and repulsive self-aggrandizement. It could be compared to Aldous Huxley's 1928 *Point Counter Point* in its staging of often thin, trifling arguments in which characters unwittingly demonstrate their flaws. Likewise, in its pleasurably cynical narration of personal vanities, it shares the comic wit of Evelyn Waugh's early satires, such as *Vile Bodies* or *Handful of Dust*. Both Percy and Margot remain in certain ways outside of the novel's satirical focus, however. Percy may engage in bald propaganda, but his belief in the cause is no less true for it, because he understands the need to present a specific public image of himself. Likewise, Margot is influenced by cultural ideals that the novel ironizes (such as Bloomsbury aestheticism) while her own moral authority remains intact.

Furthermore, these characters demonstrate the novel's larger intellectual interest in the lived experience of political ideals, as both characters seek to establish, to their own satisfaction and to the satisfaction of those around them, a suitably malleable but sincere ethos—sincere, rather than authentic, to borrow Trilling's vocabulary. In developing (or trying to develop) this ethos, they do not simply perform the opposite of false-bottoming, enacting the kind of integrity and transparency that would escape Lewis's blistering critique and perhaps instead warrant his (and his readers') appreciative endorsement. Nor do their tragic ends (Percy back in a Spanish

prison, Margot and Victor dead in the Pyrenees) support an account in which political

involvement is construed as impinging on one's true nature and corrupting one's ethical

or moral stature. Such an interpretation would hold that while Percy and Margot may

not be "false bottoms," the vagaries of political commitment and political dissidence

keep them from being "true" versions of themselves. Rather, both Percy and Margot

defy the simple, slapstick logic of the false-bottom. Although they conduct themselves

with artifice and dissimulation, their own desires and loyalties are not betrayed by this

degree of falseness. Rather, as we shall see, falseness points towards a larger truth about

character.

Artistic alienation and sabotage

While squarely in the intellectual context of the other works considered in this

study, *The Revenge for Love* bears a significant difference in that it does not take up

questions of *policy* directly, nor does it touch on questions of how to build a social base

for revolution in Britain. The communists in the novel do not expound any particular

desired actions or states of affairs they would like to see around them. Instead, their

political energies are expended on vigorous defenses of the Soviet Union and a

critiquing of western geopolitics. Even the character to whom communist-inspired

policies should especially appeal, the working-class Percy Hardcaster, has nothing to

say about policy or the building of a social base for revolution in Britain. Indeed, his

remarks touching on this subject, discussed below, are on the antipathy between

working-class and bourgeois communists *as social classes*. For Percy, the means with

which to fight the class-war are purely expedient (as discussed below), while the

particulars of a desired post-revolutionary settlement are unspecified and undiscussed.

Meanwhile, the bourgeois parlor communists are remarkably obtuse about the class

dynamics within the communist movement itself, which only underscores their

ineffectual preciousness. From Lewis's perspective, this self-imposed irrelevance is both

a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it seems natural and right that the preening,

self-satisfied bourgeois left should have little to do with domestic politics. But on the

other hand, the fixation on international geopolitics lends itself to the worst kinds of

mental laziness and most complacent patterns of thought. Lewis holds Tristy and

Gillian's enthusiasm for the Soviet Union in contempt just as Orwell criticizes the

British left's Russophilia.

By contrast, property and profit become significant concepts in the novel's

plot—though only at a layer of remove from the scenes of political action or explicitly

political discussion. For Victor's work at forging paintings proves the fraudulent nature

of Communist cultural subversion—most tellingly in a scene of alienated labor that

focalizes Lewis's interest in artistic autonomy and artists' working conditions., a scene

in which the tension between the owner of the forgery studio and Victor reaches a

climax. In chapter II of part VI, Freddie Salmon,[112] possessing a "false bottom to his

face" in the form of a ridiculously fake beard,[113] examines Victor's unsuccessful

duplication of Van Gogh's self portrait:

> The over flesh-colored face (as if violently pretending to be flesh and
> blood at all costs) with the false bottom to it gazed at the portrait. It

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[112] The name puns here and throughout the novel are patent. Salmon is a pink fish; Freddie
Salmon is a quasi-communist—a fishy fellow.

[113] Lewis, *The Revenge for Love*, 231.

gazed and gazed with a cowlike, cud-chewing concentration. [...] The complete gamut of hatred felt by its owner for this disaffected craftsman expressed itself in the expressionless eyes, as their vacuity deepened from blankness to abysses of utter blankness, from a bland blankness to a brutish blankness, from Pickwick or Pecksniff to the orangoutang: till nature's dark abhorrence of a vacuum—of such a vacuum!—became so intolerable as to be really malignant.[114]

Here, in one of the more relentlessly, indeed almost enthusiastically, loathsome of his characterizations, Lewis depicts the complete vapidity of the art-profiteer as he strains to perform the most rudimentary assessment of the labor he has purchased. Imitation (Salmon's face) fails to comprehend imitation (Victor's Van Gogh fake); the only faculty at Salmon's disposal is a vacuous hate that lacks even the interest of aesthetic properties. Indeed Salmon, at this moment especially, may be the most thoroughly excoriated character in the novel. While the double-crossing of the other Communists results in the horrible deaths of Victor and Margot, this betrayal occurs off-stage, so to speak; the reader does not witness the scene of their lowest behavior. It would seem that no one in the novel is so completely eviscerated by Lewis's powers of ridicule as Salmon.

But this scene, with its revelation of the stupidity inherent in a particular instance of ownership of the means of production, is thrown into yet sharper relief inasmuch as it takes place in front of the nominally Communist intellectual, Tristy, who also has a hand in the forging business. In the tense conversation that follows Salmon's examination of Victor's unsatisfactory painting, the other painters conjecture as to whether or not Van Gogh himself was in the business of selling fake art. This casual

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[114] Ibid., 232–234.

discussion triggers in Tristy an ironically private, smug rumination on his own ideals of

selflessness and communal living:

> Tristy tosses up his head, as if about to neigh. Thereupon he became engaged, it was plain to see, in self-communion. For with him, when he took counsel with himself, the thing was done in public, as it were; and upon his face, as upon a screen, was reflected what was going on within. He did not pull down the blinds, so to speak, in order to think. He would have regarded it as improper to possess a *self* that had any secrets, from other selves. [...] Tristy was disposed to believe that Van Gogh must have been a determined and inveterate "faker"-a confirmed muscler-in, coiner and cribber, of other people's art, and most prone to help himself to all he could lay his hands on-since Rembrandt does not belong to Rembrandt, but to all mankind: and the extemely disgusting money values [...] put upon his major works under the capitalist system, are so many invitations to trickery and theft-all in the Cause, of course. And if you can beat the criminal exploiter at his own game, good luck to you![115]

Smug and self-assured, Tristy here comes to something like a reverse-engineered

justification of capitalism itself, reproducing the cynical market logic that has already

proven to thwart artistic achievement.

But Lewis shows Tristy's role as a servant to capitalism even more clearly in the

next scene. After Freddie and others leave Victor to discuss what to do about his

inadequate painting, Tristy returns to play the good cop to Salmon's bad cop, gently

cajoling Victor to keep working on the portrait. A supposed enemy of private property,

and an intellectual committed to undoing the alienation of artistic work from the artist

and public, Tristy becomes an accessory to Salmon's disciplining of Victor's labor. The

self-identified Marxist artist cannot recognize the alienation of labor when it is

happening in front of him, and he willingly participates in the alienation himself, in no

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[115] Ibid., 234–235.

small part because of the personal satisfaction it gives him. Once again, Tristy uses lofty

communist sentiments to reproduce the most crass form of capitalist prerogative.

Precisely through his un-theoretical grasp on the situation, however, Victor—

an artist with no particular political commitment—helps illuminate the compounded

fraudulence of the art forgery studio, which traffics both in fake art and in fake political

ideals. In the interval when the others are outside the studio discussing what to do

about Victor's inadequate painting, we learn that

> the villain of this piece, the unaccommodating Stamp, did not share, by
> any means, these unorthodox views of property. As he saw it, a poor devil
> of an artist had been engaged in a petty larceny. And the work of his
> hand, even left-handed work, was a property, belonging inalienably to
> Stamp. And Stamp, he was being sweated in exchange for the work of his
> hand—and for this illegitimate and dirty work he should, according to
> the human canon, have been paid not less, but more, than for legitimate
> work. Furthermore, or so would run his simple argument, Stamp would
> have preferred, on the part of Freddie Salmon, a bit more of the "share-
> the-wealth" spirit, if communist was to be the order of the day (and
> Tristy had not failed to urge upon him the doctrine of the high morality
> of their present undertakings). And he sat there, an obtuse lump that
> *could* not be digested into this select universe, marked off by these four
> walls, and to which each of the others, in his peculiar way, belonged—as
> much Tristy as Freddie, as much Abershaw as Wohl.[116] […] For better or
> worse these broad and hostile shoulders belonged to Nature, with her
> big impulsive responses, with her violent freedom, with her animal
> directness: unconservative, illogical, and true to her elemental self. He
> subscribed therefore to the larger scheme: the smaller, the watertight,
> the theoretic, the planning of man's logic, he repudiated.[117]

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[116] More punningly meaningful names. "Abershaw," Anglo-Saxon, combines thicket and estuary, and Abershaw himself is the conspiratorial smuggling agent. "Wohl," German, meaning "well" and also related to "wahlen/der Wahl," meaning to choose, or choice.

[117] Ibid., 236.

In a passage combining both argument and intuition, Victor is imbued with the wisdom that Tristy's spurious Marxism fails to deliver. Only passingly interested in Communism and not at all enchanted by its theoretical elaboration, Victor both comprehends and resists his exploitation by nominally Communist labor disciplinarians. Furthermore, "unconservative" as a quality of Nature's directness warrants our careful attention. Lewis is clearly aware that he is mingling a political and a non-political, or pre-political, vocabulary in this description of Stamp's character. To be sure, Stamp's subsequent action, destroying the painting, is not "conservative" in a conversational, temperamental sense; his destruction is gratuitous and, by conventional standards, imprudent. By using this term, however, Lewis self-consciously guards against a reading of Victor as a conservative character, in the sense either of being possessed of a politically conservative temperament or of being a character amenable to conservative interpretation. Rather, the "directness" of Victor's "nature" arrives intuitively at precisely the insight—about the exploitation of Victor's artistic labor—that Tristy so blithely misses in the course of his self-righteous theorizing.

Furthermore, whereas Tristy is quick to discern political insight in this or that artwork or artist, he is complacently uncomprehending of Victor's small act of industrial sabotage: his stomping on the painting, his ruining it for sale. Tristy feels "mournful assent to the coexistence of modes of feeling so widely at variance with his own, with which it was impossible for him to sympathize. [...] But this undeniably was Stamp's manner of experiencing life, and he could do nothing about it".[118] In the exact

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[118] Ibid., 240.

moment where a clear connection could be seen between property relations and interpersonal strife, and at the very nexus of surplus value and alienation, Tristy chalks Victor's outrage up to the vagaries of personality and the unknowability of other minds.

Finally, Victor is also not so crudely animalistic as the novel's narration might suggest. He destroys his own painting, not out of reactive rage but out of a clear calculation of his own intentions and ideas. By destroying it, he demonstrates his resignation from the fakery business: "'That will settle it, won't it? No more need for palaver!'"[119] The "palaver" Victor refers to is both the others' attempts to cajole him into working on the painting further, and Tristy's pretentious Marxist theorizing. Victor's function in the character system is, in fact, to destroy and dismiss artifice, for the sake of the artist's ethos of dignity and integrity. In his inarticulacy, he does not *refute* the arguments of the Communist poseurs, so much as hold them beneath his contempt and the reader's. And in declining to participate in the degraded forms of argument that other characters engage in, he asserts art's wounded autonomy against its politicization and commodification.

Percy Hardcaster, "*honest* false bottom"

As we have seen, Victor Stamp, an unsuccessful artist, registers Lewis's frustration with the art market, especially among the supposedly enlightened strata of middle-class leftist intellectuals. Percy Hardcaster may be seen as a complementary figure, registering Lewis's interest in forms of political conviction that take

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[119] Ibid., 239.

responsibility for their own limitations. In the first two sections of *The Revenge for Love*, comprised of the introductions to Percy Hardcaster and Victor Stamp, we have parallel accounts of sympathetic characters struggling to reconcile their own personalities to the larger demands they have brought on themselves through their commitment to an idealist, normative goal (Communism and fine art, respectively). Percy, the English communist doing his damnedest to help the cause in Spain,[120] finds himself in prison, but in the least dramatic way one might imagine, and he narrowly survives a bungled escape operation. The awkward, undignified circumstances of his imprisonment, escape, and convalescence rob him of any kind of heroic, romantic sense of himself. In fact, while in Spain in the novel's opening, he continually checks himself, doubting the usefulness or intelligence of his own actions, as well as the suitability or authenticity of his own commitments.

The name "Percy Hardcaster" is itself indicative of his character's privileged status in the novel. Percy was Lewis's own actual first name, which he disliked and discarded. Hardcaster, meanwhile, is something of a pun, in at least three senses. First and most obviously, Percy finds himself in a cast after his injuries in the course of escaping prison. But second, Percy is both "hard" and "soft": his defense of his own dishonesty and scolding of Gillian and Tristy (discussed below) are "hard," one might

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[120] In his biography of Lewis, Paul O'Keefe reminds us of the novel's timing:

> Although appearing at the height of the Spanish Civil War [May 1937], the novel had been written during the period of political turmoil preceding it, and completed and delivered to the publishers a full six months before Franco's rebellion against the Republican government sparked off the conflict.

Paul O'Keefe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2015), 368.

say, in that he is steadfast in the defense of his war-hero role-playing. But at critical

moments during the escape, and at the novel's close (also discussed below), we see this

political persona soften, rather than crack or fall away. In this sense, he has a "hard" cast

and a "soft" center. And finally, in his posturing as the Communist war-hero, Percy has

"cast" himself in the role of hardened revolutionary.

After a spat with one of the jailers in Spain, Serafín, Hardcaster announces that

he's "on bad terms with no one but myself!", which is the opening move in a highly

developed play of personal doubts and public ambivalences.[121] In the course of his

escape, this quarrel with himself is specified: he doubts the suitability of his own

temperament to the revolutionary cause. In a passage whose careful realization suggests

that Lewis largely affirms its ideas, Percy takes stock of this conflict as follows:

> And of all cursed things, there was the beautiful night—a source of
> profound irritation to Percy, as was beauty on all such occasions, he had
> invariably found. It was rather as though, serene and self-confident, a
> beauty-queen had been sent into his cell to capture his attention by an
> inopportune display of her attractions. He could not support the placid
> night outside! There was not only the fact that Nature was blind to the
> intellectual beauties of the Social Revolution, and deaf to the voice of
> Conscience; there was also the fact that Nature, especially in these
> sumptuous climates, required a spartan watchfulness on the part of the
> revolutionary, tending to clip the wings of Percy's more civilized muse,
> and non-party mind. If he was not, in short, to be lulled into
> forgetfulness of social injustice, he must never allow himself to play the
> artist. And Percy liked playing the artist. […] He had even incurred
> suspicion—there was something bourgeois about Percy's dealings with
> bel canto, and oratorios were a source of perpetual misunderstanding.
> Did not Lenin say that he hated violinists, because they made him feel
> he wanted to stroke their heads, and all the time he knew that it was in
> fact his duty to bash their brains out? So he glared out of the ventilation

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[121] Ibid., 27.

slit, watching the lotus-eating Spanish night, frowning upon the absolutely aloof surfaces of its magic elements, of earth, air, and water— the latter of which would go on being "beautiful" if a whole colony of splendid proletarians were starving upon the foreshore.[122]

One might imagine a simpler version of Percy's conflict. A character is truly, deeply committed to art and beauty, but gets involved in politics; he comes to resent the mendacities and ugliness of political work; at a crucial moment, he is reminded of his true calling; the moral hierarchy of art over politics is clearly established by their unequal status in the character's development. But the binary is not so easy or resolute here. Percy has no particular background in the arts, and his twinges of aesthetic sensitivity are not essential to his identity. Rather, they are the callings of his "more civilized *muse, the* non-party mind": his "dealings with" art, in which "he must never allow himself *to play the artist*. And Percy *liked playing the artist*." The narrative takes care to place Percy's aesthetic sense outside of him, in the form of a muse, frame of mind, or role. Likewise, the images that stimulate this train of thought are themselves figural and mediated, even though they are natural: "a beauty-queen," "lotus-eating Spanish night," "'beautiful'" in quotation marks. Rather than the object of deep, romantic yearning, the beauty of the night is but another surface against which Percy must negotiate his own rhetorical and analytical independence. We might say that Percy's artistic sense is sincere, but not authentic; his artful appreciation is in reference to something outside of himself that he aims to see as it really is, rather than at the service of an unleashing of his innermost drives.

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[122] Ibid., 46.

Noteworthy here too is the inertness of nature's beauty, its sheer facticity, which is so oblivious to politics, and even to human thought in general, as not even to register its own obliviousness. Thus the slight ludicrousness of Percy thinking he "could not support the placid night outside": it does not need support, and in fact the notion of "supporting" it is a category mistake that reveals more about Percy's own habits of mind than about the night's "aloof surfaces." Crucially, the upshot of Percy's sentimentalizing is not that it gives the lie to his supposedly robust communism; rather, it indicates that his public role demands a certain ambivalence. Percy's mind is unable to subsume all of nature under politics, but he does not concede that nature undermines politics. Percy's character, rather, inheres in his experience of their tense relation to each other.

A more comic moment of role-playing ambivalence occurs earlier, when Percy tries to make his way out of the jail clinging to Serafín's arm as though he were injured:

> the affectionate manner of their exit, arm-in-arm, gave such a buffoonish turn to their action that Percy's inefficient nerves caused him to chuckle a little explosively against Serafín's shoulder. Chuckling, he noticed, afforded him an added sense of security: also undoubtedly conveyed the impression of gallantry. He chuckled again.[123]

Although this is a fleeting moment, its complexity warrants attention. Percy laughs on a variety of levels, as it were: at the artificiality of his performance with Serafín; out of a need to diffuse the tension of the situation; and at the unwarranted feeling of gallantry that his laughter, differently interpreted, might afford. As in the previous scene, Percy is constantly evaluating his performance of a role, then checking his own stance towards his self-evaluation, while at the same time imagining himself

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[123] Ibid., 48.

viewed by someone else. Again, there is not a true Percy that a suspicious reading (by

him or by readers) would reveal, but instead a variety of temperaments, modes, or

comportments that vary in their suitability to a particular moment.

