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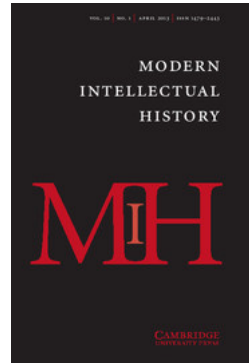
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ANNA VANINSKAYA

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THE ORWELL CENTURY AND AFTER: RETHINKING RECEPTION AND REPUTATION*

ANNA VANINSKAYA

Cambridge Victorian Studies Group and King's College, University of Cambridge

The Orwell centenary of 2003 has come and gone, but the pace of academic publications that usually accompany such biographical milestones has not slackened. *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* was released in summer 2007, John Rodden's *Every Intellectual's Big Brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings* was published in 2006, *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, the proceedings of a 1999 conference, came out in 2005.¹ The striking thing about many of these publications, not to mention the ones which emerged out of the commemorative activities of 2003 itself, is that they are more concerned with Orwell's reputation and relevance today than with his *oeuvre* as such. As many as five chapters of the *Cambridge Companion* have a "posthumous" focus;² the

* The original and much shorter version of this essay was presented at the George Orwell Centenary session of the 9th International Culture and Power Conference in Portugal in 2003. I am grateful to the editors of *Modern Intellectual History* for their revision suggestions.

¹ John Rodden, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *idem*, *Every Intellectual's Big Brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Abbott Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds., *On Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Other publications over the last four years include Stephen Ingle's *The Social and Political Thought of George Orwell: A Reassessment* (London: Routledge, 2005); an Italian collection of centenary essays edited by Ugo Ronfani, *Orwell: i Maiali e la Libertà* (Milano: Bevivino, 2004); the proceedings of a German centennial conference edited by Bernd Lippmann and Steffen Leide, *Das Orwell'sche Jahrhundert? Colloquium zum 100. Geburtstag von George Orwell* (Ludwigsfelde: Ludwigsfelder Verlagshaus, 2004); and Anthony Stewart's *George Orwell, Doubtless, and the Value of Decency* (New York: Routledge, 2003); as well as primary sources like *Orwell: The Observer Years* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003) and Paul Anderson, ed., *Orwell in Tribune* (Politico's Publishing Ltd, 2006).

² "Orwell and the Biographers" by Gordon Bowker; "Orwell, the Academy, and the Intellectuals" by Neil McLaughlin; "Orwell for Today's Reader: An Open Letter" by John

proceedings of the largest centenary conference, *George Orwell: Into the Twenty-First Century*, raise the issue of Orwell and the war in Iraq more frequently than that of Orwell and World War II.³ The latter is not entirely surprising for an American conference which featured the “liberal hawk” and former Trotskyist journalist Christopher Hitchens as the keynote speaker, and whose proceedings were edited in accordance with a corresponding political agenda, but it is also indicative of a larger phenomenon, a phenomenon most thoroughly examined by John Rodden in books like *George Orwell: The Politics of Literary Reputation* and *Scenes from an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell*.⁴ Few imaginative writers have been so compulsively remoulded, coopted, and invoked outside of their proper literary sphere; as Rodden’s scrupulous documentation shows, no modern crisis from the Cold War to the war on terror has gone by without an Orwell headline to define it. What, one may ask, are the mechanisms behind this astounding popularity? How are reputations on this vast scale made? Looking at “the writer and his work” will only get one so far; one must also look outward, for the world’s perception of Orwell is as interesting and intriguing a subject as Orwell himself. Rodden, the most prolific Orwell critic publishing today, has made this reception history his focus.

The study of “reception” goes back a long way and has assumed many guises: from the tracing of textual transmission of the kind classicists have engaged in for centuries to the archiving of performances,⁵ from the historical analysis of the afterlives of mythical figures like King Arthur or entire periods like the Middle Ages to interview-based surveys of contemporary reader-response.⁶ In the literary profession no consensus on the meaning, object, or methodology of

Rodden; “George Orwell: A Bibliographic Essay” by Erika Gottlieb; and “Why Orwell Still Matters” by Christopher Hitchens.

³ Thomas Cushman and John Rodden, eds., *George Orwell: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2004).

⁴ John Rodden, *George Orwell: The Politics of Literary Reputation*, 2nd edn (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002); originally published by Oxford University Press in 1989 under the title *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of “St George” Orwell*; *Scenes from an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003).

