

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

Public Intellectual Par Excellence

WHY ORWELL MATTERS.

By Christopher Hitchens.

Basic. 224 pp. \$24

Reviewed by Richard A. Posner

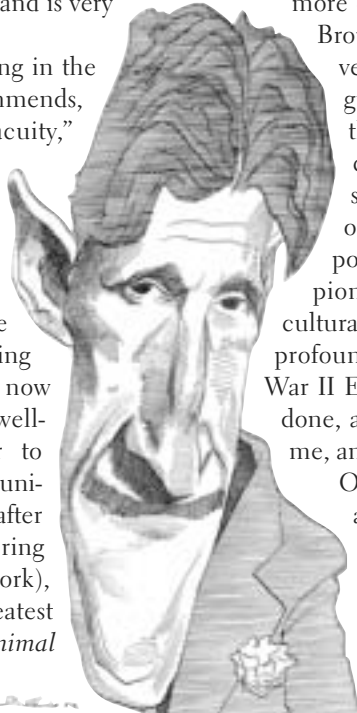
As an Orwell idolater, I was predisposed to like Christopher Hitchens's book, which though not uncritical is immensely admiring. Hitchens is well equipped to write an intelligent, sympathetic guide to and critique of George Orwell (1903–50), for he too is English, an intellectual but not a professor, and a maverick rather than a doctrinaire leftist. A short book, neither a biography nor a full-scale study of Orwell's work, *Why Orwell Matters* nevertheless covers a lot of ground and is very well written.

I don't agree with everything in the book, however. Hitchens commends, as an observation of "great acuity," Lionel Trilling's silly assertion that Orwell "is not a genius—what a relief! What an encouragement. For he communicates to us the sense that what he has done, any one of us could do." This patronizing dictum, so oft repeated and now endorsed by so fervent an Orwellian as Hitchens, bids fair to become canonical. Lacking a university education, dying at 46 after years of execrable health (during which he did his best work), Orwell wrote the greatest political satires since Swift, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); was a

brilliant literary critic; wrote some of the 20th century's best journalism and contemporary history, such as *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), and indeed is considered by some the founder of investigative journalism; was one of the most penetrating critics of Stalinism and the fellow-traveling Left, even though he never visited the Soviet Union; ranks among the greatest English prose stylists; invented a number of memorable phrases (such as "some animals are more equal than others" and "Big

Brother"); and wrote with great verve and insight about language (his essay "Politics and the English Language" is a classic), the intelligentsia, social class, and a variety of other subjects. His essays on popular culture made him a pioneer of what is now called cultural studies, and his early novels profoundly influenced post-World War II English fiction. What he has done, any one of us could do? Not me, and not Trilling either.

Orwell is patronized by academics because he was sensible; because he wrote simply, avoiding foreign, Latinate, and obscure words and complex sentence structure; because he said simple things that needed



saying; because he was a late bloomer (no Mozart, he); because he did not go to university but instead became a policeman for five years; and above all because he despised intellectuals and to a degree intellect itself (a typical jibe is “the more intelligent, the less sane”), and particularly *leftist* intellectuals, which most intellectuals are. His uncompromising hostility to communists and fellow travelers has made him a bone in the throat of the Left. Hitchens quotes astounding jabs at Orwell by well-known leftist intellectuals such as E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Edward Said—the last saying that Orwell observed politics from “inside bourgeois life . . . from the comforts of bookselling, marriage, friendship with other writers. . . . Orwell’s writing life was thus from the start an affirmation of unexamined bourgeois values.” (Orwell’s life *comfortable*?) Orwell’s insistence on plain speaking has particularly affronted the postmodernist Left—he was a foe of postmodernism before it existed.

Orwell’s plain style (not much discussed by Hitchens) is easily misunderstood as artless, contributing to the belief that he was not a genius. He did avoid long sentences and pretentious words, but he did not write in Basic English (Newspeak, the thought-destroying language adopted by the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is a satire on Basic English). Consider this passage quoted by Hitchens from a 1940 essay in which Orwell recalls a beating incident from his days as an imperial policeman in Burma: “That was nearly 20 years ago. Are things of this kind still happening in India? I should say that they probably are, but that they are happening less and less frequently. On the other hand it is tolerably certain that at this moment a German somewhere or other is kicking a Pole. It is quite certain that a German somewhere or other is kicking a Jew. And it is also certain (*vide* the German newspapers) that German farmers are being sentenced to terms of imprisonment for showing ‘culpable kindness’ to the Polish prisoners working for them.”