In a similar moment of levity before his escape, when Hardcaster walks to the

jailhouse toilet amidst the other political prisoners, role-play and self-exposure collapse

into the same performative occasion:

> Don Percy got up and stamped, as his fat legs stuck to the trousers on
> these hot afternoons. He was so much the picture of blond Midland well-
> being—so stocky and sturdy, with his little walrus mustache—that he
> was such a figure as might be seen any day in a roadmenders' squad in
> some English city tarring a road or working a rock drill: through his
> lobster-sleeves, his stout arms bare to the elbow, with silver-rimmed
> spectacles, large feet, he was conspicuous among the Spanish prisoners -
> a British navvy turned marxist schoolmaster. [...] The red-shirted priest-
> butcher caught him round the waist as he came up, and drew him in
> against the table with profuse proletarian affection - hugging him low
> and leering up in a flattersome fashion as this man-of-action whose
> government possessed Gibraltar. [...] Dragging himself with gentle
> violence and sweet force away from the cordial gang of high-minded
> hold-up experts, with a sturdy little buttock-swagger he moved off,
> continuing on his way to the *excusado*. Percy's standing would have
> gratified any man in the Left-wing game - he stood high with all these
> eminent Partymen of the Peninsula. He was one of them. He was looked
> up to as an organizer of parts, a man of good Party-brains. They had all
> heard how he had potted at a tax-collector from a tree-top. He had told
> them. He was the only Spanish "gunman" who had come out of
> Edgbaston. He did not wait till he reached the *excusado* to prepare
> himself—since a man's a man for a' that, and there was no bloody
> bourgeois shame or uncivilized modesty about old Percy—he showed off
> his sans-gêne while yet far short of the place set aside for it.[124]

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[124] Ibid., 29–30.

This passage is framed by Percy sticking to his trousers at the beginning, and then undoing them a little too soon at the end. The prim euphemisms of the final sentence are not only funny; they also call into question what kinds of behaviors one should perform spontaneously or deliberately in the performance of one's class position. What's interesting about the desired working-class coarseness here is its self-consciousness: "a man's a man for a' that" is Percy's affirming of his deliberate choice to undo his trousers well before reaching the toilet—but it's a choice that, to be truly indicative of proletarian comportment, probably ought not be a choice *as such*.[125] The *performance* of unselfconscious naturalness, much like laughing at an inopportune moments during the escape, removes the promise of authenticity from Percy's character, while allowing Lewis to stress the urgency of careful self-presentation, which is no less legitimate for its artificiality. Percy is also both singular and typical, in that his ambivalence about his origin and present predicaments marks him as unique, but at the same time, the narrative approaches him through a series of typological, national references.

So too is there a displacement or cathexis of feeling when he is recuperating, after his shooting, in a Spanish hospital. In his arguments with a fellow recuperating comrade, Virgilio,[126] Percy finds that he lacks the other's consistency of political conviction. The demand is that he resent the dutiful ministrations of the nuns and refuse to show any suffering, so crucial is anti-Catholicism to the Spanish revolutionary

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[125] This tension is a clear parallel to Orwell's at once proscribing affecting working-class manners and suggesting that a change in manners may well indicate real social and political realignment.

[126] Like Virgil in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Virgilio escorts Percy up and out of purgatory, and as a virtuous pagan, is unable to follow him further, to England/Paradise.

cause. Percy cannot maintain the temperament that is demanded of him, and is

hounded by his own feeling of equanimity. He must instead trigger the proper feelings

artificially:

> He saw red whenever he encountered the black frock of the papa
> matador [...] or pretended to: for, of course, bluff was the tactical basis of
> the latterday revolutionary personality. (We all know too much to-day to
> be plain blunt men.) Bluff stood in the same relation to the revolutionary
> expressionism as does sang froid to the pugnacity of the duellist. *The
> bogus* in the bursting uplift it was that made it intellectually bearable. It
> made it a game—as a game only was it acceptable, once you'd got used to
> it. [...] In Percy's professional make-up he never quite knew what part of
> bluff went to what part of solid belief. And in solution neither bluff nor
> belief remained quite the same as they were in their natural state. Bluff
> was mixed in as you went along [...] He could not have put his finger on
> this attitude, or on that, and said: *This is Bluff* or *Here you have an
> authentic bit of Belief*. [...] The Jesuit was his enemy-as much as anyone in
> the world. Since Percy was a good-natured man, it was not much.—This
> basket [alluding to the basket that was smuggled to him earlier in prison]
> was not in reality of simple manufacture. It was most of it honest *false
> bottom*. [...] And at present, poor fellow, he was an angry man, a very
> angry man indeed. His bogus rage was real rage—but diverted from its
> true object and make to play upon a stock Aunt Sally of the dogma of
> Spanish revolt.[127]

In precisely this sense, Percy's falseness is of a different—and higher—quality

than the falseness of the parlor pinks: his authentic political engagement *demands* the

cultivation of inauthentic feelings, in both himself and others. Significantly, Percy is

not alone in his general condition; the parenthetical "we" brings us to Percy's level and

makes his bluffing seem almost commonplace. Instead, the question of authenticity is

supplanted by a kind of ad-hoc rhetorical adjustment, both of his own thoughts and of

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[127] Lewis, *The Revenge for Love*, 52–53.

his public persona. Although we are likely to regret that Percy must work up his enmity toward the Jesuit, against his own "good nature," the novel here makes clear that this bluffed feeling is not false simply by cultivated rather than spontaneous.

Furthermore, the mingling of bluff and belief as represented here does not necessarily dull one's perception of either, or make one unconscious of their fungibility. Inasmuch as it is an "intellectual game," bluff can be known and mastered. "Good-natured" is not only a casual but also a *careful* term, as it names an attitude, comportment, or sense of well-adjustment; we know that someone is good-natured through her exterior expressions and behaviors. At the same time, however, the terms that make up this approbation, *good* and *nature*, suggest something deeper, more moral, and essential. To say that someone *is good-natured* is a more superficial and epistemologically modest term of praise than to claim knowledge of someone's *good nature*. That someone is good-natured is a part of her ethos, while someone's good nature is no doubt part of her authenticity. And as Percy is "good-natured," we may trust that he will not play this "game" for the sake of an evil victory—however much we, or Lewis, may reject his Communism as such.

While one may extrapolate here and say that the mixture of bluff and belief is part of all political engagement, I would argue that the professional communist revolutionary presents a special case. Bluff, here, marks the interface of cognition and intellect with affect and intuition; likewise, Marxian ideology critique (the desire to bring class antagonism to its natural, but hitherto suppressed or unexpressed, climax) requires—not as a virtue per se, but as a matter of course—an intensely intellectual

orientation, in order for the revolutionary transvaluation to proceed. Lewis himself

makes this point some years earlier, in *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change*:

> All the contemporary revolutionary ferment, then, can be shown to come
> from the head rather than elsewhere. It thinks, and then afterwards
> translates thought into feeling. A great deal of extravagance and
> unreality on the emotional plane is in consequence of this. Because it is a
> *translation* always, from the idiom of the mind into the idiom of the
> emotions. It is forced for religious purposes to play a part too much. To
> be persuasive on an emotional plane is often an effort for it, and so it
> becomes too transparently histrionic. And it is again because it is so
> "intellectual" that in its emotional role it has to repudiate the intellect so
> much. Its intellectuality is in its favor, no doubt; but a good deal of
> confusion is due to the labor of transposing the things of the Intelligence
> into the things of very crude rigescent emotion."[128]

This conscious, deliberate "labor of transposing" is what makes Percy's ethos

"*honest* false bottom," in contradistinction to the false bottom of the parlor pinks,

among whom this transposition is associated with complacent self-satisfaction. The

seasoned revolutionary bearing Lewis's name leaves the parlor-pink falseness behind,

and in this expands the novel's intellectual scope beyond social satire. With Percy, once

the question of the authenticity of this or that sensation or feeling is suspended, the

question of plausibility and suitability takes its place. To use a more contemporary

terminology, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" is here replaced by a rhetoric whose key

components are before us: the logos of revolutionary ideas, the pathos necessary for

their public expression, and the ethos of the professional revolutionary, which is able to

control and craft the rhetorical occasion of "translation." So here, rather than

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[128] Wyndham Lewis, "Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change," 1926, *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature, and Society, 1914–1956* ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 137–161, 138.

unmasking the falseness of a given utterance or thought (as he does with the decisively ridiculed characters in the novel), Lewis invites us to consider, even if not to outright affirm, Percy's ethos and its development.

By contrast, in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "doublethink" represents the metastasizing of this mixture of bluff and belief: there is no separating them, and no honest accounting of how they came to be interconnected in the first place. If we think of Orwell and Lewis as concerning themselves with this same tangled problem of authenticity of political belief but in different ways, we might deduce that (according to Lewis) the "labor of transposing" constitutes the revolutionary ethos, while "doublethink" is the stupefied ethos of totalitarianism. Yet doublethink and "transposing" are unsettlingly similar, no matter how one may try to nuance to their definitions so that the former is understood as the bad conscience of the latter. It is perhaps *this* uncanny ambiguity in the structure of political feeling—rather than the content of revolutionary or authoritarian ideas in and of themselves, and rather than their mere intensity or "extremism"—that enables both liberal and conservative dismissals of revolutionary politics as latently or potentially authoritarian. One needn't turn to totalitarian states that have formalized doublethink, however, in order to see its dangers For the "labor of transposing" performed by shallow radicals in a liberal society can have equally contemptible consequences. And in fact, in an argument with Gillian in one of the novel's most pivotal and revealing scenes, Percy draws out the violent, authoritarian condescension at the heart of her bourgeois leftism, which she transposes onto an argument about the working class's unfitness for revolution.

At the Phipps's flat, Percy "had been kissing Gillian and was hot and short of breath."[129] In his disengagement from her, Percy unknowingly takes part in what the narrative calls a "Jackish" dialogue of sexual innuendo and flirtation, in which Gillian responds to him as though he were Jack Cruse, Tristy's philandering accountant (who has already been seduced by Gillian):

> Percy had a feeling something was wrong, not for the first time, and looked up quickly. But he could not guess that he was taking part (at times) in a Jackish dialogue! And so he remained with his sensation that all was not quite as he would have expected it to be, as between himself and this Communist girl born in the ambassadorial purple.[130]

The narrative here highlights Percy's multiple senses of being out of place. In this interaction with Gillian, his individual, occasional mis-location is compounded by, of course, the feeling that he is out-of-place by virtue of his social class. Percy rebuffs her sexual advances, and their conversation turns instead to his injuries and his putative ill-treatment at the hands of Spanish nuns at the hospital. Gillian shows that she had believed his story, but Percy disabuses her, saying that his tale of torture was "a stock story" and "atrocity propaganda—a most important branch of our work."[131]

Percy adds that most of the other people at O'Hara's party, save perhaps for a few "sentimental intellectuals," probably knew it was false at the time. It follows, then, that in Percy's account, their reception of the story should have been an intense enjoyment of propaganda *as such*: "People are such crazy fools—they want something to make their flesh creep. They like feeling good and indignant. It's our business, as

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[129] Lewis, The Revenge for Love, 187.

[130] Ibid., 187.

[131] Ibid., 189.

revolutionaries, to supply that want."[132] However, Lewis's careful dialogue here leaves

open just which populations Percy is describing in this account of "sentimental

intellectual" belief as opposed to esoteric non-belief. Who, in fact, are the

"revolutionaries" who are in on the game, and would Gillian—not as an individual but

representing her type, that of upper-class Communist—be part of that revolutionary

cognoscenti which Percy identifies? Clearly not. Percy has drawn a clear line between

those on the inside and those on the outside of revolutionary engagement.

In the argument that follows from this revelation, Lewis adroitly reconfigures

the expected hierarchy of truth and falsehood suggested by the "false bottom" motif

elsewhere in the novel. What follows is not simply a revelation of the truth that had

been concealed by a lie but instead a considered account of what produces lies such as

Percy's in the first place and of how they ought not to be received. This is not to say that

the novel *endorses* Percy's fabrication, so much as it demonstrates the shallowness of

Gillian's response, which climaxes in outrage and condescension. Initially, "Gillian

looked crestfallen and even a little indignant, rather like a much-petted star pupil who

has been caught out by some quite simple problem of grammar—even of A B C."[133]

Lewis offers us here precisely what Orwell was satirizing in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

in the distinction between Inner and Outer Party. Within the Communist movement,

there is a tacit division between the propagandists and everyone else, one that the

trappings of Outer and Inner Party membership makes explicit. Furthermore, in his

confident assertion of the necessity of false propaganda, Percy prefigures an aspect of

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[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid, 188.

"doublethink," but more clearly and shrewdly, lacking Winston Smith's characteristic ambivalence. Driving the point home, he claims that propaganda is not especially interesting in itself, but is merely a practical approach to the political environment in which the Communist movement is developing:

> "It was all bluff from start to finish—" she began.
>
> "Not *bluff*," he interrupted her. "Not bluff. There is no chivalry in the class-war. There's only one way of fighting a lie, and that's with a lie."
>
> "I see that, of course. Everyone knows that."
>
> "It's like, well, call it Machiavelli—if you have read his *Prince!* Have you ever read it? One of the most truthful books ever written."
>
> "I have."
>
> "Well. You understand then. *There* is the principle. It's not *bluff*, that's not the word. There's no room for George Washington in this sinful world."[134]

Percy's disavowal of *bluff* here is a subtle but significant move. Bluff, we will recall, applied to his manipulation of himself out of his own equanimity when working himself up into anger at class enemies in Spain. Crucial to bluff in this sense is that it cannot be separated from belief; there is no certainty about where bluff ends and belief begins. But here, bluff, from Gillian, means something much closer to lying in reference to his war stories. Percy retorts that that *is* lying, and that *as* lying, it has a sound philosophical and practical justification. This contrast—between strategic, deliberate lying, and manipulating one's own divided feelings about a situation—has the effect of seeming to justify both, if for no other reason than that Percy is *honest* about the lying,

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[134] Ibid, 189–190.

but *good-natured* about the bluffing. Of course, in this scene, this subtlety is to elude Gillian, which only confirms the novel's (and Percy's) contempt for her.

Percy's pedantry intrudes here, interrupting the frenzied tempo of their argument and reminding the reader of his earlier qualifications of the word. But it is not as though Percy can suggest that "bluff" is entirely irrelevant. "That's not the word" suggests instead that Percy's propagandizing is *like* bluff, but is better described as the action of some "principle" necessitated by a "sinful world."

We are now in a position to infer the usefulness of a concept like "bluffing" for Percy: it allows him both to describe and partly to justify his own temperamental ambivalence and dubious manipulation of his emotions. "Bluff" is therefore a basically private practice that dodges accusations of outright lying. The lies of propaganda, in distinction, are purely expedient and *only* for the task of some rhetorical situation; in his view lies are justified (or not) only by the unjust state of the world in which he utters them. It is through the careful separation of these two kinds of falseness that Percy attempts to explain the ethos communism requires, reserving "bluff" for his own purposes (unknown to Gillian or anyone else).

We are not invited to approve of Percy's propagandizing, to be sure. But Lewis takes pains here to show how not all forms of duplicity are the same. Percy's Communism is not false because he feels twinges of aesthetic yearning when he ought to be focused on escaping out of Spain and killing enemies; the fact that his personality is not perfectly expressed in a political task before him neither affirms or denies that task's legitimacy. Rather, the question of whether his lies about Spanish atrocities are excusable or not is a question wholly within the realm of political analysis, not

determined by the status of his character. The separation of one's personality from one's

political engagements is condoned as "abolishing a part of yourself" by Orwell in *The

Road to Wigan Pier*[135]; here, in his refusal to admit a concept so personal and

ambivalent as "bluff" into his argument with Gillian about propaganda, Percy shows us

an instance of this abolition at work.

> But Percy's lesson here is finer still:

>> "If you'll allow me to say so, Jill, you shy at verbal 'falsehood' like a
>> thoroughbred-as you are." He swelled and flushed at the idea of his
>> proximity to a "thoroughbred." "It does not say that because a man
>> invents something that he is incapable of truthfulness. Look at it this
>> way. Lies are the manure in which truth grows."[136]

Percy's schoolmaster tendencies are here again on display, and we may certainly

be doubtful of his metaphor's aptness. But the critique of Gillian has teeth nonetheless.

As Percy is disinclined to pure anger, he suggests to to Gillian that his jailer Morato "was

rather a fine man in his way," to which she responds with sputtering incomprehension

and hauteur.[137] Gillian "could not follow him in *that* sort of attitude. This was too much

of a good thing! [...] No! There was something wrong here—amateur or no amateur she

knew better than that!"[138] The inversions here are many: Percy is capable of a sensitivity

to personalities that overrules political alignment, a sensitivity normally associated

with upper-class, or even aristocratic, psychology. On the other hand, Gillian, an

educated upper-class Communist, cannot envision such a view of the world, and

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[135] Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 176.

[136] Lewis, *The Revenge for Love*, 190.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid.

doggedly clings to the rigid logic that a jailer in fascist Spain *cannot* have redeeming qualities. Working-class Percy has a vague sense of gentlemanly honor; Gillian demands, in Lewis's mockery of her moral conviction, a wholly deterministic relation of one's class to one's character.

Almost in the manner of a mathematical proof, Lewis demonstrates the absurd position Gillian creates for herself, which is emblematic of upper-class Communist condescension carried to its logical outcome: "Was there a streak of treachery," she thinks to herself, "in this moon-faced child of the people? The proletariat were the weak-spot in the communist scheme of things, ultimately. Like all his class, had he a *bourgeois* streak? A workman, after all, must always be suspect to the revolutionary."[139] Here, in a neat reversal of the Communist valorization of the working class as revolutionary, Gillian implicitly thinks of herself as the truer Communist. From this height,

> She gazed at him in amazement. He was turning into something else definitely—beneath her eyes. Into a stupid little fat man, of the working-class (treacherous and full of self-pity, as the working-class always were, ready to turn around and bite the hand that feeds them!) [...] Percy Hardcaster was a *show-piece*, all right-by which *she*, Gillian Communist, had been taken in! Well![140]

Gillian's gullibility, and subsequent over-confident diagnosis of Percy, does not only smack of an ugly class snobbery, though this in itself is an irony Lewis takes pains to make plain to us. She also finds herself in this ironized position because of her presumption that a public figure will exhibit personal authenticity. In failing to

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[139] Ibid, 191.