⁵ Although classicists have always concerned themselves with questions of literary influence, the institutionalization of reception in Classics is a recent development, exemplified by the Classical Reception Studies Network, the Performance Reception of Greek and Roman Drama project at Oxford, and the Reception of Classical Texts and Images project at the Open University; see also Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas, eds., *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

⁶ See, for instance, Inga Bryden, *Reinventing King Arthur: The Arthurian Legends in Victorian Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (London: Yale University Press, 2007); Janice Radway, *Reading the*

“reception” studies has ever been reached. As early as 1961 C. S. Lewis proposed the empirical observation of the reading experiences and practices of “real” readers,⁷ but the approach had no immediate takers in Anglo-American academia and would have to await the growth of cultural studies and the inauguration of large-scale projects like the Open University’s Reading Experience Database. In Germany, on the other hand, reception “theory,” both *Rezeptionsästhetik* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, flourished from the late 1960s onwards. This was a clutch of philosophical methodologies—offshoots of phenomenology and hermeneutics—and the names of their representatives (Iser, Jauss) are to this day better known than those of the toilers in the field of statistical analysis of actual reader-response. Though the heyday of German reception “theory” is held to have passed in the 1980s, in the English-speaking world the study of reception ramified far beyond literature departments and continued to develop as a branch of Classics, theatre, media studies, and cultural history. In this incarnation, reception concerned itself with many other things besides books, but it overlapped with the new discipline of book history where the latter dealt with the readership end of the communication circuit.⁸ As with book history (the International Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing was formed in 1991), the interdisciplinary interest in reception only burgeoned in the last twenty years, and Rodden was one of the revamped field’s earliest pioneers.⁹ His study of the processes of “image-making” in which various institutional audiences engage pre-dated the appearance of journals like *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* or book series like Continuum’s *The Reception of British and Irish Authors in Europe* (the output of an eponymous project at the University of London). Yet it was symptomatic of the coming institutionalization of reception studies and of the transference of critical attention to extratextual matters.

Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

⁷ See C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

⁸ Although some of its constituent fields—bibliography, publishing history, and so on—have been around for a long time, the new book (or more properly print culture) history considers every step in the process from book production and distribution to canon formation and reading habits.

⁹ Lawrence H. Schwartz’s *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) preceded Rodden’s book by a year, but the work on reception and reputation that Rodden cites in *Every Intellectual’s Big Brother*, 196–7, and the second edition of *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, xiv–xv, dates from the 1990s, and there is now a small industry in the penning of afterlives.

Any entity, from an intellectual concept or an ancient monument to a popular tune or an architectural style, can have a reception history, and the object of reception determines the combination of approaches—formalist, sociological, bibliographical, historical—that the researcher takes. Rodden’s decision to focus on the reputation of an *individual* and an author of literary *texts* dictated both the choice of methodology and its application to a vast array of raw data. All sorts of evidence, from book sales and adaptations to the “group psychology” of admiring and hostile readers, was sifted and assessed, and the result was an innovative synthesis of theoretical and empirical approaches offering something much broader than a traditional study of “literary influence” or a random “statistical survey” of contemporary responses.¹⁰ A student could ask for no better introduction to the intellectual and cultural history of the twentieth century, filtered as it is through an original, specially developed “conceptual vocabulary” (the glossary of his terms runs to thirty pages), than Rodden’s Orwell volumes. His coverage of different “publics” ranges from anarchists, Zionists, feminists, Marxists, neoconservatives, and Catholics to biographers, the Movement writers, the New York Intellectuals, and the staff of the *Nation*. When he claims to offer “a panoramic survey of a reputation from a variety of critical locations: political . . . national . . . professional/cultural . . . religious . . . gender . . . and generational,” he is not boasting; he has indeed amassed and codified thousands of pages’ worth of reception material produced by various groups, circles, and networks from the 1930s onwards—not just Anglo-American but East and West German and Soviet, and not just intellectual but academic and popular.¹¹ Everything from the media frenzies surrounding 1984 and 2003 to Orwell’s role in the classroom and in cinema has come under his spotlight.

Rodden’s new “rhetoric” of reputation formation is grounded in “the historical materials of Orwell’s reception,” but it also offers a way into the study of reputation in general as a social and discursive phenomenon.¹² Rodden is not the only critic to have focused on audiences rather than on production, to have adopted a historiographical and sociological rather than a phenomenological approach. But he is the only one to have systematically traced the changing images of an author that real readers develop in real historical contexts (in relation to their reference groups and institutional networks), as well as these images’ “radiation” through society and through time. His methodology is inductive: the reader-response materials are not used selectively to corroborate a priori assumptions based on textual interpretation, but are analysed for patterns and organized into categories on their own terms. The reception evidence remains

¹⁰ Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, xii, 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, xi.

primary (rather than subsidiary to some pre-existing theoretical construct), and is allowed to speak for itself; the complex terminology arises from and is adapted to the exigencies of the data.