Not all the words in this passage are necessary to convey information, nor is the passage literal truth (“kicking” is being used figuratively, surely). After the first two sentences, the true “plain speaker” would have written: “Probably, but less and less frequently. But

Germans are unquestionably mistreating Poles and, even more, Jews, and the German newspapers acknowledge that German farmers are being sentenced to prison for showing ‘culpable kindness’ to the Polish prisoners working for them.” That would be prose as clear as a windowpane, Orwell’s stated aim—only it would not sound like him at all.

Hitchens misses Orwell’s slyness. He posed as a simple man, but he was both an artful writer and a sophisticated intellectual. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exaggerates the efficacy of brainwashing and considers television an instrument of oppression rather than of liberation; these are typical errors of intellectuals. Here and elsewhere, Hitchens misses some opportunities for valid criticism of Orwell, instead accusing him unjustifiably of a “thuggish episode” concerning W. H. Auden’s poem “Spain.” Written during the Spanish Civil War when Auden was a Communist, the poem at one point depicts a day in the life of a party member, including “the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder.” Orwell comments acidly: “Notice the phrase ‘necessary murder.’ It could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a word. . . . The Hitlers and Stalins find murder necessary, but they don’t advertise their callousness, and they don’t speak of it as murder; it is ‘liquidation,’ ‘elimination,’ or some other soothing phrase. Mr. Auden’s brand of amorality is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled. So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don’t even know that fire is hot.”

Hitchens deems this passage unfair because Auden’s “‘brand of amorality’ consisted in a sincere attempt to overcome essentially pacifist scruples,” and blames the unfairness on Orwell’s “unexamined and philistine prejudice against homosexuality.” He has not read the poem carefully. Auden is not talking about fighting. When soldiers kill in battle, it is not called “murder.” Auden can only be referring to political execution, which the Communists in Spain engaged in wholesale (Orwell narrowly escaped being one of the victims). Once this is understood, the offensive complacency of the poem

becomes apparent and justifies Orwell's criticism—which Auden, to his credit, accepted.

There is no hint that Auden's homosexuality had anything to do with this criticism, although it is true that Orwell used expressions such as the “pansy left” elsewhere in referring to Auden and Stephen Spender. Hitchens engages in the obligatory search for hints of homosexuality in Orwell himself (no prominent person is spared such a search nowadays), and, in a chapter on feminist critiques, concludes that Orwell thought women on average less intelligent than men. But that was a *virtue* in Orwell's eyes. We must be attentive to the special sense in which he used “intelligent” (remember “the more intelligent, the less sane”). Julia, the heroine of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is too practical minded, too sensible, to fall for the baloney dished out by the Party (“one has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that; no ordinary man could be such a fool,” is another of Orwell's aphorisms). Orwell also fiercely opposed abortion. In short, he was not politically correct. A man who died in 1950 did not subscribe to all the values that the likely readers of Hitchens's book happen to hold a half-century later. How shocking!

Hitchens dubs Orwell “one of the founders of the discipline of post-colonialism” (which makes Said's criticisms seem particularly churlish). I knew that Orwell was critical of imperialism, but the deep and insightful character of his criticisms was not apparent until I read Hitchens's skillful assemblage of quotations from Orwell's scattered writings on the subject. And this helps explain a puzzle about Orwell's reputation: why, though he was a self-described democratic socialist and a loyal member of the British Labor Party, he is not a bone in the throat of the Right as well as of the Left. Part of the reason is his anticommunism and his acute sense of the risk that socialism could become totalitarian—he reviewed Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) favorably and named the totalitarianian regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “IngSoc” (English Socialism), though he denied that he had the Labor Party in mind. Norman Podhoretz, as Hitchens reminds us,

absurdly claimed in 1984 that Orwell if still living would have been a neoconservative, just like Podhoretz. No one knows what Orwell would have been thinking at age 81 had he lived that long. But the main reason Orwell does not trouble the Right is simply that British colonialism and the British class system are no longer rallying cries for conservatives. “Democratic socialism,” in addition, was just a slogan for Orwell—he was no economist and had no practical ideas for running a society on socialist principles.