[140] Ibid., 191–192.

comprehend the possibility, and the suggestive expediency, of propaganda *as such*, she

also fails to allow for any form of variousness or ambivalence that is not outright

hypocrisy; in her indignant hauteur at the discovery of simple falsehood, she refuses a

more complex and politically crucial truth about Percy's activity. Lewis, in effect, has

presented his most emblematic character ("Gillian Communist" in the chapter's title)

with a highly individualized ethos (in Percy) that shows the fraught and ambivalent

nature of political commitment; Gillian then conflates Percy's propaganda with his

plausibility as a Communist, failing to recognize that his propagandistic lying is the

evidence of his political skill. In so doing, her own political convictions are shown to be

a more damning false bottom: in Communist terms, she repeats patent class snobbery.

Lewis here makes the moral or ethical status of Percy's propagandizing a relatively

trivial affair, instead aiming his satiric barbs at Gillian's complacent assumption of a

radical posture.

Later, in Chapter III of "The Fakers," when relaying to Tristy the scene of his

beating by Jack at Gillian's behest, Percy delivers another lesson in the lived experience

of Communist conviction. The recipient of this lesson, Tristy, is a man who has been

cuckolded by Jack and represented as slight and feminine throughout the novel. Jack

himself, rather than Tristy, takes Percy to the hospital after beating him, and Percy later

meets with a very concerned Tristy to discuss what happened. Not unlike Winston

Smith after leaving his reeducation at the Ministry of Love in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,

Percy is physically diminished, thin, and feeble. But unlike Winston, he is no less

confrontational than before; his face has wasted and his mustache is unseemly, but he

makes a point of compelling people to look into it, which he knows to be an unsettling,

disquieting experience: "A far *worse* Percy than before was inside—and he liked being noticed, about that there was no question."[141] The dialogue between this worse Percy and scandalized Tristy, like Percy's argument with Gillian, is not simply about Percy's own wounded personality, nor is it just about the falseness and inadequacy of his interlocutors' political comprehension.

Instead, Lewis dissuades the reader from feeling pity for Percy's mistreatment by having Percy himself refuse to accord any existential significance to Jack and Gillian's attack on him. It was, he tells Tristy, "[f]or nothing"—that is, lacking both incidental meaning and general interest:

> Percy could not have said *nothing* with more feeling for the false bottom underlying the spectacle of this universe, and making a derision of the top—for the nothingness at the heart of the most plausible and pretentious of affirmatives, either as man or as thing. And that his "nothing" meant nothing, just that, not more and not less, but a calm and considered negation, caused Tristy to stop abruptly and look away. [...] "There was *nothing* at all out of the way," he continued violently to lecture his visitor, "in what happened to me in your flat. You understand me? There was nothing in it that one would not have expected, or that was *exceptional*, or not in accordance with the everyday pattern of events. You are talking nonsense to suggest that there was!"[142]

Like Gordon Comstock in Orwell's *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Percy revels in his own abjection, but not simply as a ploy for greater sympathy. "It was nothing" is, conversationally, the polite response to a casual apology, which literally claims to remove the need for the apology in the first place and, by implication, disclaims the need to forgive. If Percy's assault is "nothing" in this sense, it is so minor as to be

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[141] Ibid., 246.

[142] Ibid. 247–248.

dismissed before being fully comprehended, which would mean in turn that Percy has no standing to forgive, so complete is his abjection before offended bourgeois proprieties. Percy and his beating are synecdoches of everything that grinds up the working class, and therefore a small sample of a system of exploitation that is both vast and quotidian. Comstock and Ravelston, Percy and Tristy: nowhere is the lower-class character's grasp of his own marginalization more fully revealed than when he confronts his richer, naive, more orthodox fellow Communist.

Percy as we have seen, allows Lewis to satirize and chastise the social types that *other* characters represent, in keeping with his longstanding critique of bourgeois progressive pieties. But Percy as an individual is also an occasion for Lewis to think more sympathetically and with greater nuance about dissident political commitment itself. A working-class Communist is hardly the first figure one would expect Lewis to draw on for this reflection. However, it is precisely the figure of the working-class Communist who compels Lewis to think through a problem germane to his many other intellectual interests: how to reconcile individual variousness with the argumentative detachment necessary for ideology critique. Percy affords Lewis two simultaneous advantages in pursuit of this question: first, a case-study in the ways in which political engagement is irreducible to questions of personal authenticity, vitality, or affect; second, a concrete perspective from which to unmask others' political engagement as so much cynical self-absorption. In considering Percy's fate, and especially the scene with which he closes the novel, we shall see how his public ethos speaks to a larger phenomenon in the intellectual life of the period.

"The crisis of man," loving a symbol, and symbolism's revenge

In his recent study, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973*, Mark Greif identifies a strain of "interminable analysis" of human (or man's) nature, fate, and possibilities—an analysis that animated a good deal of midcentury American intellectual life.[143] Drawing on anthropology, existentialist philosophy, and theories of human rights (among other discourses), the "crisis of man" *topos* suggested that something about twentieth-century modernity—especially after the Holocaust, and with the advent of nuclear weapons—made it imperative to grapple with "man" in absolute, all-encompassing terms. Greif catalogs four main areas of interest for the "crisis of man" discourse: first, the question of human nature or human essence (what it consists of, and what historical trauma it can withstand); second, the "shape of history," broadly conceived, and whether human history conforms to any sort of fate or destiny; third, the crises of the world's religions and many of its political creeds, especially liberalism; and fourth, technology's emerging capacities in both large-scale planning of whole economies and the development of weapons of mass destruction.[144] The "crisis of man," exasperating as Greif and many others may find it, did respond to a real intellectual need. In its own tendency to vacuity, the "crisis" proved to be an

> empty discourse of man, something quite distinct, coherent, and credible, if not necessarily always lovable or redeemable seventy-five years after the fact. The midcentury discourse that, in the face of the massive degradation of the rights of man, tried to rediscover a

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[143] Mark Greif, The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 4.

[144] Ibid., 10–11.

foundation for man's protection simply said: there must be something that must be protected. The human agency to protect this unknown quantity was absent. And so there was a strong temptation to imagine this protection as self-authorizing, auto-guaranteed. Man must carry his warrant within himself, like his heart or lungs. Any person should have it—whatever it should be, from wherever it came.[145]

Greif charts the ways in which this discourse saturated American intellectual and cultural life—ways that were often stultifying and complacent, but which nevertheless warrant patient study. For Greif, American writers like Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Flannery O'Connor, and Thomas Pynchon responded to this putative crisis and its theorizations in a fashion that was both critical and aesthetically powerful.

Greif's work illuminates our understanding of Orwell and Lewis in several ways. While there are many important connections between the "crisis of man" and American Cold War ideology, many of its key features were present in the wider English-speaking world as well; likewise, much of the American crisis discourse drew on continental European thought and literature. It's in this international dimension that we might think of Orwell and Lewis joining the writers above in their deep involvement with, if also their disdain for, crisis-of-man theorizing. As Greif points out in a brief mention of Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was almost titled *The Last Man in Europe*; one could easily imagine Lewis' *The Art of Being Ruled* retitled so as to include the word "man" as well. What keeps both figures from being fully part of the trend Greif identifies, however, is their recourse to satire and their ongoing investment in ideology critique. For both of these writers, man in the abstract is usually a vapid and venal notion; it

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[145] Ibid., 12. For a full development of this exasperation and the critique it should motivate, see Christopher Nealon, "The Trouble with 'Modernity,'" *Public Books*, May 1, 2015, http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/the-trouble-with-modernity.

often conceals political bad faith, or leads to intellectual slackness about pressing

public issues. As Greif acknowledges, the "crisis of man" is in itself an ideologically

suspicious meme: it universalizes, naturalizes, and reifies what is in fact a politically

and materially contingent state of affairs with manifestly *interested* parties pulling the

strings. Thus while many crisis-of-man figures saw all too readily the ways in which, say,

the historical novelty of totalitarianism compelled urgent reflection on human nature,

they did not examine their own (often self-important) thought with the same analytical

care. Satire is perhaps the generic *other* to the earnest crisis-of-man pronouncements

Greif analyses.

Although both writers were preoccupied with many of the same abiding

concerns as crisis-of-man discourse—total war, totalitarianism, the Holocaust, the

dangers of technology—they saw the idea of a "crisis of man" resulting from these

developments as being rather beside the point. In a way, we can understand Lewis's

criticism of Bergsonism as a bristling against a close relative of "crisis of man"

theorizing. The "Time Cult," for Lewis, like the "crisis of man" Zeitgeist, ruminates on a

putative *gravity* to human existence that is both too intellectually portentous and too

analytically thin; Bergonianism is too optimistic and confident, while the bleak, bad

news of the "crisis of man" has its origins both everywhere and nowhere (and also

occasionally succumbs to an unearned sense of moral uplift).

For Orwell, the analytical or moral purchase of "man" and his "crisis" is more

ambivalent, in that it commands a greater share of his moral imagination than is the

case with Lewis. On the one hand, the iconic image of totalitarianism offered by

O'Brien in the interrogation scene of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is "a boot stamping on a

human face, forever," which no doubt indulges in a universal figuration that should inspire horror and shared dread. On the other hand, the novel is peculiarly interested in the specific sites and methods of oppression and abjection. To take the previous image as a point of reference: the *manufacturing* of boots and the broadcasting of bogus *statistics* about the production of boot-laces are arguably more central to the novel's formal and thematic commitments. In fact, the boot image is *most* striking because of its vague generality, when compared to the almost eager accumulation of telling details and material contingencies in the other parts of the novel. To put this ambivalence another way, we might recall that the novel's original title, *The Last Man in Europe* is also drawn from the interrogation scene, when Winston cites the "spirit of man" as a recourse to or sanctuary from the total control exercised by the Party. O'Brien shows Winston his own degraded, tortured body in a mirror and says that inasmuch as "man" exists as a hopeful concept or category of being for Winston, he is the last one. As argued previously, the interrogation scene is where the novel's powers of satire and analysis break down, formally and thematically. The *figure* of "man" and his "crisis" or degradation is, therefore a damaged discourse from the start, the *result* of the stupefying powers of totalitarianism rather than its potential remedy.

It is through the character of Margot Stamp that Lewis shows the limits of such an existential, anthropological investment in the notion of Man. When Margot finds Victor across the border in Spain, close to the end of the novel, she gets into the car he has been supplied for the smuggling operation, and they begin their fast-paced attempt at escape. In the midst of this frenzied panic, she reflects on who Victor is, if he is not— as he worries he is—a "nobody" (parallel to Percy's "nothing") :

She had long ago made up her mind that Victor was-well, *a symbol*.
Some men are symbols. She knew that. They were the very words even of
an argument, in which she had timidly joined (but she had argued
against the symbolic man [with Tristy and the other Communists when
they're talking to Victor]); and they certainly abashed her a great deal of
the time with all their chatter of symbols. The word "symbol" then was
new to her. And was not her Victor *the symbolic man*, as you might call
it, to a fault? She grasped quite well that he *stood for something*. Not for
nothing, anything but that. So he could not be a nobody. But she *could*
love a *symbol*. And that, as she put it a little hardily, was one up to her.
[...] Supposing, for argument's sake, these people had discovered a
Neanderthal Man, let's say, knocking about these villages. What would
they have done? Hunted it, of course. With guns, pitchforks, hammers
and sickles—and other symbols too. Well, had not Victor some title to be
considered as a Man with a capital letter—as the Kipling Man, for
instance? [...] But it was semi-extinct, or it was becoming so. Already
Kipling Man was flying in the face of fact-they all had agreed when they
were talking about it. It made her very angry at the time. This sort of
Man was in fact an outlaw, at best in a Big Game Park. That was how
Tristy had summed the matter up.[146]

In this passage, we have an example of Margot's effort to redeploy received
wisdom and figures of thought. Gillian's reflexive adherence to a degraded version of
communist commitment, we will recall, condemns her (in the novel's valuation). By
contrast, and as an opposing moral pole to Gillian's, Margot's way of enlisting pre-
established views makes her more noble, if it also makes her more vulnerable and her
death in trying to save Victor more pathetic. To be sure, Margot is another example of
an uncomprehending woman for Lewis to demolish before his readers' eyes, and she is
of a piece with Lewis's less than robust imagination of women's political engagement.
However, the sincerity of her love for Victor, combined with her intuition about the

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[146] Lewis, The Revenge for Love, 318–319.

dangers of the gun-running, gives her an unusually privileged status for a woman in

Lewis's work. Although the novel condescends to her, she represents an honest and

abiding commitment to love, which could be said to make her the novel's moral center.

In this role, her love complements the focalization of social analysis and questions of

ethos that the novel conducts through Percy. And as we shall see, these two figures are

brought most closely together in the novel's final scene.

On the one hand, Victor is unique for and to Margot; on the other, however, he

has many symbolic roles—imagined by Margot, and assigned in the novel's plot—that

threaten to overwhelm his individuality. Through Margot's struggle here, Lewis

demonstrates some of the consequences of adopting the analytical language of Man in

the abstract: Margot is willing to love Victor as a symbolic Man, but inasmuch as he *is*

such a figure, history is set against him. Both agreement and disagreement with the

abstract, world-historical arguments of Tristy et al leave Margot desperate for anything

to anchor her love for Victor. She loves Victor as an individual, absolutely, yet the

distortions of intellectual and cultural prestige make it all too possible to regard this

love for an individual as love for symbolism.

Furthermore, although Lewis has made Victor a clear *figure* for the artist, Victor

is in fact arguably the least symbolic, most *individual* character in the novel, whose

actions and thoughts are derived from his own desires and experiences, rather than

from national character (Jack Cruse, Sean O'Hara, Percy Hardcaster) or social class

(Gillian Phipps, Hardcaster again). If he *is* a symbol, it could be that what he

symbolizes most is the frustration of the artist, caught between the immiseration of the

art market and the communist cultural milieu; indeed his situation is perhaps best

described as a sample of, rather than a symbol for, this grim juncture. But Margot's

reflection shows the limits of even such a compromised, provisional approach to

symbolizing. Victor, she says, "stood for something."[147] To "stand for" something can, of

course mean different things: a symbol, which represents or indexes something else, is

passive, and its symbolic power is granted by agents who are *not* the symbol; but one

may also "stand for something" in the sense of deliberately articulating, and acting

upon, some belief, assertion, or value. This latter sense of "stand for" is secondary in

reference to Victor, however; his capacity to stand for something has been

compromised by others' use of him as a tool for political intrigues. Loving Victor as a

symbol, then, means loving him as a victim of an unloving world—which means that

Margot's love is channeled through, and mediated by, a world hostile to her love and

loyalty. Through Margot's somewhat desperate reflections, Lewis shows the very limited

purchase of Man in the abstract as a heuristic for understanding a character (Stamp)

whose artistic struggles resonate with his own,.

But it is Percy whose symbolic function closes the novel. Back in jail, having

been caught in the gun-running scheme, and likely to remain there for some time,

Percy's reflections on himself form the novel's closing scene.

> Swollen with affected speechlessness, Percy proceeded to give a
> sculpturesque impersonation of THE INJURED PARTY. His cellmates
> watched him surreptitiously, with an admiration it was out of their
> powers to withhold. Heavily clamped upon his brickred countenance,
> held in position by every muscle that responded to Righteous Wrath, was
> a mask which entirely succeeded the workaday face. It was the mask of

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[147] Here, Victor Stamp's name acquires a further punning significance: He does not stand for something, so much as he stomps for something by *stomping something*, namely, putting his foot through his painting to assert his autonomy as an artist.

THE INJURED PARTY (model for militant agents in distress). Obedient to the best technique of party-training, he sustained it for a considerable time. But meanwhile a strained and hollow voice, part of a sham-culture outfit, but tender and halting, as if dismayed at the sound of its own bitter words, was talking in his ears, in a reproachful singsong. It was denouncing him out of the past, where alone now it was able to articulate; it was singling him out as a man who led people into mortal danger, people who were dear beyond expression to the possessor of the passionate, the artificial, the unreal, yet penetrating voice, and crying to him now to give back, she implored him, the young man, Absalom, whose life he had had in his keeping, and who had somehow, unaccountably, been lost, out of the world and out of Time! He saw a precipice. And the eyes in the mask of THE INJURED PARTY dilated in a spasm of astonished self-pity. And down the front of the mask rolled a sudden tear, which fell upon the dirty floor of the prison.[148]

At once sentimental and satirical, both honest and deceiving, this conclusion condenses the different, divided parts of Percy's ethos into a single tableau. He is, without a doubt, an "injured party" in the novel, having been shot, beaten, deceived, and condescended to. That this is a *pose* and a *mask* makes the point no less true, but it also invites scrutiny, precisely because his impersonation is for the sake of viewers and listeners, a way of constituting his role in the prison. Percy appears again in a rhetorical situation in which the artfulness of his self-presentation neither gives the lie to, nor helps to persuade us of the rightness of, his ideals and his vision of himself as a revolutionary.

To this theatrical figure, then, comes a voice which is both general and particular. The voice is unnamed, and may be said to be something like conscience. But it is also Margot Stamp, whose "sham-culture" persona still, even in death, expresses

[148] Ibid., 336.

itself through references not of her own devising (Absalom). An imagined voice speaks

to a masked figure in the language of symbols and allusion, but it does so in identifying

a real life that has been lost in an act of doubled fraudulence. "Artificial, yet unreal, yet

penetrating," Margot's voice, of which Percy had been so dismissive before, makes clear

to him the full force of what has happened. The self-pity, one might think, is

contemptible, like the self-pity Gillian accused him of; yet this moment is arguably a

moment of tragic self-recognition, cathartic for the subject if not for an audience. The

classical dramatic structure is patent, even: eyes "dilating" in knowledge of what he has

done, the hero, who has previously been surrounded by a "chorus of prisoners," comes

to a full understanding of his actions because of a prophet's vision (Margot's sense of

foreboding and warning of disaster). Once again, the playing of roles, not depth

psychology—and masked rhetoric, not a hermeneutics of unmasking—are the modes

of knowledge Lewis brings to bear on these two privileged characters.

What, then, is the "revenge for love" that Lewis's title purports to name? It

might seem that we are to understand death as some revenge for Victor and Margot's

love for each other. Yet this is not revenge in any straightforward way. No real or bogus

Communism takes revenge on them for loving each other; nor is the revenge that takes

the form of their deaths tragic in a formal sense (unlike Percy's self-recognition); nor

are these deaths the kinds of deaths one would associate with political or world-

historical violence (such as death camps, executions, or bombing of civilians). Rather,

these deaths have a thin absurdity to them, especially since neither Victor nor Margot

was a committed Communist or anti-Communist. For them to die *for* their politics or

because of their convictions would, in a sense, counterbalance their love for each other

in a way that Lewis is careful to avoid. There is no neatly balanced dichotomy of public and private life, either in melodramatic opposition or as part of a whole, integrated, authentic persona.

Lewis's title, then, points to a more subtle argument: that beneath politics, or contrasted against politics, is not some authentic, meaningful sense of identity or fate. Rather, the revenge for love exacted by the realm of politics is ordinary and without meaning, *insignificant*. The most thrilling moment of the novel, the attempted getaway by Victor and Margot, is the one in which they become the least "political," as it were: they only wish to escape and remove themselves from the smuggling, not to take up a defiant or oppositional stance. There is no Man beneath the symbolic figure who attains significance amidst the chaos of political life, either as an authentic political actor or as someone who sets himself apart from political life. There is only the bare facticity of events themselves, and only the known behavior and thoughts of characters, rather than fate and rather than essential or core human impulses.

This refusal of depth—this denial of melodrama, ego psychology, and Man in the abstract—takes various forms throughout Lewis's oeuvre. Most famous in this regard is his investment in an "external method," an artistic approach not seduced by the false promise of an esoteric truth at the core of things. In an account of his artistic and literary practice in *Men without Art*, Lewis offers one of many renderings of his distaste for depth psychology in favor of a rigorous attention to solids and surfaces:

> In contrast to the jelly-fish that floats in the centre of the subterranean stream of the "dark" Unconscious, I much prefer, for my part, the shield of the tortoise, or the rigid stylistic articulations of the grasshopper. [...] To put this matter in a nutshell, it is the shell of the animal that the plastically-minded artist will prefer. The ossature is my favourite part of a

living animal organism, not its intestines. My objections to Mr. D. H. Lawrence were chiefly concerned with that regrettable habit of his incessantly to refer to the intestinal billowing of "dark" subterranean passion.[149]

In *The Revenge for Love*, Lewis unsettles the promise of a self that is prior to or above political commitment and the contingencies of political life. For him, certainly, there could be an excess to the human self outside of modern politics: some personal, human remainder that has not (or not yet) been fully apprehended by the institutional politics of the twentieth century. (Margot holds out for such a selfhood, and dies for it. Percy, by contrast, has long ago relinquished such an ideal, in exchange for political engagement.) In a milieu like that of *The Revenge for Love*, to *pursue* that excess and seek that selfhood—to hold out for some private reserve of authenticity that could confirm, deny, or supersede the artificiality of politicized life—may paradoxically be only to push it further away.

This is an insight Lewis would offer in a rather different form years later, at the conclusion of *The Writer and the Absolute*: that a private, authentic self can neither lead to a freer politics nor outmaneuver the "Absolute of politics" altogether.[150] Lewis refuses to be seduced by the promise of what Lionel Trilling would later call "authenticity," in large part because the concept obscures, rather than enables, an understanding of the outside world:

> The factual is not just what lies there, to be picked up by anyone. It is what is perceived by the wisest—and it at once is, and is not, there for the short-sighted or "average man." Indeed, it does not appear to be

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[149] Wyndham Lewis, "Wyndham Lewis, 'Personal-Appearance' Artist," *Men without Art*, 1934, ed. Seamus Cooney (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), 95–106, 99.

[150] Wyndham Lewis, *The Writer and the Absolute* (London: Methuen, 1952), 198.

factual at all to the person devoid of insight: or if you like, there is *another* factual for him. Yet, of course, we are often dealing with a more complicated situation than that; i.e. a matter of the most rudimentary fact: such a fact, for instance, as the presence in a field of a cow; present to all men equally, whatever their intelligence. There have been long periods in recorded history when the cow was in the field, but no one mentioned the fact publicly because the writer was denied the right to do so. He was denied *verbal* access to the cow—unless, of course, he were the padishah. These were dark ages. The present is a private age in-the-making. It is all a question of how long we can fool ourselves, or others, that it is a public age: a *public* age, in my way of speaking, being a free age.[151]

The different registers here are clearly pedagogical. In the context of discussing political repression, brainwashing, torture, propaganda, the pastoral image of a cow in a field would seem to have to political import whatsoever. But this approach is deliberate on Lewis's part. Were he to assert the same kind of point but use some cosmic or morally profound example, the responses Lewis anticipates (or would anticipate if this were a dialogue) would be so morally freighted and exerted as to preclude the clarity of vision Lewis seeks to affirm and cultivate. Indeed, Lewis has a high estimation of the mind, with a low estimation of historical progress. The variability and folly of other minds, for Lewis, does not give the lie to the mind itself, just as the suppression of analytical speech does not destroy analytical thought. The retreat into the individual mind—much less something like the soul—will yield neither knowledge nor political redemption. In his privileging of the imperiled *public* aspect of his age, Lewis attests to the progressive appeal of intentional argument, against the enfeeblement and barbarism of a politics of personality.

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[151] Ibid., 198.

Chapter 3

Private Loyalties and Public Visions in Doris Lessing

The career of Doris Lessing took shape in the midst of the crisis-of-man

discourse outlined at the end of the previous chapter. In her literary and critical works,

she shares its tendencies to speak about mankind in the abstract, while at the same

time, she attends to the political, historical, and cultural contingencies that have made

that discourse so potent and topical. In other words, Lessing is constantly detecting a

crisis of man, but never takes that crisis to be indicative of anything about man in the

abstract or absolute.

Rather, like Wyndham Lewis, she detects a "political Absolute," as opposed to an

ontological or anthropological absolute, subtending all other arguments and

experiences.[152] And, like Lewis in *The Writer and the Absolute,* Lessing is in dialogue

with two prominent intellectual currents: existentialism, with its trademark fixation on

the purportedly free, infinitely responsible individual; and Marxism, with its then-

prevailing incredulity towards art's autonomy and corresponding demand for

"committed literature." The works discussed in this chapter bear witness to Lessing's

ambivalence about both of these intellectual currents—an ambivalence that took shape

over the course of a series of disillusionments with Communism and with the post-war

British left.

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[152] Wyndham Lewis, *The Writer and the Absolute* (London: Methuen, 1952), 195.

In her famous 1957 essay, "The Small Personal Voice," Lessing outlines two dynamics of public engagement and disengagement, one for writers and one for readers.

> Once a writer has a feeling of responsibility, as a human being, for the other human beings he influences, it seems to me he must become a humanist, and must feel himself as an instrument of change for good or for bad. [...] The act of getting a story or a novel published is an act of communication, an attempt to impose one's personality and beliefs on other people. If a writer accepts this responsibility, he must see himself, to use the socialist phrase, as an architect of the soul.[153]

For Lessing, the writing of literature is never wholly oracular, gnomic, or autonomous, but is instead always already apprehended by literature's public life, and by the dry, ordinary fact of its influence on people. However, Lessing goes on, in this essay and across several of her critical statements, to insist upon the individual, independent, *personal* dimension to any writing worth reading. And in her fiction, she works towards a formal and thematic attempt at precisely this balance between an outward demand for public commitment and an inward gravitas exerted by personality and individual personhood.

For the public at large, however, there is a different, bleaker inward-and-outward dynamic, in which a scene of personal revulsion towards world affairs leads directly to a tragic, desperate form of universalism and interconnection:

> Everyone in the world now has moments when he throws down a newspaper, turns off the radio, shuts his ears to the man on the platform, and holds out his hand and looks at it, shaken with terror. [Because of nuclear armament, we] are all of us made kin with each other and with everything in the world because of the kinship of possible destruction.

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[153] Doris Lessing, "A Small Personal Voice" 1957, in *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews* ed. Paul Schleuter, (London: HarperCollins, 1994), iBooks e-book.

> We are haunted by the image of an idiot hand, pressing down a great
> black lever; or a thumb pressing a button, as the dance of fiery death
> begins in one country and spreads over the earth; and above the hand the
> concentrated fanatic stare of a mad sick face.[154]

For writers and for everyone else in the world, there is some form of recognition or insight that makes withdrawing from public life impossible. For writers, this recognition comes with the communicative act that has already taken place in the act of writing and publishing; for everyone else, this recognition comes with a vivid sense of horror and disgust, via the imagination. Rather than look at and listen to the world directly, we are joined together in being "haunted" by imaginative visions of total war. Neither of these models of human connectedness is particularly uplifting. Rather, they partake of a bleak Cold War sensibility, weighed down by feelings of pessimism and impossible moral duty—a characteristic Lessing shares with postwar existentialism. In Lessing's moral topography of the nuclear age, danger and destruction are experienced collectively: "It is a question of life and death for all of us; and we are haunted, all of us, by the threat that even if some madman does not destroy us all, our children may be born deformed or mad."[155] But what, then, of collective redemption, repair, or a "humanism" in public life? What are the chances for a public, shared ethos capable of withstanding and combating the anxious horrors of Cold War geopolitics?

Already in 1957, Lessing is pessimistic about any such project, but her pessimism is at this point *incidental*, so to speak, in that she detects a mental atmosphere in the West in which left political engagement is circumscribed by Cold War ideology rather

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[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid.

than by the pitfalls of political engagement generally. A communist ethos is lacking not

because of its own qualities, but because of the dual draws of anti-Communism, on the

one hand, and a kind of provincialism and insularity, which might fall under Trilling's

notion of "authenticity," on the other. The purported independence of mind cultivated

by anti-Communism is in truth a form of mental impoverishment:

> People who have been influenced by, or who have lived inside, the
> communist ethos, will understand the complicated emotions, the
> difficult loyalties [...]. [By contrast,] for me it is depressing that the
> younger people now have no understanding of it. This is the real gap
> between people of my age and, to choose a point at random, people
> under thirty. Rejecting "propaganda," for this is what they believe they
> are doing, they reject an imaginative understanding of what I am
> convinced is the basic conflict of our time. The mental climate created by
> the cold war has produced a generation of young intellectuals who totally
> reject everything communism stands for; they cut themselves off
> imaginatively from a third of mankind, and impoverish themselves by
> doing so.[156]

This provincialism in the young which is both morally and politically derelict.

Its ethos (its "mental climate") has preempted certain political questions—about

colonialism and capitalism especially—not by countervailing political conviction *per se*,

but by means of an *anti-political* current of thought in philosophy and literature.

> There is [existentialist philosopher and novelist] Mr Colin Wilson, who
> sees no reason why he should not state that: "Like all my generation I am
> anti-humanist and anti-materialist." Mr Wilson has every right to be
> anti-humanist and anti-materialist; but it is a sign of his invincible
> British provincialism that he should claim to speak for his generation.
> The fact is that outside the very small subclass of humanity Mr Wilson
> belongs to, vast numbers of young people are both humanist and
> materialist. Millions of young people in China, the Soviet Union, and
> India, for instance. And the passions that excite the young African

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[156] Ibid.

nationalist, five years literate, watching the progress of dams being built in India and China, because he knows that what goes on in other countries intimately affects himself, have little in common with the passions of Mr Wilson. Mr Wilson may find the desire of backward people not to starve, not to remain illiterate, rather uninteresting, but he and people like him should at least try and understand it exists, and what a great and creative force it is, one which will affect us all.[157]

How, then, does Lessing's fiction bear this out? In particular, does Lessing's fiction, which is explicitly about public political engagement, serve the humanism she sees in store for her and other writers? What forms of withdrawal, horror, and recognition do characters undergo, when they not only read newspapers with a shared feeling of dread but also seek to make news themselves through political action? And above all, to what extent are we supposed to regard political engagement with suspicion in general, in view of her characters' tragic struggles to maintain their individuality while committing themselves to a broader social movement?

To answer these questions, this chapter turns to three works of fiction dealing explicitly with political commitment and activism—*The Golden Notebook* (1961), *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* (novella, 1972), and *The Good Terrorist* (1985). In these works, Lessing's protagonists burn out of political activism and in one way or another lose their minds. In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna Wulf grows dissatisfied with life in the Communist Party of Great Britain, and this disillusionment, combined with a series of failures in personal relationships and mental stress, forms the novel's dominant mood and series of conflicts. Aging, ill health, and family estrangement lead the titular character of *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* to a wearied resignation of activist

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[157] Ibid.

engagement. In *The Good Terrorist*, the weakening of Alice Mellings' sense of her own place in the world leads her to a morally and politically pointless act of terrorism.

These works may seem to suggest that a synthesis of private and public life—of the muddled complicatedness of individual minds and temperaments on the one hand, and the work of political engagement, on the other—is impossible, tragic, or ultimately conducive to political quietism. This has certainly been a staple of critical responses to Lessing's work, and something of a justified caricature of Lessing herself—the former Communist public intellectual turned Sufi mystic, retreating into domestic life with her cats, disappointed with and annoyed by the modern world. Lessing's later pronouncements on these matters aren't very clarifying, frequently settling, as they do, into a general emphasis on the complexity of lived experience itself, the need for clear thinking and integrity (especially in a political context menaced by authoritarianism, deceit, and brutality), and the inexplicability of many human motivations.[158]

In her literary attention to the personal dimensions of political positions, Lessing continues a debate about Communists' ethos originating in literary polemics of the 1930s and 1940s in figures like Orwell and Lewis, even as she brings it into a postwar context characterized by the exhausted political will and diminished expectations of the socialist left. As in many of Lessing's other works, the net effect of these plots and thematic arrangements is to enable the novel to speculate on the relationship between

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[158] For a useful summary of Lessing's later persona., which is often like a "scourge," see Jane Miller "Doris Lessing and the Millennium," *Raritan* 18 (1998): 133–145. Miller finds Lessing's anti-Communist and anti-left stances "lopsided and overgeneralized, on the one hand, and unfair to the large numbers of people who worked and wrote from a variety of positions on the left, on the other" (n.p.)

The subsequent discussion of *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* will fill out this picture.

private and public life in general—*and* to show that an attempt at reconciling private and public may lead to further psychological fragility in a specific person or sort of person.[159] As we shall see, Lessing permits us to apprehend each of these protagonists—Wulf, Orkney, and Mellings—in three different ways: first, as exceptional people, whose mental states have little to do with the validity or value of their dissident politics; second, as exceptional people whose individual properties say *something* about their dissident politics, making their states of mind and their politics some kind of symptom or analogy for the other; third, as figures for political engagement's pervasively damaging, warping effects on personality. In this last case, the characters seem both to recognize this process and to be powerless to stop it, which makes them less exceptional and more like object lessons or cautionary tales.

Lessing's oeuvre in some ways suggests that this last option, the most pessimistic interpretation, captures her intention. Yet as we shall see, this third possibility is finally untenable, given the vivid peculiarities of the characters' mental states, which preclude them from commanding readers' wholesale assent. The second option, meanwhile, seems betrayed by the protagonists' own deep *intelligence*, through which the novel is focalized. I hope to show that it is instead the first that most nearly does justice to Lessing's texts, and that far from showing dissident politics as analogies for madness, these works ofter dissident politics as an *alternative* to madness that the

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[159] As John Plotz succinctly points out: "It wouldn't be hard to break many of Lessing's novels down into the sections of a traditional scientific paper: *procedures, methods, materials, discussions,* and *results* are all present." John Plotz, "Feeling Like a Stoic: Doris Lessing's Experimental Fiction," *Public Books*, August 7, 2012, http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/feeling-like-a-stoic-doris-lessings-experimental-fiction.

protagonists are unable to see or choose with the clarity with which the implied reader can. In other words, these novels cannot be enlisted to an anti-communist or post-political dispensation quite as readily as even Lessing herself may have imagined they could.

The Golden Notebook: Expressing criticism

> It frightens me that when I'm writing I see to have some awful second sight, or something like it, an intuition of some kind; a kind of intelligence is at work that is much too painful to use in ordinary life; *one couldn't live at all if one used it for living*.[160]

The Golden Notebook's formal structure is well known; it both depicts and formally demonstrates its protagonist's attempt to reconcile different parts of her life.[161] In different colored notebooks, Anna Wulf records her experiences in various roles: as an anti-imperialist colonial during World War II at the Mashopi hotel with other white leftists; as a Communist Party member in London; as the lover of two Communist men, Willi and later, Saul; as a novelist (whose novel, *Free Women*, appears in excerpted form throughout the book); and as a psychoanalytic subject. The golden notebook, at the

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[160] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* 1962 (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 546, emphasis added.

[161] Tonya Krause helps to situate *The Golden Notebook* in literary history on the basis of its formal complexity:

[T]his realistic representation of the postmodern problem of loss of meaning constitutes not a retune to either nineteenth-century realism or twentieth-century modernism but rather a gesture toward a hybrid, radically naturalistic literary form that refuses to grant literature or language unifying power. [...] Lessing's novel gestures toward the "hysterical realism" of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a term coined by James Wood in a review of Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*[.]

Tonya Krause, "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Positioning *The Golden Notebook* in the Twentieth-Century Canon," *Doris Lessing's* The Golden Notebook *after fifty*, ed. Alice Ridout and Roberta Rubinstein, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 118.

end, is where she tries to synthesize and reconcile different parts of her life, but in the process, loses her grip on reality.[162]

Anna seems to recognize more deeply than others the fraught relation of political position to personality, while at the same time suffering through a series of alienating and ambivalent relationships with committed leftist men. In her reflections, she seems to offer the novel's own meta-commentary, while simultaneously falling short of her own ideals of integrity and psychological fortitude. Add her additional preoccupation with, and ambivalence about, the demand for "committed literature," and the self-referential quality of the novel increases by another order of magnitude, both demanding and resisting a clear account of Lessing's own "commitments" in writing the novel.

The Golden Notebook itself depicts Anna's political and literary commitments as usually either belated or exhausted: she, and many others, become disillusioned with the Communist Party of Great Britain after Khrushchev's "secret speech," and her attempt to involve herself in a more distinctly British Communist movement comes to nothing. In 1962, the year of the novel's publication, the prospects of a revolutionary socialist movement in Britain seem to be waning fast, between the recognizing of Stalinism's moral bankruptcy, on one hand, and the co-optation of socialist sentiments

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[162] Judi M. Roller offers a more precise and insightful view of the notebooks' relation to the *Notebook*:

> The world and the individual in this novel are so closely connected that their union might be said to exemplify the idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny that the life-span of a single organism mirrors the evolutionary development of the whole species-. As there is minimally a period of infancy, a period of intellectual development, a Marxist phase, and a period of insanity in the development of each society, so also there are corresponding developments in the life of the individual (74–75).