Hitchens, here following Jeffrey Meyers, Orwell's most recent biographer, acquits Orwell of the charge of being a McCarthyite *avant la lettre*. Orwell kept a list of communist sympathizers and near the end of his life turned it over to the British Foreign Office. He did not want these fellow travelers punished or even exposed, but he was concerned that they would undermine the democratic Left if they were given positions of responsibility in the government or the media—as doubtless they would have done. His position was no different from that of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Walter Reuther, and other liberals of the late 1940s who fought communist and fellow-traveler infiltration of American political, labor, and cultural institutions.

Orwell emerges from Hitchens's book as the public intellectual par excellence, a much-needed model in an age in which intellectuals have ever-greater access to the popular media yet are increasingly irresponsible in their utterances, often to the point of absurdity. But emphasis on Orwell as a public intellectual threatens to obscure his literary genius, which has been underrated and does not receive its due from Hitchens. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were no doubt intended by Orwell primarily as warnings against Stalinism. But they are great works of the imagination, which, like the works of Swift, equally topical in their time, can be read with pleasure and profit by people who have never heard of Stalin or the Soviet Union (i.e., by young people). *Animal Farm* is a novel of great pathos (concentrated in the figure of the horse Boxer), black humor, and sinister undercurrents.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a great romantic novel, science-fiction tale, horror story, boys' adventure story, and Kafkaesque novel of the absurd, all rolled into one. Neither work has richly elaborated characters, colorful prose, or complex social situations, but that is just to say that they are not of the same genre as the fiction of Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, or Henry James. Neither are the

works of Franz Kafka or Edgar Allan Poe—and they were geniuses too.

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Tainted Glass

THE ARCHITECTURE OF PHILIP JOHNSON.

By Hilary Lewis; photos by Richard Payne. Bulfinch Press. 330 pp. \$85

Reviewed by Tom Lewis

“Philip, am I inside or out?” Frank Lloyd Wright asked when visiting Philip Johnson’s Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. “Do I take my hat off or leave it on?” Imagine this meeting of the young and old turks that took place sometime in the 1950s: the young, cosmopolitan Johnson, tall, well dressed, well heeled, gay, promoter of himself and especially of the International Style; the octogenarian Wright, short, dressed in his signature shoulder cape and broad-brimmed hat, often financially strapped, decidedly heterosexual, promoter of his Prairie Style and especially of himself. The two men had been sparring ever since an architecture exhibition in 1932 at the new Museum of Modern Art, where Johnson had depicted Wright as a shadowy forerunner of the brilliant architects of the International School, especially Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. More than once, Johnson had declared Wright the greatest architect of the 19th century.

Mies at the time served as Johnson’s muse. Studying architecture at Harvard University, Johnson even designed his first house in Cambridge along Miesean lines. The Glass House of 1949, echoing Mies’s Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, marked the summa of his appreciation, yet it was a very different structure. Mies was so unhappy with the result that he refused Johnson’s offer to spend a night there. And no wonder. Farnsworth’s

girders, columns, and dead-white color appear heavy, sterile, and charmless in comparison with the warmth of Johnson’s glass gem. Johnson had out-Miesed Mies.

Johnson designed like a honeybee, culling virtuous sweets from many flowers. With the Glass House, the nectar didn’t all come from Mies. The structure owes as much to classical ideas of balance as it does to the International Style. True, it has the glass walls and the steel frame that the Internationalists so loved, as well as Mies’s chrome-and-leather Barcelona chairs and day bed. But it also has features that no doubt made Mies uncomfortable, particularly a brick floor, and a brick cylinder that encloses a fireplace and a bathroom. Johnson stresses the totality of a design, too. He pays as much attention to landscapes and interiors as to buildings. Wright’s critical question about the Glass House was on the money; Johnson himself has said that “trees are the basic building block of the place.”

Not all Johnson buildings are as successful as the Glass House. No pretty picture can make the brown wood and glass of the Paine House in Wellsboro, New York, anything other than a mediocre postwar residence. One could easily mistake Johnson’s dormitory at Seton Hill College in Pennsylvania for a Holiday Inn. The John F. Kennedy memorial in Dallas seems less the sacred place he intended than a pair of huge, cold, graffiti-