Judi M. Roller, *The Politics of the Feminist Novel*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

by the Labour Party, on the other.[163] Her notion of literature, too, is somehow out of step with the times, as the intellectual public has come to expect novels to perform the same function as journalism, a task she no longer wishes to undertake:

> The point is, that the function of the novel seems to be changing; it has become an outpost of journalism; we read novels for information about areas of life we don't know—Nigeria, South Africa, the American army, a coal—mining village, coteries in Chelsea, etc. We read *to find out what is going on*. One novel in five hundred or a thousand has the quality a novel should have to make it a novel—the quality of philosophy. I find that I read with the *same kind of curiosity* most novels, and a book a reportage. [...] The novel has become a function of the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness. Human beings are so divided, are becoming more and more divided, *and more subdivided in themselves*, reflecting the world, that they reach out desperately, now knowing they do it, for other information about other groups inside their own country, let alone groups in other countries. It is a blind grasping for wholeness, and the novel—report is a means toward it. [...] Yet I am incapable of writing the only kind of novel which interests me: a book powered with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life. It is because I am too diffused. (58—59, emphases in original)

This passage, like many others, seems in some sense separable from the novel *The Golden Notebook* itself, as though it is the occasion for Lessing, on whom Anna Wulf is loosely but definitely based, to editorialize more generally and, ironically, break the ideal for the novel form that is expressed here. Would it be easier or more appropriate to take these statements on their own terms, rather than as Anna's own idiosyncratic worries, if they were in the *Free Women* part of the book instead of her notebooks? This is precisely the sort of self-referential conundrum that *The Golden*

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[163] Hugh Gaitskill's leadership of the Labour Party signaled long-term triumph of its right wing, against the more radical Aneurin Bevan. Harold Wilson, as successor, solidified Labour's technocratic, essentially non-confrontational stance in relation to capitalism.

Notebook so frequently and vividly offers. And it is this *kind* of conundrum that seems to be the novel's intended offering—a revelation of how Lessing actually thinks about the personal experience of dissident political commitments.

It would seem that the different dimensions of *The Golden Notebook* are simultaneously mutually informing and self-canceling, leaving behind them only a sense of ambiguity, bewildering complexity, and political defeat and fatigue—all of which reach their climax in the stylistically disorienting and disjointed final golden notebook, which records Anna's damaged psyche. Jane Miller suggests that even in 1962, the year of *The Golden Notebook*'s publication, Lessing had retreated into a kind of post-politics: "Her conversion from communism and, indeed, from politics, towards ways of valuing individual choice and conscience and the sanctity of the inner life, was already in progress and is signalled at the end of the novel in the 'breakdown' experienced by Anna and the unspeakable Saul."[164] This kind of life-trajectory would seem to be the sensibility that she "imposes" on her readers at the end of *The Golden Notebook*, to invoke the language of "The Small Personal Voice."

One prevalent reading, which we might label *existential*, takes as a given that the lines of thought converging in the golden notebook lead to an inquiry into character itself—into Anna's own personality and experience and the *form* of her own novelistic character. Under this reading, the novel's nested, multipart construction, oriented around a single character, constitutes a claim for the inseparability of *existential* and *political* varieties of ambiguity and complexity; and inasmuch as the

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[164] Miller, "Doris Lessing and the Millennium."

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"golden notebook" is the site of Anna's most focused and strenuous attempt at personal synthesis and integrated subjectivity, it must be natural *telos* of the novel's formal and thematic thrusts. Yet Anna's golden notebook is precisely where her mental powers are most attenuated. Slightly mad and dreamlike, the golden notebook documents the intensity of her relationship with a "real man," the American Communist Saul Green, as well as the fragility of her sense of self in the eerie, disquieting use of: "I, I, I, I." Thus in an existential reading, the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of political commitment are infinitely troubled and compromised; the individual mind's intense suffering and ambivalence cannot be reconciled with dissident political commitment, which demands some elision of oneself—as in Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* and Percy Hardcaster in *The Revenge for Love*. Anna, in this reading, becomes the same kind of figure as Mersault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*: personally shattered by her own actions, she nevertheless shows the moral authority of those actions over any social norms or political ideals. And from this shattering, readers can deduce the novel's overall ethical and philosophical stance.

In an illuminating discussion of the cultural context in which Lessing wrote *The Golden Notebook*, Jenny Taylor writes that

> The novel itself is part of a wider sense of split between creation and criticism. With the expansion of the media and higher education, the position of the independent writer was eroded. In addition, the freelance intellectual was undercut by the academic, and the practice of criticism was increasingly centered in universities. These developments were widely but ineffectually complained about from several quarters in the

post-war period. In *The Golden Notebook* the process of criticism becomes incorporated into the text itself, which loses its innocence.[165]

Taylor's key terms here, *creation* and *criticism*, are not only helpful in the analysis quoted above, but they also perhaps offer a complementary vocabulary for describing Anna Wulf's own conflict. The conflicts driving the novel are not *only* public vs private, personal vs political, sincerity vs authenticity. Rather, there is also a splitting of *criticism* and *creation* in the character's own plot.

We see one example of this splitting of critical and creative intelligence in Anna's description of the Communist Party of Great Britain's electoral non-strategy:

> These discussions have the same pattern. No, we don't want to split the vote; it's essential to have Labour in, rather than a Tory. But on the other hand, if we believe in C.P. policy, we must try to get our candidate in. Yet we know there's no hope of getting a C.P. candidate in. [...] On the three occasions I watched this happen, the doubts and confusions were solved by—*a joke*. Oh yes, very important in politics, that joke. This joke made by the man from the Centre himself: It's all right, comrades, we are going to lose our deposit, we aren't going to win enough votes to split the Labour vote. Much relieved laughter, and the meeting splits up. This joke, completely contradicting everything in official policy, in fact sums up how everyone feels.[166]

For the CPGB, the distinction between creation and criticism is never wholly resolved. Running candidates is, functionally, an attempt at creation—vying for responsibility for what happens by means of government. As the CPGB is a token minor party, however, the electoral apparatus—what its members are spending their energy canvassing for— is turned into a damaged tool for criticism: leftward pressure on Labour. The candidacy

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[165] Jenny Taylor, "Introduction: Situating Reading," in *Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing* ed. Jenny Taylor (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 10.

[166] Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 156–157.

itself cannot claim too aggressively to *mean* anything (much less *do* anything), given

the spoiler blackmail—which isn't even a worry, as the joke shows.

Both in the Britain and in the Africa sections of the novel, characters bear a

certain irrelevance to their domestic political situation as well as a commitment to the

Soviet Union's legitimacy as a socialist state—a commitment that can *only* be

discursive. When domestic affairs are under consideration, the theoretical analysis of

nationalism as the enemy thwarts the party's creative potential. In Africa, the party's

analysis is both morally authoritative and out of touch with the limited horizon of

political possibility:

> The "line" was simple and admirable. In a colour—dominated society
> like this, it was clearly the duty of socialists to combat racialism.
> Therefore, "the way forward" must be through a combination of
> progressive black and white vanguards. Who were destined to be the
> white vanguard? Obviously, the trade unions. And who the black
> vanguard? Clearly, the black trade unions. At the moment there were no
> black trade unions, for they were illegal and the black masses were not
> yet developed for illegal action. And the white trade unions, jealous of
> their privileges, were more hostile to the Africans than any other section
> of the white population. So our picture of what ought to happen, must
> happen in fact, because it was a first principle that the proletariat was to
> lead the way to freedom, was not reflected anywhere in reality. Yet the
> first principle was too sacred to question. Black nationalism was, in our
> circles (and this was true of the South African communist party), a
> right—wing deviation, to be fought. The first principle, based as it was
> on the soundest humanist ideas, filled us full of the most satisfactory
> moral feelings. I see I am falling into the self—punishing, cynical tone
> again. Yet how comforting this tone is, like a sort of poultice on a wound.
> Because it is certainly a wound—I, like thousands, of others can't
> remember our time in or near "The Party" without a terrible dry anguish.

Yet that pain is like the dangerous pain of nostalgia, its first cousin and just as deadly.[167]

Anna shifts here from a tendentious, catechizing parroting of the party line to a self-reflective, critical account of the bitterness that motivates it. The actual problem of the party line, however, is treated rather casually.[168] Both the dubious value of the "satisfactory moral feelings" and the almost nostalgic comfort of regret occlude the real missed insight: the strategic advantage of black nationalism for communist agitation, which would only be realized in later anti-colonial struggles.

However, the sarcastically phrased "most satisfactory moral feelings" generated by the party line are not only an indication of Anna's critique of the group's specious self-confidence; they are also wholly detached from the measurable results of communist organizing. It's not just that there's something unlovely, maybe even smug, about the white intellectual communist circle; if this were a side-effect of actual

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[167] Ibid., 86.

[168] While it's not clear what success in the political sphere would look like for the communists in Africa, it *is* clear what is necessary to save the party and the movement itself: historical knowledge and understanding:

> Nothing happened in our small, amateur and indeed ludicrous group that hadn't happened right back with the Iskra group in London at the beginning of the century, at the start of organized communism. If we had known anything at all about the history of our own movement we would have been saved from the cynicism, the frustration, the bewilderment—but that isn't what I want to say now. In our case, the inner logic of "centralism" made the process of disintegration inevitable because we had no links at all with what African movements there were—that was before the birth of any Nationalist movement, before any kind of trade union. [...] The situation was that a group of highly militant white politicos, equipped with every kind of information about organizing revolutionary movements were operating in a vacuum because the black masses hadn't begun to stir, and wouldn't for another few years. And this was true of the communist party in South Africa too. The battles and conflicts and debates inside our group which might have driven it into growth, had we not been an alien body, without roots, destroyed us very fast. [...] Because we did not understand the process, it sapped our emotional energy." (65)

communist political effects, it would still be problematic, but explainable in terms of a

historical narrative in which communism achieves political success. Rather, the moral

feelings are *independent* of political responsibility for what actually happens. This point

is tacit in Anna's account, yet it must be highlighted if the novel is to be recognized as

something other than a dismissal of political commitment in general as so much

psychological manipulation.

Another, more precise way to frame this point would be to think in terms of

what the Party really is or does. As a body that institutionalizes political ideals and

ambitions, its effects are positive, if mainly cultural, and often at odds with its own

professed stances. As a movement laying claim to state power, however, the Party is vain

and ineffectual. In Britain, the international arena (about which one can only be

critical) dominates the Party activity and sense of its own identity, while its fruitless

vying for state power (its unrealized and unlikely creative capacity) is demoralizing and

befuddling. From Anna's red notebook:

> The Rosenbergs electrocuted. Felt sick all night. This morning I woke
> asking myself: why should I feel like this about the Rosenbergs, and only
> feel hopeless and depressed about frameups in communist countries?
> The answer is an ironical one. I feel responsible for what happens in the
> West, but not for what happens over there. And yet I am in the Party. I
> said something like this to Molly, and she replied, very brisk and efficient
> (she's in the middle of a hard organising job), "All right, I know, but I'm
> busy."[169]

Here, there is a displacement of responsibility in Anna's party membership. The

implication is that by being a member of the Party, she is responsible for the frame-ups

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[169] Ibid., 52.

in Communist countries, and that her continued membership solidifies that responsibility. Yet the unspecified "organizing job" that Molly is working on entails, we can only assume, a responsibility for domestic affairs. For Anna, "responsibility" exists at the level of individual thought and feeling, and is measured by the existential discomfort of her own mind when contemplating a distant country she only knows as an abstraction. (In her local canvassing for the Party discussed above, this sense of responsibility enables her to recognize the quiet despair and suffering of one of the women she visits: lonely and frustrated in their house-bound lives in austerity post-war Britain. Whether or not the Party has anything to offer to alleviate this suffering, Anna does not say.) Again, membership in the Communist Party is, by necessity, a standing as a critic, not as a creator; British electoral politics will not accommodate Communists and there is no horizon of possibility for Communists to assume responsibility for any actual state of affairs. For Anna and many other members to whom Lessing is alluding via her character, the typical allotment of the Party's energies are doubly vexing: In the domestic, electoral arena, it pursues a weak mode of creation—running candidates while not actually contesting the Labour Party, while Communist criticism of Labour is presumed to fall on deaf ears during elections. While in international affairs, Anna feels responsible for Communism in the Soviet Union, a sphere in which she (like nearly all other Party members) has no *creative* power; criticism is the only fruitful (to say nothing of moral) response, but is inhibited.

In the black notebook, Anna explicitly connects a lack of political responsibility to "revealing" one's true character. She recalls her time with Willi and other leftist activists and intellectuals, who frequented the Mashopi hotel in Rhodesia:

> I remember us all at Mashopi—for now all those years of nights of talk and activity, when we were political beings, seem to be far less revealing than what went on at Mashopi. Though of course, as I've said, that is true only when we were politically in a vacuum, without a chance of expressing ourselves in political responsibility. (71)

The Mashopi hotel is, to be sure, a semi-utopian refuge, in which idleness and amusement (and sexual intrigue) are the chief preoccupations. That these should be more "revealing" than political talk and activity (reified in the "political being") shows the extent of Anna's tacit, existential anti-politics. "Talk and activity" (what else is there?) is the other to "what went on"; in what is almost an invitation to read the passage over again, these two phrases, so similar and ordinary, are instead posed as distinct opposites. Chronologically, this moment, which is designated a vacuum, might be thought of as a pre-post-politics on Anna's part. Anna is reluctant to give any credit to her political activism in Rhodesia, so complete is her post-war retrospective disillusionment—a disillusionment the reader is invited to scrutinize.

Likewise, Anna's criticisms of Willi and his impersonality seem to invite scrutiny; the moral overexertion of Anna's mind has more to do with her own mind than with the people she's trying to describe. After listing opposing terms to describe Willi (ruthless/kind, cold/warm, sentimental/realistic), Anna reflects on the futility of her own attempt to do so:

> [I]n describing any personality all these words are meaningless. To describe a person one says: "Willi, sitting stiffly at the head of the table, allowed his round spectacles to glitter at the people watching him and said formally, but with a gruff clumsy humour…" Something like that. But the point is, and it is the point that obsesses me (and how odd this obsession should be showing itself, so long ago, in a helpless list of words, not knowing what it would develop into), once I say that words like good/bad, strong/weak, are irrelevant, I am accepting amorality, and

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> I do accept it the moment I start to write "a story," "a novel," because I simply don't care. All I care about is that I should describe Willi and Maryrose so that a reader can feel their reality. And after twenty years of living in and around the left, which means twenty years' preoccupation with the question of morality in art, that is all I am left with. So what I am saying is, in fact, that the human personality, that unique flame, is so sacred to me, that everything becomes unimportant? Is that what I am saying? And if so, what does it mean?[170]

Here, Anna's faculties of creativity and criticism are self-canceling, resulting in the uncertainty at the end of this passage. On the one hand, she is committed to the art of fiction, but on the other hand, this commitment is felt so strongly as an *anti-politics*—as a relinquishing of her political commitments—as to surrender her talents in advance. It is almost as though, before the novel brings us to London, the incommensurability of these two projects has been assumed all along. What is more, Anna's powers of discernment when describing other people are conspicuously weak; so many moments like the passage above highlight her needlessly tortured approach to "the human personality"—a concept whose generality and portentousness guarantees that any artistic rendering will fall short somehow. What the novel holds out to us in the set of characters *around* Anna, however, is the possibility that dissident political engagement can be another *ordinary* site in which "the human personality, that unique flame" can be seen to operate, without the existential ballast of "the question of morality in art." Anna's desire to write about "the human personality" partakes of the language of the "crisis of man," discussed in the preceding chapter.

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[170] Ibid., 68–69.

If there is a *section* of the book that rejects this sense of tragedy, it is the "black notebook," from which this quote is taken, which documents the communist milieu in colonial Rhodesia during the Second World War—a part of the book that has received decidedly less critical attention than the parts set in London. In this section, the limits of international Communism and individual Communists' commitments are both recognized by the text and thematized by the characters themselves. The leftist clique Anna lives in forms an intellectual and cultural minority, or assembly of minorities, whose "ideas were so far in advance of the country's development" (66). [171] But we might detect nostalgia on Anna's part in her description of the cultural life of the Communist Party:

> People are too emotional about communism, or rather, about their own communist parties, to think about a subject that one day will be a subject for sociologists. That is, the social activities that go on as a direct or indirect result of the existence of a communist party. People or groups of people who don't know it have been inspired, or animated, or given a new push into life because of the communist party, and this is true of all countries where there has been even a tiny communist party. In our own small town, a year after Russia entered the war, and the left had recovered because of it, there had come into existence a small orchestra,

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[171] I share Jane Miller's appreciation of "spasmodically marvellous writing, like those startlingly memorable weekends in wartime Mashopi which have made the Black Notebook the one I've always wanted to get back to." And although in this chapter, I aim to show that her work is not as political debilitating as it may seem, there is ample reason for Miller and Showalter to think of Lessing, as early as *The Golden Notebook*, as a deeply censorious figure:

> Lessing's repudiation of her political youth may, of course, speak less rebarbatively to a younger generation than hers or mine. She is certainly right to remind herself and us that all political commitment and activity must be susceptible to revision, to the admission of mistakes and wrong-headedness, and that it seems right to start from your own mistakes and wrong-headedness. But to gather retrospectively an entire generation's ideological commitment into a single, idiosyncratic mea culpa smacks of another kind of ideologue, even a scourge.

Miller, n.p.

readers' circles, two dramatic groups, a film society, an amateur survey of the conditions of urban African children which, when it was published, stirred the white conscience and was the beginning of a long overdue sense of guilt, and have a dozen discussion groups of African problems. For the first time there was something like a cultural life in that town. And it was enjoyed by hundreds of people who knew of the communists only as a group of people to hate.[...] Yet the communists had inspired them because a dedicated faith in humanity spreads ripples in all directions.[172]

At first reading, this catalogue of achievements would seem to be directed at critics of Communism, offering a counter-narrative of the consequences of Communist movements and parties as a kind of compensation or exculpation for Communism's many historical crimes and faults. However, this statement from Anna—which seems to step forward, separating itself from the narration[173]—is in fact directed to *other Communists* or *ex-Communists*. That they are "too emotional"—rather than, say, too rueful, bitter, or alternatively too enthralled to Communist Party apologetics—suggests that in Anna's view, what she is calling for is not a more affirming or forgiving mode of communist memory. Instead, Anna is calling for a more distanced view, like that of the sociologist, in which one's own private life is elided in favor of total assessment—not merely appreciation—of Communism's influence on non-communists.

Still more to the point, the ripples being described here are *institutional*, rather than affective or existential. For all her failures, Anna herself is able to account for the

[172] Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, 63–64.

[173] In discussing the novel's structure, Irving Howe notes, in a famous early review, that "[t]he advantage of this scheme is that Miss Lessing can isolate the main elements of Anna's experience with a sharpness that might not be possible in a traditional kind of novel; the disadvantage, that she has had to force large chunks of narrative into a discursive context." Irving Howe, "Doris Lessing: No Compromise, No Happiness" 1963 *A Voice Still Heard: Selected Essays of Irving Howe*, ed Nina Howe (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015): 35–40, 39.

activities of the party in general social terms. Through the activities in and around the party—even those that the party institutionally opposes—notions of the social good take tangible forms in "the cultural life," regardless of the individual integrity or existential disposition of the people engaging in them. Thinking of the Party as an institution implies—promisingly, I think—that the good that the Party may do, its real efficacy, has little to do with who one is, or with what the personalities of its members are; institutions are, in a way, defined by the irrelevance of the personalities of the people in it to that institutions methods and goals. The activity around Anna suggests that institutional life may in fact hold some political promise or benefit, precisely because one doesn't need to know who everyone really *is*. But inasmuch as the novel and its protagonist are interested in who Anna Wulf is, the narration of Party life is constantly undermining the Party's political commitments, just as Anna's own Communism seems always already in a state of entropy. An account of the novel as heralding the triumph of the personal over the political—even if that triumph takes the form of tragedy—does not do justice to the novel's political meanings embedded in the institutions it describes.[174] Through Anna, as through Percy Hardcaster, we find that the

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[174] Nor, likewise, would a post-political reading attend to the novel's formal investments in dialogues of argument. Amanda Anderson definition of the "liberal aesthetic" could be profitably enlisted in a redemptive reading of *The Golden Notebook*:

> Liberalism's commitment to the ideal of reflective enlightenment is often expressed not as a mere investment in neutrality or principle, but precisely as a kind of existential challenge. [...] Turning these principles and practices into a way of life, or infusing them into political institutions, has typically been seen as a challenge for liberalism, certainly not as a simple matter. [The] realist novel often can be seen to engage liberal thought through its own version of the dual perspective (the first-and third-person perspectives) and to grapple in diverse ways with the difficulty of living the examined life, or successfully enacting political or philosophical ideals.

search for a reserve of human essence untouched by politics is just as suspicious and liable to end tragically as an effort to *merge* human essence and politics. It is through Anna's damaged creative ethos, as it were, that the need for a different critical ethos can be recognized. Anna's determination to synthesize the existential and the political only serves to ratify her sense of their unbridgeable distance.

Feeling post-political in "The Temptation of Jack Orkney"

> Once, when they had come together to express a view, it had been a minority view, and to get what they believed publicized had sometimes been difficult or impossible. Now something had happened which not all of them had understood: when they expressed themselves about this or that, it was happening more and more often that their views were identical with conventional views put forward freely by majorities everywhere. Once they had been armed with aggressive optimistic views about society, about how to change it; now they were on the defensive. Once they had forecast utopias; now they forecast calamity, failed to prevent calamity, and then worked to minimize calamity. (623)

While Lessing does not buy into the neoliberal, technocratic consensus that defines the post-political as it is usually theorized, "The Temptation of Jack Orkney" does considerable theoretical work in drawing out the ways in which individual consciousness, in the throes of mortal doubt, dissolves questions of political alignment and action. In this story, moral integrity replaces state power as the object of political attention, and personal attachments replace class or group interests.

The titular character of "The Temptation of Jack Orkney" is of the "Old Guard" of the British left, an established writer, activist, and traveller. The death of his father

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Amanda Anderson, "The Liberal Aesthetic," *Theory After Theory*, ed. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 2011), 251.

sets into a motion a set of existential crises, accompanied by depression, heightened

consciousness, and disturbed sleep. (Travel delays and his own ambivalence cause him

to miss both his father's funeral and the start of a twenty-four-hour hunger strike for

Bangladeshi refugees, which has been ignored by news coverage anyway.) First, Orkney

comes to doubt his atheism and his principled, but uninformed, dismissal of religious

belief and experience; the surprising religious fervor of his father, daughters, and niece

causes him to reconsider his disdain for religion, leading to potential embarrassment in

front of his anti-religious "Old Guard" comrades. Second, he begins to discern and

dislike the smugness, vanity, and power-worship of his leftist friends and colleagues.

Third, he comes to see the history of the socialist movement as a repeating series of

damaging splits and recriminations, which are the result of historical amnesia; he feels

compelled but powerless to address this amnesia and indulges in a "fantasy" of a huge,

unifying, conciliatory, *ecumenical* socialist conference (627).

The last page or so of the novella loses focus, as Jack continues his retreat into

his private spiritual (though that word is never used) experiences, dreams, and leave-

takings of his political affiliations. The tone of the last third is not unlike the final pages

of Lessing's earlier novel, *The Grass is Singing*, in its attenuation of reality by inward

imagination and memory. The "temptation" of Jack Orkney is not just the solace of

dubious religious belief, but "another world," "behind the face of the skeptical world,"

into which he might follow his father, "the man whose pride and strength has to come

from a conscious ability to suffer, in silence, the journey into negation" (655). In what

must be a deliberate, sly gambit, Lessing here substitutes the philosophical baggage of

"negation"—crucial to Hegelian Marxism—with an allusion to death. In other words,

Lessing seems to collapse Jack Orkney's political disillusionment with his existential grasp of mortality.[175] The narrative depicts more political conversations that Jack *declines* to have for reasons of personal estrangement than conversations he *does* have for reasons of political organizing or persuasion, or even personal connection.

If the novella's intimation is that the personal trumps the political, it brings the reader to this conclusion by several steps. Most prominent is the comparison of socialism—and perhaps politics generally—to religion. While his daughters and niece discuss their various religious views, Jack

> had to stop himself saying that they sounded like a Conference of World Churches debating doctrinal differences, because he knew that if it came to dogmas, and disagreements about historical personalities, then his faith, socialism, beat them all. He looked at, listened to, his daughters, his brother's daughter, and knew that in two, three, ten years (if they were all allowed to live so long) they would be laying claim, with exactly the same possessiveness, to other creeds, faiths, attitudes.[176]

We might say that Jack is acquiring a long view, afforded by age and awareness of generational repetition. This view provides simultaneous humility and proximity (socialism is just as fussy as religion; best to keep quiet) and superior distance, in the form of diagnosing the contingency of his beliefs, which implicitly nullifies the specific *claims* of their beliefs:

> As he read, he conscientiously examined what he thought; was this changing at all? No, his distaste for the whole business could be summed

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[175] My basic hunch is that aging and death in this novella are unconvincing alibis for a retreat into post-political quietism. It is quite possible to reverse my reading, and suggest that instead, the post-political retreat is the occasion for realizing the brutal truth of aging and death-another parallel with Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*. Although we may never quite agree on this, I am grateful to my colleague, Anthony Wexler, for turning me on to this compelling possibility.

[176] Doris Lessing, *The Temptation of Jack Orkney* in *Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 635.

up by an old idea of his, which was that if he had been bred, let us say, in Pakistan, that would have been enough for him to kill other people in the name of Mohammed, and if he had been born in India, to kill Moslems without a qualm. That had be been born in Italy, he would have been one brand of Christian, and if he had stuck with his family's faith, he would be bound to suspect Roman Catholicism. But above all what he felt was that this was an outmoded situation. What was he doing sitting here surrounded by histories and concordances and expositions and exegetics? He would be better occupied doing anything else—a hundred years ago, yes, well, that had been different. The struggle for a Victorian inside the Church had meant something; for a man or woman then to say: "If I had been born an Arab I would be praying five times a day looking at Mecca, but had I been a Tibetan I would have believed in the Dalai Lama"—that kind of statement needed courage then, and the effort to make it had been worthwhile.[177]

As a consequence of this insight about contingency, Jack's political syncretism (expressed in his fantasy of a unifying conference) is a non-starter, as politics, like religions, are accidents of chance; the circumstances that cause them command attention more than political views themselves. Startled by his ignorance of religious history and thought, Jack goes to the Reading Room of the British Museum and calls for books of religious history. His long historical view leads to quietism and a disavowal of his own positions:

Jack's synthesizing of religion and politics here is in sharp contrast to, say, the criticisms of Communism as a "political religion" discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. Whereas the account of Communism as a political religion aims to show how it is neither politics *or* religion in good faith (and therefore worthy of opposing), Jack's account is more sincerely dialectical. The upshot of his comprehending politics

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[177] Ibid., 651–2.

and religion as historically contingent is not the affirmation of any particular religion or politics but instead a radical anti-foundationalism about one's own religion and politics *as themselves*.

We might also consider the constellation of political events and causes that the novella depicts vying for Jack's attention: Bangladeshi refugees; mass starvation in the developing world; the "Robinson affair" his son talks about, which is some unspecified scandal involving legal proceedings and bad prison conditions; travel to Nigeria for some unspecified political or journalistic work; a vaguely alluded to threat of nuclear annihilation; and a conference on "Saving the Earth from Man." What's missing here is precisely the cause for *socialism in his own society*.[178] For the most part, the concerns just named are either foreign in siting or sublimely and overpoweringly international in scale (nuclear war, starvation). The political cause more palpable in Jack's life, women's liberation, occupies a distinctly (perhaps tellingly) minor role in the novella; he is periodically aware of the troublesome ways in which he and other men in the "Old Guard" relate to women, but these are not political problems *per se*.[179]

Jack's "socialism," then, might be an example of leftist political commitment in the absence of the project of building a social base. While many left opinions have become mainstream in the post-war Britain of "Orkney" (as signaled in the epigraph), the socialist movement has become a professionalized accumulation of advocacies and concerns rather than the organization of new political agents in, say, the broadly-

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[178] In fact, there's nothing distinctly *socialist* about any of these causes. Capitalism is no longer an agreed-upon enemy.

[179] "Jack hated women talking about [Women's Liberation], not because he disagreed with any of it, but because he had never been able to cope with it; it was all too much for him" (634).

defined working class. Tacit in this politics-as-advocacy mode of socialism is a foreclosure of both the Labour Party and the trade union movement as growing, revolutionary institutions. These have been replaced by strategies of internationalism (of a sort), voluntarism (communes, squatting), expertise (Jack's cohort of writers and prominent personalities, "standing on plinths, each representing a degree of opinion [594]), and spectacle (twenty-four-hour hunger strikes versus mass media). The ambivalence and frequent quietism of Lessing's middle-class, educated characters should come as no great surprise, in light of these postwar configurations of political activity. "The Temptation of Jack Orkney" thus exhibits the further dissipation of radical left commitment. Whereas *The Golden Notebook* foregrounded personal relationships and individual psychology as giving the lie to Anna's political engagement, the novella of Orkney's disillusionment makes this depoliticizing process more general (a result of aging and generational misunderstanding), while at the same time granting this process a higher intellectual profile, as it is occasioned by a long, researched historical view.

The Good Terrorist's vanishing target

> As always when she stepped out of her own life, into the world of
> ordinary people, she felt divided, confused. (245)

In *The Good Terrorist* (1985), Doris Lessing "celebrates commonsense bourgeois values with a wit, an indignation and a narrative agility which leave few left-wing sacred cows unscathed"—as a *Sunday Times* reviewer put it.

> [We] are in the world of the subsidised sub-culture of the marxist
> groupuscules of contemporary Britain. The Communist Centre Union is

> not exactly a mass party—its national Congress musters the grand total of 24 members. But what they lack in numbers they make up for in seriousness. Their policies and posturings, their borrowed phrases and affected voices, are lampooned with wicked precision.[180]

This is a concise and effective summary of a compelling way to view Lessing's novel. *The Good Terrorist* certainly continues her sustained criticism of the left from within, or beyond, a leftist position of her own. One could even assert that the novel is a triumph of a particular subgenre: sober satire of the far left, scolding and psychologically penetrating. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Revenge for Love*, and Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey* would be Lessing's precursors here. In its unadorned, almost bleak realist mode, *The Good Terrorist* compels its reader to accept its explanation of how a frustrated, conflicted young middle-class leftist might end up committing senseless and self-aggrandizing acts of violence.

To give a rough outline of the plot: *The Good Terrorist* opens with the protagonist, Alice Mellings, and her friend, Jasper Willis, looking around a squatted house at 43 Old Mill Road, somewhere around London, during Margaret Thatcher's premiership. Alice is the daughter of divorced Dorothy and Cedric (the owner of a press and stationers shop), both left-wingers. Jasper and Alice are among the co-founders of the Communist Centre Union, a party with some thirty members in London and another dozen or so in other cities. Although devoted to the organization's functioning, Alice is largely indifferent to, or ignorant of, its sectarian philosophical particulars. Alice and Jasper's relationship is both intense and distant, with Alice tending to him

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[180] Nicholas Shrimpton, "Revolting daughters: Review of 'The Good Terrorist' by Doris Lessing." *Sunday Times*. 15 September 1985.

like an older sister, and Jasper disappearing for stretches of time, having anonymous gay sex and possibly doing drugs. Bert Barnes and his girlfriend, Pat, are also CCU members moving into 43, where Jim Mackenzie (part-Trinidadian) has been squatting for some time.[181] Faye, who is mentally unstable and suicidal, and her lover, Roberta, also move in, but are less central to the CCU's work. Bert, Jasper, and Alice commit to affiliating with the Irish Republican Army, and offering some of the CCU's resources to advancing the IRA's cause in England on a clandestine basis.

Both 43 and 45 next door are slated for demolition, and the local Council has attempted to make the house uninhabitable: cementing over the water connection, damaging appliances, filling the toilets with cement, ripping out wiring, and so on. Under Jim's occupation, 43 has fallen into disrepair, and is filled with garbage inside and out; one room is set aside to store buckets of human waste. Alice sets herself the tasks of getting official permission from the Council to occupy the house, reconnecting its utilities, repairing and cleaning it, establishing friendly relations with the neighbors, and organizing the new commune's budgeting and food.[182] In each of these tasks, Alice

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[181] Jim's initial name for 43 is "Liberty Hall." Liberty Hall in Dublin (now the headquarters of the Services, Industrial, Professional, and Technical Union) was originally a hotel, and later served as James Connolly's residence, a munitions factory prior to the Easter Rising of 1916, and headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union and the Irish Citizen Army. Jim's name for 43 only explicitly refers to his desire that the house be a (largely apolitical) squat.

[182] Incidentally, both Alice Mellings and George Orwell share a similar dismay at poor people spending their money on white bread, when brown bread would be better:

> The basis of their diet, therefore, is white bread and margarine, corned beef, sugared tea and potatoes—an appalling diet. Would it not be better if they spent more money on wholesome things like oranges and wholemeal bread or if they even, like the writer of the letter to the *New Statesman*, saved on fuel and ate their carrots raw? Yes, it would, but the point is that no ordinary human being is ever going to do such a thing. The ordinary human being would sooner starve than live on brown bread and raw carrots.

is experienced and savvy, while the others attend demonstrations and meetings and resent her bourgeois domestic sensibility. In making repairs, she enlists the help of Philip, a slightly built laborer in desperate need of work. Alice steals from both her parents (further alienating herself from them), as each of her goals requires more money than the commune has. (Her theft from Cedric gets blamed on Jim, whom Alice enjoined her father to hire. In a parallel subplot, she sends a local, destitute single mother to Dorothy's house for help, forgetting that Dorothy has put the house up for sale.) One of the Council workers Alice persuades to help, Mary Williams, moves into 43 with her husband, Reggie, while he looks for work. Having been in The Militant Tendency of the Labour Party, they left out of discomfort with its "methods" and are now more attracted to Greenpeace; they never involve themselves in the CCU or in commune business. Their respectable, middle-class aspirations are transparent to Alice, as they accumulate furniture with the money they save, and move out as soon as they can. The house hosts a conference of the CCU.

Bert and Jasper go to Ireland to offer their services to the IRA, and then to the Soviet Union to offer the CCU's aid to the KGB; they are rebuffed both times. In the meantime, Alice has become intrigued with the activities next door in 45. She becomes enamored of a more polished and reasonable activist there, "Andrew Connors," a Russian spy, who tries to recruit Alice. After the residents of 45 leave, 43 becomes the new contact point for secret shipments of arms; Alice resents this interpellation of 43

And the peculiar evil is this, that the less money you have, the less inclined you feel to spend it on wholesome food.

Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, 91.

into Soviet plots, and the tenants of 43 reconsider their rejections by the IRA and KGB as a sign of their own uniquely English freedom. They begin to plot acts of terrorism, and experiment with bomb-making before settling on a first major target.

Alice has a series of increasing tense and hostile encounters with her parents, and remembers her own sense of alienation from them as a child, when she would have to give up her bed to host their guests. When she visits her mother in her new, shabby flat, Dorothy faults her and Jasper for her own poverty, among other recriminations. Alice also remembers an argument that Dorothy and her friend, Zoë Devlin had, about politics and open-mindedness. Philip dies from traumatic workplace injuries.

On the appointed day of the bombing, when the car is about to arrive in position in front of the Kubla Khan hotel, Alice telephones for emergency help, and credits the bombing to the IRA. Faye locks herself in the car at the last possible moment, killing herself; others from 43 are injured, and passersby are killed. The IRA denies involvement with the bombing, and residents of 43 are disappointed in the lackluster media attention. Alice looks forward to talking with a replacement for "Andrew Connors," "Peter Cecil," another Soviet spy looking to recruit her. In the novel's final pages, Alice's grasp on present reality loosens, and she thinks of herself as a young, innocent child.

The novel deals in a good number of stereotypes: the rag-tag, pious splinter Communist party; the spoiled, wayward children of leftist parents; self-involved and ineffectual political demonstrations; activists who revel in confrontation with the police; man-hating lesbians; middle class leftists' clumsy affectations of working-class accents; the psychological (and distinctly sexual) conflicts of commune life; young

radicals growing into tepid Labour Party supporters; chillingly methodical Russian spies; and even the sad, codependent dyad of the forlornly single woman and her reckless gay best friend.

Yet for all her involvement with many of these stereotypes, Alice herself is not reducible to one. In fact, she is most often the one to predict the fates of, or conjecture about the inner lives of, other stereotyped characters, rather like Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Furthermore, she is the novel's most prominent bearer of affirmed values (domesticity, sympathy, generosity, industry), and she therefore has the furthest to fall, ethically and existentially. (So, too, does Winston Smith, as the possessor of a historical sense and a desire for humane decency.) Inasmuch as she embodies, in a conflicted and underdeveloped way, the "commonsense bourgeois values" praised by the *Sunday Times* above, her descent into issueless terrorism cannot be accounted for in terms of the novel's lampooning of the other terrorists' flaws and hypocrisies. Although the novel seems to go out of its way to make her attachment to Jasper baffling and exasperating, and even with her eerie willingness to submit to Andrew Connors and Peter Cecil, Alice models the thoughtful distance and reflection that many of the social and institutional situations in the novel demand. *The Good Terrorist* may be a satirical warning, but Alice is not the satirized figure, and the novels' target reader seems neither a full-fledged Marxist nor a bourgeois conservative. Rather, if Alice's experience is to be instructive, it must be for the benefit of a reader who thinks of himself as smarter than both Marxists and conservatives, and more morally sound than Alice.

Yet it may be be profitable to suspend reading the novel as a satire or bleak warning, and instead view it as account of a particular political arrangement—an arrangement that wastes and thwarts meaningful political action. We might summarize this situation as one in which the social base that would be the agent of social transformation (be it revolution or perfection of the welfare state) has gone missing (the industrial proletariat) or has begun a seemingly terminal decline (the trade unions). In very loose terms, we might think of left politics in Britain between, say, the 1910s and the 1970s as defined by a varied set of utopian visions generalized as "socialism." These visions entail both impersonal forms of intellectual persuasion as the basis of political alignment and a set of (again, quite various) changes in personal lifestyles, relationships, and comportments (Orwell's famous bugbear, vegetarianism; free love; the relinquishing of upper-class privilege). The relationship between these two modes of socialist vision was always, as we have seen with Orwell, complex and problematic, but usually with a more-or-less agreed-upon end in sight. The revolutionary socialist and communist movement functions, through the 1950s, was a wellspring of activist energy out of all proportion to its size and often far-reaching in its effects.

By the time of the 1980s, however, the terms of political interest have changed. The word "socialism" appears only once in *The Good Terrorist*: the aborted second point on the CCU's Conference agenda is "The future of Britain: full socialism" (225). The word "socialist" appears a handful of times, usually referring to other socialist parties, the successes and strengths of which the CCU aims, and fails, to synthesize. We could think of *The Good* Terrorist as a *post-socialist* novel, where this would refer to the end

of the postwar social democratic, welfare-state consensus, which is replaced by New

Right (and neoliberal) conceptions of markets in themselves constituting fairness. By

the time of Alice's political radicalization, *socialism* belongs to the left of the past.

Thatcherism's biggest accomplishment was to make that social base seem to

disappear: cripple the unions, advance home ownership and shareholding; reject the

social pact and the basic assumptions of the welfare state; liquidate state assets; extol

the virtues of individualism, consumption, and self-interest. It is in this context that

The Good Terrorist situates sectarian Communism, squatting, communes, and

terrorism—the frustrated, unfocused rage of a left without a public. (The obverse

approach is, of course, a more mainstream but ineffectual Labourism, represented by

Mary and Reggie.) With the evaporating possibility of a mass socialist movement, the

politics of personal authenticity on the parts of the left that Lessing describes only

intensify, distorting political visions into personal vanities and recriminations. The

consistent, conscious use of "fascist" as an epithet for anyone not in agreement is a

telling sign of this distortion.[183] ("Capitalist" and "capitalism" occur a total of four times

in the novel, compared to "fascist" and "fascism," thirty-seven times; "imperialist" and

"imperialism," six.) Rather than assess one's own political position and its merit on the

basis of the ideal society that one envisions, revolutionary credibility is now measured

by one's distance from a mainstream, bourgeois set of cultural norms. The dynamic

between one's analytical alignment with a political cause and one's personal life

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[183] In her last argument with her mother, Alice snuffled and sniffled, and then said, "I am sorry I called you a fascist."

"Wha—a—at?" Dorothy seemed incredulous. "A fascist, did you? Well, well. And what about all the other things. A fascist. Who cares about your naughty little swearwords." Ibid., 332.

becomes both more fetishized and less productive, as the ascetic demands of revolutionary activity become prized in and of themselves. It is this personal turn that generates the politicized friction about Alice's domesticity—*friction* precisely in the sense of wasted energy that thwarts movement.

But it is Alice's way of perceiving and intervening in the affairs of 43 that form the novel's most compelling material, as it probes the relationship between her sympathy and her political self-image. It may be surprising, given the *Sunday Times* review cited above, to discover that Alice has political insights. It is nevertheless the case that she is able to connect present suffering under capitalism to an imagined alternative to come—which no other character is seen or heard to do. A powerful example of this vision relates to the character with whom Alice does the most real work, Philip:

> Suddenly Alice knew. All of it was perfectly clear, like a graph. It was not a question of Philip's having "lost hold." He had never grasped hold. Something had not happened that should have happened: a teacher, or someone, should have said: This one, Philip Fowler, he must be a craftsman, do something small, and delicate and intricate; we must get him trained for that. Look how perfectly he does things! He can't fold a shirt or arrange some chips and a piece of fish on a plate without making a picture of it. It had not happened. And Philip began to work for a building firm, like everyone who hasn't a training. A painter in a building firm, losing one job after another until he said: I'll start my own business. The relentlessness of it. The fucking shitty awfulness of it...[184]

Able to connect a weakness of the social system, Philip's workplace injuries, and the waste of his potential ("from each according to his ability"), Alice provides the novel with one of its rare, thoughtful insights about a character's socially determined fate.

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[184] Lessing, *The Good Terrorist*, 280–281.

There is also, especially in the urgent concern of Alice, a parallel to the Schlegel sisters' interest in Leonard Bast in E.M. Forster's *Howards End*. Philip never "grasped hold," while the Schlegel sisters, in Leonard's mind, had "their hands on all the ropes of life."[185] Both Phillip and Leonard demonstrate the chilling and violent exclusion inherent in their society; both have their talents underdeveloped and wasted by economic contingency; both are killed by forms of social domination, while an exceptional house of utopian aspirations remains; both are mourned by single but maternal women. Leonard Bast reads John Ruskin in his shabby flat; Philip is an artisan ill-suited to the heavy renovation and repair work he can find.

In a somewhat more disturbing mode, Alice connects the possibility of a future without people like Faye with her own absorption into a clandestine cadre:

> Lying awake, listening to Faye's distress, her misery, Alice thought as usual that one day soon there would be *no people like* Faye. Because of people like Alice. Even Muriel. *No more people damaged by life*. She thought, too—steadily, letting her mind open out into one perspective after another—of the implications of what she had learned since she had come here. She simply hadn't had any idea before! All over the country were these people—networks, to use Comrade Andrew's word. *Kindly, skilled people watched, and waited, judging* when people (like herself, like Pat) were ripe, could be really useful. Unsuspected by the petits bourgeois who were in the thrall of the mental superstructure of fascist–imperialistic Britain, the poor slaves of propaganda, were these watchers, the observers, the people who held all the strings in their hands. In factories, in big industries (where Comrade Andrew wanted her, Alice, to work); in the Civil Service (that was just the place for Comrade Muriel!); in the BBC, in the big newspapers—everywhere, in fact, was this network, and even in little unimportant places like these two houses, numbers 43 and 45, just ordinary squats and communes. *Nothing* was too small to be overlooked, *everyone* with *any* sort of potential was

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[185] E.M. Forster, *Howards End* 1910. Ed. Douglas Mao (New York: Pearson, 2010), 107.

noticed, observed, *treasured*... It gave her a safe, *comfortable* feeling. (250—251, emphases added)

This is a moment of high utopianism. Alice imagines a future in which forms of suffering have been eradicated, in which people's talents are expertly administered and cultivated, and which has been brought about by a private, esoteric caste of discerning people.[186] These thoughts thus belong to an earlier moment of socialist thought, far too oriented towards comfort and stasis for the revolutionaries of 43. But perhaps more symptomatic of the times here is the fact that what she is envisioning is not an overturning of capitalist social relations, or really, an end to imperialism. Rather, the dominant mood here is a longing for a robust, maybe even corporatist, welfare state, with its emphasis on technocratic management of labor and talent, its promise of apprenticeship leading to full employment, its infrastructural ubiquity throughout the nation, and its feeling of safety and reliability.

But, of course, there are other tendencies on display here as well. For example, "no people like Faye" and "no more people damaged by life" are not exactly equivalent. The former hints—in what is surely supposed to be a disturbing moment for the reader—at the elimination of types of people, or the elimination of whatever aspects of

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[186] In one of the uglier moments of Alice's transformation, after the hotel bombing, this utopianism shifts into self-aggrandizement:

> She really did feel very peculiar, not herself at all! Well, that was only natural. She needed to go for a good long walk, or perhaps drop over for a little chat with Joan Robbins? No, there'd only be a lot of silly talk about the IRA and the bombing. Ordinary people simply didn't understand, and it was no good expecting them to... Here the tenderness that had been washing around the place, inside and outside her, not knowing where it belonged, fastened itself on these ordinary people, and Alice sat with tears in her eyes, thinking, "Poor things, poor things, they simply don't understand!"—as if she had her arms around all the poor silly ordinary people in the world. (371)

people fall under the heading of "like." One needn't push this line of thought to its most

chilling and hypocritical conclusion—eugenics—to sense that there's something in

Alice's reverie here that Lessing wants us to find unlovely. Further,parallels between the

network of watchers and the Brotherhood in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are easily discerned:

again we have a covert web of dissidents, reaching all levels of society, working

diligently, waiting for a sign. But whereas the Brotherhood promised suffering on

behalf of the cause, the network Alice imagines offers material security and comfort,

consisting as it does of a set of people she doesn't know but who have been well-placed.

Her utopianism and her domesticity, it would seem, are part of the same longing

for order, completion, and integrity. Where Jasper's influence in Alice's life is chaotic

and taxing, her work on the house with Philip yields hope and satisfaction. They share a

hatred for a political system, which ruins habitable houses for profit:

> Bitterness was on his face; the same incredulous rage she felt. They stood
> together, feeling they could destroy with their bare hands those men who
> had done this. Men like the dustmen, thought Alice steadily, making
> herself think it. Nice men. They did it. But when we have abolished
> fascist imperialism, there won't be people like that. At this thought
> appeared a mental picture of her mother, who, when Alice said things of
> this kind, sighed, laughed, looked exhausted. Only last week she had
> said, in her new mode, bitter and brief and flat, "Against stupidity the
> gods themselves." "What's that?" Alice had asked. "Against—stupidity—
> the gods—themselves—contend—in vain,"[187] her mother had said,
> isolating the words, presenting them to Alice, not as if she had expected
> anything from Alice, but reminding herself of the uselessness of it all.
> The bitterness Alice felt against the Council, the workmen, the
> Establishment now encompassed her mother, and she was assaulted by a
> black rage that made her giddy, and clenched her hands. Coming to
> herself, she saw Philip looking at her, curious. Because of this state of
> hers which he was judging as more violent than the vandalising

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[187] From Friedrich Schiller's tragedy, *The Maid of Orleans*, 1801.

> workmen deserved? She said, "I could kill them." She heard her voice,
> deadly. She was surprised by it. She felt her hands hurting, and
> unclenched them. (53—54)

This is not only a crucial portending of "the murderess in Alice," but a moment in which several key elements of the novel come together with vivid concision: longing for a utopian future; domesticity; the state; the working class (its perverse self-injury in pillaging the house, as well as Alice's uneasy distance from actual laborers); her mother Dorothy's invocation of the persistent futility of utopian thought (another echo of "Jack Orkney"); Alice's contempt for her mother; and her mother's pivotal status as a voice of conservative pessimism.

Yet we might pause to ask whether Dorothy's mockery really applies here. Surely, Jasper and Alice's action—rehabilitating the house—is neither as grandiose nor as impossible at contending against stupidity. Furthermore, Alice's radicalism coheres around individuals and individual experiences, and around local, tangible injustices— in contrast to, say, Bert and Jasper's fixation on imperialist geopolitics and ideological rigor. (The question of whether or not this focus is intended to show a difference in the ways that men and women conceive of political action seems unanswerable in *The Good Terrorist*; it is more germane to *The Golden Notebook*.)

The house at 43 Old Mill Road is not the only example of the injustice Alice sees in the built environment. When scouting out places for the first experimental bomb, Alice remarks to herself on the "absolutely shitty" site she selects in "a passion of loathing" (296—297):

> The pavements, built so that two people could pass each other, were
> narrow, and in two of these little streets, at right angles to each other, the
> pavement had been widened on one side, thus further narrowing the

streets by about a yard. This piece of official brilliance was dazzling
enough, but in addition, to make it all totally incomprehensible to the
ordinary mind, having gained this extra yard or so of pavement for the
comfort and satisfaction of the citizens, the Council had then stuck all
along the reclaimed edge of pavement cement stanchions or bollards of a
peculiarly ugly grey—brown, about a yard tall, and round, like teeth.
These hideous and pointless and obstructive objects, twenty or so
around each corner at either end of the afflicted street, which Alice
passed whenever she went to the Underground, provoked in her the all—
too—familiar helpless rage, useless, violent, and unappeasable. She
would stand there, examining this scene as she had done when seeing
how the Council workmen had filled in lavatories with cement, smashed
pipes, vandalised whole houses, saying to herself, People did this. First,
in some office, they thought it up, and then they made a plan, and then
they instructed workmen to do this, and then workmen did it. It was all
incomprehensible. It was frightening, like some kind of invincible
stupidity made evident and visible. Like modern university buildings.
(297)

In a moment like this, the novel is almost invoking an older socialist line of thought,

reaching back to William Morris in the nineteenth century and continuing though

several currents of (variously) socialist, progressive, reformist, and utopian visions of a

socially just built environment. Furthermore, Alice's sense of outrage is complemented

by, if not predicated upon, an eye for aesthetic form and detail—again, the kind of

interest in comfort and repose about which the ethos of the CCU is so

uncomprehending.

It is also in this moment that we can see the public potential of Alice's domestic

sensibility. The connection of her outrage about the blocked toilets to her outrage about

the bollards entails a connection of the outrage on behalf of people she knows to

outrage on behalf of innumerable people she doesn't know. But unlike, say, Irish

Republicans, in whose name they CCU tries to speciously to operate, the people on the

street are *visible* and *known to* Alice, even if she does not always see and *know* them. There can be little doubt that Alice is a "good" terrorist for focusing on this demographic and spatial middle distance, between the communal home and the colony. The city—indeed just so much of it as one can take in with a single view—is both where Alice's politics *could* find their highest purpose and the natural site of terrorism. In this sense, urban terrorism as a mode of political violence is contrasted to the domestic space, on the one hand, and the conduct of imperial aggression on whole populations abroad, on the other hand.

Alice's versatile capacities for sympathy, observation, and distance not only provide the novel with its most powerful critiques of the sectarian left but are also the very qualities that make her an attractive spy recruit, provided her sympathy can be reined in and focused on the larger historical cause. In other words, *The Good Terrorist* shows how the character the reader is invited to identify with has been corrupted by apposite emotional traumas and abandonments (alienation from her parents, loss of her childhood home, unreciprocated love for Jasper); she cries innumerable times, almost a caricature of a well-intentioned Victorian "angel in the house." Alice's involvement with terrorism—for it seems wrong to speak of *Alice's terrorism*—is possible, it would seem, for *anyone* with her sympathetic and analytical powers, given a similar psychological fragility.

Alice's complicity with terrorist bombing, we should note, is not the result of ideological fervor, cynicism, or personal enchantment with the other terrorists. Rather, her growing complicity is correlated with an attenuation of her alertness and short-term memory, and with the firm rebuke of a parent—much like Jack Orkney's

disillusion with socialism. The novel's vivid, digressive, retrospective scenes of Alice's

youth occur while she is unaware of her surroundings, even standing in the middle of

traffic, arrested by her own remembering. Whereas Orkney feels remote and old at the

end, Alice feels like an impressionable, wayward nine-year old girl at the novel's close;

both are enfeebled.

> She could not remember a point where she had said, "I am a terrorist, I
> don't mind being killed." (Here she was again impelled to get up from her
> chair, in a trapped panic movement, but again sat down.) I was all the
> time waiting for something to start—she thought; and on her face came
> a small, scared, incredulous smile at the inappropriateness of it. Had she
> not believed that the bombing was serious, then? No, not really; she had
> gone along with it, while feeling it was not right—and behind that was
> the thought that serious work (whatever that might turn out to be)
> would come later. Well, what would they think about the bombing?
> (Meaning, the Russians.) There was no need to ask what Andrew would
> say. Or Gordon [another Russian spy she encounters]. She could
> imagine, only too vividly, their condemning faces. (371—372)

Both quietist political maturity (Orkney) and psychological deformation into terrorism

(Alice), Lessing asserts, are essentially private, personal experiences; they do not arise

out of, nor do they have any meaningful purchase on, the public domain of political

action.

Yet Lessing's account of the personal experience of political positions cannot be

easily generalized, nor can it plausibly interpellate its readers into its judgment. *The

Good Terrorist*, "The Temptation of Jack Orkney," and even *The Grass is Singing* each

resolve a conflict or contradiction in the protagonist's social views through the

disordering of the protagonist's mind. On the one hand, these works are *aimed at*

thoughtful, politically-aware people, encouraging them to ask similar questions about

how their relationships affect their politics and vice versa. On the other hand, however,

the peculiarities of the protagonists' mental states makes them exceptional and

diagnosable. As Lessing herself says:

> There is one thing that surprises me about *The Good Terrorist*. It is how people see Alice. The girl is of course quite mad. This confirms what I have said so often in this context: if a mad person is in a political setting, or a religious one, a lot of people won't even notice he or she is mad. A theme for our times, indeed.[188]

As a summary of what we are to derive from Alice's experience, this is inadequate. Lessing is often cagey and crafty about giving accounts of her own work's political purchase, more eager to point out where critics are mistaken than where we might find a touchstone for her work's own truth-claims. In a sense, *The Good Terrorist* is resolutely concerned with the vagaries of leftist radicalism and terrorism; in another sense, its depiction of the madness of the "good" terrorist is independent of either political project. The topical split in the book—between the problems of the far left in Britain and the psychological experience of personal betrayal sublimated into violence—is patent. Like Anna Wulf of *The Golden Notebook,* Alice could be compared with the protagonist of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus: Mersault is not an existentialist model, but his narrative reveals existentialism's worth; Alice does not have a typical experience of the psychological dimension of radical politics, but her narrative sets the stage for us to recognize how, in a historical moment in which leftist projects of mass public engagement have run out of steam, someone like Alice could emerge.

In the absence of a viable left populism, and in the face of increasingly ridiculous attempts at vanguardism, the most substantive site of political thought

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[188] Doris Lessing, "The Languages We Use," afterward to Lessing, *The Good Terrorist*, 13.

would seem to be argument itself, between individuals, in private. Over a series of

conversations in *The Good Terrorist*, we see arguments seem to reach a stalemate,

defined by the irreducible existential density of another person's experience—and yet

this irreducible density paradoxically reveals the value of argument. The first major

instance of this appears in Alice's encounter with Andrew Connors. Up to this point,

Andrew is the only character to have a favorable impression of Alice's political potential;

he is also the only character with whom she experiences sexual attraction and attention.

Significantly, he represents possibilities of political involvement (long-term spying and

sabotage for the KGB) that exceed the dreary squalor of house 43. Alice notes the

refinement of Andrew's manners, and his eschewing of the self-impoverishing, ascetic

fetishes of the CCU's leadership.[189]

> But she said, after a while, in a pause that was there for her to fill, "I can't,
> Andrew." And suddenly, arising from her depths, "A bourgeois life? You
> want me to live a middle-class life?" And she sat there laughing at him—
> sneering, in fact—all alive with the energy of scorn, of contempt. He sat
> facing her, no longer tired now, or stale with sleep, watching her closely.
> He smiled gently. "Comrade Alice, there is nothing wrong with a
> comfortable life—it depends on what the aim is. You wouldn't be living
> like that because of comfort, because of security"—he seemed to be
> making an effort to despise these words as much as she did—"but
> because of your aim. Our aim." They stared at each other. Across a gulf.
> Not of ideology, but of temperament, of experience. She knew, from how
> he had said, "there is nothing wrong with a comfortable life," that he felt
> none of the revulsion she did. On the contrary, he would like such a life.

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[189] Andrew is undoubtedly a similar figure to Wilhelm Rodde in *The Golden Notebook:*

> That was Wilhelm Rodde, the professional revolutionary who later (after failing to get
> good well—paid job in a London firm he had counted on) went to East Germany
> (remarking with his usual frankness: I'm told they are living very well there, with cars
> and chauffeurs) and became an official with a good deal of power. And I am sure he is an
> extremely efficient official. I am sure he is humane, when it is possible. (71)

Just as Anna resents the sexlessness of her relationship with Willi, so Alice desires Andrew.

> She knew this about him; how? She did not know how she knew what she did about people. She just did. This man would blow up a city without five seconds' compunction—and she did not criticise him for that—but he would insist on good whisky, eat in good restaurants, like to travel first-class. He was working-class by origin, she thought; it had come hard to him. That was why. It was not for her to criticise him. (166-167)

This moment is remarkable for several reasons: it is a rare moment in which Alice is able to change her mind about her condemnation of another person's political shortcomings (she comes to a less definite acceptance of Mary and Reggie's middle—class aspirations); it is a moment in which Andrew validates Alice's domestic efforts at 43 while also suggesting that she has better things to do; it is a moment when Alice appreciates the distinction between, rather than unity of, lifestyle and politics; and most of all, it is a moment when she recognizes the inarguable, incontestable weight of personal experience in judgments of political integrity. To be fair, it may be that I am too recuperative, too approving of this scene. Andrew is after all a ruthless Russian spy and something of a chauvinist (he cannot comprehend lesbianism), and the novel certainly does not salute the professional polish of Soviet espionage; it instead gives characters air-time to dismiss the USSR as a failed state. It must be said too that what Alice recognizes in Andrew is something of herself, a desire—persistent and potent no matter how strongly disavowed—for bourgeois comforts. It is therefore no surprise that, in the deprivation of these comforts, or in a sphere in which her attachment to these comforts cannot be recognized, Anna's personality is put under considerable stress.

Her involvement with the bombing is riddled with mental fatigue and attenuation, and her final arguments with her mother are emotionally devastating and unforgiving. But as the novel goes on, Alice's memories of her mother's and Zoë's

arguments are quite clear and distinct, and the novel would seem to invite us to

consider them as having more explanatory power than Alice realizes. Dorothy and Zoë,

longtime friends with a shared history of left activism, have become estranged, as

Dorothy has come to doubt the interpretive fixity and single-mindedness of the British

leftist milieu. Dorothy has also grown weary of leftist's self-righteousness, tone-

deafness, and facile deployment of political labels as insults.

> "Strange as it might seem, the idea had occurred to me. You know, that psychotherapy of yours has made you very dim-witted, Zoë. You come out with something absolutely obvious as if it's some revelation."
>
> Zoë stood vibrating with anger. But she was not going to let her voice rise, either. "If it's so obvious, then why do you go on doing it?"
>
> "There might be different ways of looking at it? Can you conceive there might be different ways of looking at a thing? I doubt it, the way you are… Can't even meet someone who reads a different newspaper… Listen. My life has to change. Right? Strange as it might seem, I had taken all that into account, what you said. But I am doing a stock-taking—do you understand? I am *thinking*—do you see? I'm *thinking* about my life. That means I am examining a lot of things."
>
> Dorothy and Zoë stood opposite each other, standing straight, like soldiers told to stand at ease, or a couple about to start the steps of an intricate dance.
>
> "And all you can see about me," said Zoë, "is that we've got nothing in common. Is that all? Twenty years of being friends."
>
> "What have we got in common now? We've been cooking meals and talking about our bloody children and discussing cholesterol and the body beautiful, and going on demonstrations."
>
> "I haven't noticed you going on any recently."
>
> "No, not since I understood that demos and all that are just for fun."
>
> "For fun, are they?"
>
> "Yes, that's right. People go on demos because they get a kick out of it. Like picnics."
>
> "You can't be serious, Dorothy."

> "Of course I'm serious. No one bothers to ask any longer if it achieves anything, going on marches or demos. They talk about how they feel. That's what they care about. It's for kicks. It's for fun."
> "Dorothy, that's simply perverse."
> "Why is it perverse if it's true? You've just got to use your eyes and look—people picketing, or marching or demonstrating, they are having a marvellous time. And if they are beaten up by the police, so much the better."
> A silence. Zoë was staring at Dorothy, bewildered. She really could not believe Dorothy meant it. As for Alice, who was standing there transfixed with flowers in her hands, staring at the two, and praying inwardly, "Oh, don't, don't, please don't, please, please stop," her mother had gone over the edge into destructiveness, and there was no point in even listening to her. Better take no notice.[190]

Internal to Dorothy's remarks are two pivotal ideas that explain the absurdity of the CCU's terrorism: the muddle/fuck up, and the self-indulgent thrill of confrontation with state power. To be sure, both ideas are well-established faults on the far left. The former undercuts utopian ambition; the latter calls the bluff of mediatized, spectacle-based demonstration. We can also notice that Dorothy accounts for her stalemate with Zoë in liberal terms: "different ways of looking at a thing," "stock-taking," "examining." To be sure, this late-life reflective turn only seems to result in withdrawing from society and being particularly nasty to Zoë and Alice. And it may be added that the maneuver of accusing one's interlocutor of being insufficiently reflective and tolerant of disagreement can be a way of stopping argument rather than refining it. Dorothy's fatigue is, then, the dominant note these scenes end on: "I haven't the energy for all these rows and little scenes." It is not so much that Dorothy has changed her politics as

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[190] Ibid., 338–340.

that she has redefined her experience of it, given the deadness of socialism in

Thatcherite Britain.

Yet these arguments are not the only revealing instances of political speech in

The Good Terrorist. In closing, we might note that the novel suggests in another

instance how in the right moment, in the right context, political speech can have

significant effects. Most of the leftist jargon in the novel is either ironized or merely

obtuse. However, at the CCU Congress, Jasper—hardly a privileged character—

demonstrates the enduring power of socialist rhetoric:

> His style was to use the familiar phrases of the socialist lexicon, but as
> though he had only just that moment discovered them, so that when he
> began, there was often a moment when people showed a tendency to
> laugh. This stopped at once, because of his desperate, even ecstatic
> seriousness. "Comrades! Welcome to you all, comrades. This is for all of
> us a historic moment. There are very few of us in this room today, but we
> are a chosen few—chosen by the time we live in, chosen by history
> itself!—and there is nothing we cannot achieve if we set ourselves to do
> it." Here, if Bert or anyone else had been speaking, there would have
> been applause. There was a tense silence. The truth was, the comrades
> had not expected this note of high seriousness; or, at least, not so early in
> the proceedings. [...] This thing that often happened when Jasper began
> to speak—a nervousness, even a tendency to titter, or perhaps to interject
> the odd deflating sardonic remark—was because his style was not the
> common—or—garden British style, a bit homespun, humorous by
> preference, down to earth. And, of course, Alice in the usual way would
> be the first to admire this Britishness. It was ours! National
> characteristics were precious. But Jasper was a special case. He had to
> impose his own exaltation on them from the start; and today there were
> no titterers instantly suppressed by others who were on a worthier,
> higher level. The strained expressions she saw were not because of
> criticism, far from it; rather, they did not trust themselves to believe
> some beautiful message or gift that was being offered to them by Jasper,
> did not feel themselves to be worthy. She had learned long ago that when
> Jasper spoke people did not clap or shout approval. They remained
> absolutely silent—after the tricky first few moments, that is; and when

he had finished speaking, there would be a silence lasting perhaps as long as fifteen seconds, more. Then there would be applause, sudden, fervent, even violent; people would stand up and shout and cheer. The applause would go on like this, and then suddenly stop (223)

The fresh spontaneity and "high seriousness" of socialist rhetoric retains, even in the doldrums of Thatcherite Britain, something of its power, even as people take ironic distance from it. But here, the appreciation for Jasper's rhetoric is not even ironic. Instead, his auditors have been startled into a more deliberative mindset. The use of "high seriousness"—an allusion to Matthew Arnold's "The Study of Poetry"—connects Jasper's speech to a much older set of cultural aspirations while at the same time elevating his speech to the level of art. It does not seem tenable to suggest that the novel would have us either discount this moment or sentimentalize it. Rather, this rare high point in the novel's exposition of political ideals shows that the rhetorical occasion of political speech—like the psychological experience of political commitment—can be inestimably powerful in determining the course of political action. Jasper's minor moment of public ethos is not reducible to human folly or the plight of the human psyche in the throes of political radicalism; it is instead a moment of mastery.

Lessing's political ends

Lessing's narratives of the exhaustion of political activism offer a compelling alternative to certain received notions about the opposition between between literature's privileging of, and privileged access to, private life, on the one hand, and the vulgarity of civic or political engagement, on the other. The psychological unravelling of Lessing's protagonists—occasioned by the dissipation or deformation of their political

work—is Lessing's offering to readers of a kind of object lesson. The psychic demise of Anna Wulf or Alice Mellings demonstrates for readers how a character's personal tragedy and the ups and downs of political engagement can move independently of each other, with different temporalities, narrative styles, moral/ethical orientations, and cognitive frameworks. To put it crudely, the *theme* of these works may seem to be something like: "individual psychology and the exhaustion of one's own mental energy makes political engagement impossible or unhealthy to sustain." But these novels' formal properties and larger character systems offer an intriguing revision of this assumed determinism. In *The Golden Notebook*, something like the *institutional life of political organizations* can retain some moral authority, without having to redeem, or even undo, individual experiences of crankiness and despair. In "The Temptation of Jack Orkney," even disillusion brings with it a desire for dialogue and deliberation. In *The Good Terrorist*, rhetoric, rather than a hermeneutics of personal authenticity, seems to offer a possible moment of genuine inspiration, wrested out of the morass of revolutionary anti-capitalist politics.

In a powerful assessment, Lynn Sukenick suggests that in Lessing's work, "intelligence is at the heart of liberation, and a fall from intelligence is, for her heroines, a cause for self-denigration."[191] But intelligence, in our understanding of these works, is

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[191] Sukenick and many others have pointed to the gendered divide of the faculties in Lessing's work: "Far better not to feel than not to think, since the fist not only keeps one out of the stultifying dependency and consequent humiliation but better matches the capacities of men as Lessing describes them." Lynn Sukenick, "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction" *Contemporary Literature* 14 (1974): 515–535, 524.

To be sure, the gendered divide in works like *The Good Terrorist* and *The Golden Notebook* is patent and unedifying. However, as I hope to have shown, the similarity of a figure like Jack Orkney,

not reducible to mere quantity and mastery of knowledge as such. Rather, intelligence refers to an ethos adopted in the course of political and private life. When this thinking, distance-taking ethos is compromised, characters lose their personal and political dignity. When entire movements lose their critical ethos, they lose their historical momentum, and instead are enfeebled by such characters' yearning for authenticity in political life.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

With *The Good Terrorist*, published in 1985, we see the decline of the ethos of ideology critique well underway, an accompaniment to the loss of appeal sustained by left politics during the Thatcher era. But it's also at about this time, notably, that personal expression supplanted critique, and insistence on existential depth displaced fighting for one's interests, as the signature moves of political sensibilities that saw themselves *as* left. To put this dramatic shift in perspective, we can recall George Orwell's injunction in *The Road to Wigan Pier* to "abolish a part of yourself" in order to bring about socialist revolution. For Orwell, personal expression (or Trilling's "authenticity") may have counted for a great deal in art and literature, but they were hindrances to be *overcome* in the course of left-wing political organizing. For Wyndham Lewis, a pivotal if also in specific ways marginal figure in Anglophone modernism, the working-class Communist became a persona through which he could consider the near-total interpellation of private mental life by political exigency. And for Doris Lessing. the interpellation appears to work in the opposite direction: private

whose principal conflicts are indeed with other men, shows that gender does not strictly determine the pitfalls of characters' failures at a proper political ethos.

mental life thwarts and hollows out political engagement, whether because of strained personal relationships, or psychosis.

We might note here that Lessing was also one of the last canonical writers to have passed through the heyday of Communist prominence and cultural achievement in the English-speaking world. This fact makes the circumstances of her Nobel Prize win in 2007 even more significant, for reasons that Lessing might have avowed one day, and vociferously denied the next. Her first reaction when being told the news by reporters—in a trademark performance of studied indifference and stagy world-weariness—was "Oh, Christ. [...] It's been going on now for thirty years; one can't get all excited." After some cajoling from the reporters, she went on to add, with greater humor, "What do you think I should say? Look, you tell me what you think I should say and I'll say it."[192] Although Lessing's more explicit reasons for being underwhelmed have to do with the length of her career, her numerous other prizes, and her less-than-reverent stance toward the Nobel itself, we might venture another, more diagnostic reason for the Nobel seeming so underwhelming to her.

As Sarah Brouillette has argued, the Nobel Prize in literature "plays a crucial role in circulating and universalizing liberal norms of originality, autonomy, and estranged, ambivalent contemplation."[193] The Nobel's terms of praise "are constitutive of the

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[192] "British author Doris Lessing reacts to Nobel win," YouTube video. October 12, 2007. https://youtu.be/vuBODHFBZ8k.

[193] Sarah Brouillette, "Literature is Liberalism," *Jacobin*, October 15, 2014, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/literature-is-liberalism/. Obviously, that both this piece and Amanda Anderson's article on "The Liberal Aesthetic" could bear such similar terms of description with such divergent political valences speaks to the unsettled status of *liberalism* itself as a political project and an aesthetic project which should command broad left assent.

standard liberal conception of the literary as an expression of the author's unique ability to perceive the world clearly and truthfully. There never appears to be a structuring field of power or relations into which the work itself is placed," as evinced by the Academy's oddly neutral praise for recipients like Orhan Pamuk and J.M. Coetzee.[194] According to Brouillette:

> The implication [of the prize's terms of approbation] is that art is able to comment on events in the world only to the extent that it can separate itself from those events. When the Nobel committee chooses a writer, they do not discuss his or her work as a manifestation of contradictory social or historical forces. They do not present it as a filtering and highlighting of particular social codes. Instead, they very clearly support the idealist image of the writer as a lone source and engine of creative innovations, as an expressive being whose authentic originality results in unique works of art.[195]

At least part of Lessing's wry cynicism, I would suggest, is that this "liberalizing" function has become, in fact, routine and self-perpetuating. We can also note how the Nobel Prize's strain of *authenticity*, to revisit Trilling's terms once again, here supplants sincerity in and about the public sphere.

In fact, this liberalizing function has irked all three of the writers in this study at several points in their work as social and cultural critics. And this process is detectable even in Lessing's own writing. In the 1960s and 1970s, one could plausibly say that the terrain of "committed literature" was quite full, such that Lessing's eccentric distance-taking could be especially compelling. But consider *The Good Terrorist*, issued under the ascendancy of Thatcherism and the incapacitation of the last vestiges of the British

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[194] Ibid.

[195] Ibid.

socialist movement—the National Union of Mineworkers, precisely whom Orwell was with when touring the mines in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Given *this* context, one could press Lessing on what exactly the political upshot of her novel about left political commitment *itself* is supposed to be. Her works demand that we ask such a question, while refusing to validate any particular answer.

Rather than trying to solve the conundrum of liberal–left debates about political commitment in art and literature, or to tally up this or that author's political credentials, this study has aimed to identify a very precise *kind* of literature about commitment itself—a kind that has turned to openly Communist figures with surprising regularity, far in excess of Communism's actual domestic political potency at any given time. The figure of the committed revolutionary (Orwell's middle-class socialist agitator, Lewis's hard-cast proletarian propagandist, Lessing's array of humbled and jaded activists), more than revolutionary ideas in themselves, have commanded literary attention in ways which are unique to the communist predicament in Anglo-American society: how to reconcile erudition and solidarity, how to develop an ethos of critique, how to turn ideology critique into a tool for organizing rather than an accessory to rumination. As the history of the twentieth-century political novel in English continues to be written, and especially as the pieties of the Cold War lose their command on our imaginations, what may emerge for us will be a steadier vision of Communism's mediating function. Rarely speaking *for themselves* in mainstream fiction, Communists are nevertheless often present—whether to be approximated, appropriated, diagnosed, or disowned.

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