Rodden has made a career of researching Orwell's legacy and influence, especially his influence on that mythical being, the public intellectual. He has, in his own words, tried to "indicate the astounding diversity and divergence of Orwell's public images, with a particular focus on his posthumous reputation, i.e., the phenomenon of his fame and its vicissitudes."¹³ But he does not just look at the past. Rodden has conducted interviews with contemporary Orwell-influenced intellectuals and scholars—from Christopher Hitchens to British political theorist (and Orwell biographer) Bernard Crick—who regularly feature in his own edited volumes. And he has coopted them, as well as the conferences in which he has himself participated (and even his own personal reception of Orwell), into his theory of reputation formation.¹⁴ Such self-reflexivity has its limits. Rodden does not dissect his own "intellectual circle" as thoroughly as could be wished. The reader of the Centenary Conference proceedings and of Rodden's interviews with the conference participants could be forgiven for suspecting that here was a new post-9/11 appropriation of Orwell: an Orwell who had become, like Hitchens himself, an American liberal differentiated both from the neoconservatives and from the "anti-American" left engaged in "apologetics for and appeasement of Islamofascism."¹⁵ Although Rodden does not say as much, he admits that "Islamofascism" and the war in Iraq were recurrent topics of the discussion, topics which cast no conceivable light on Orwell and his books, but which say a great deal about a certain group's ideologically inflected use of the Orwell icon. The Centenary Conference added one more "face" to the Orwell "portrait gallery," one more "act" to the "newsreel" of Orwell's afterlife: Rodden's guiding metaphors continue to work even when turned against his own reception group.

¹³ Rodden, *Scenes from an Afterlife*, xiv.

¹⁴ Hitchens and Crick, for instance, appear simultaneously as contributors to Rodden's volumes and as subjects of his analysis of particular reception scenes (e.g. the *Nation*, or Orwell biography).

¹⁵ Thomas Cushman's Introduction to Cushman and Rodden, *George Orwell*, 19. Of particular interest with regard to this appropriation are the Introduction; Ian Williams's "In Defense of Comrade Psmith: The Orwellian Treatment of Orwell"; Hitchens's own "George Orwell and the Liberal Experience of Totalitarianism"; and Todd Gitlin's "Varieties of Patriotic Experience." On the other hand, contributions such as John Rodden's "On the Ethics of Admiration—and Detraction"; Jim Sleeper's "Orwell's 'Smelly Little Orthodoxies'—and Ours"; Erika Gottlieb's "Orwell's Satirical Vision on the Screen"; and the chapters in the section on "Orwell Abroad" offer historical overviews, personal testimonies, or theoretical statements that escape this specific bias.

They might also continue to work when turned to the service of other authors, and herein lies the main value of Rodden's methodology: its potentially wide applicability. Any writer whose persona and work are sufficiently public and controversial to serve as the basis for competing "images" or "portraits" would benefit from an examination using Rodden's toolkit. Although it has been developed with particular reference to Anglo-American intellectual milieus, Rodden pays enough attention to international and popular contexts to generate a truly comprehensive framework. The method is not just suited to those who may be loosely described as "political" writers—from Jack London to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Emile Zola to G. K. Chesterton—each one of us can think of a nonpolitical author who has been subjected to equally contradictory appropriations by different groups. A whole series of case studies in cultural history—high and low—could in fact be written on Roddenesque lines.¹⁶ Contrast, for instance, the many "faces" and afterlives of William Morris (Morris the Marxist revolutionist and founder of English socialism, the utopian anarchist, the pioneer environmentalist, the Victorian sentimental dreamer, the Arts and Crafts guru, the designer of Pre-Raphaelite wallpapers, the father of fantasy, the party responsible for the excesses of the modern "heritage" industry) and of J. R. R. Tolkien (the pious Catholic, the hippy tree-hugger, the reactionary eulogist of Middle England, the Great War veteran, the brilliant philologist, the originator of a global Hollywood franchise and a mass-market publishing genre, the totem of a variety of alternative subcultures from Latin America to the former Soviet Union). However different in themselves, both would reveal as much about twentieth-century cultural history as any survey organized around a more traditional theme. Because positive and negative reputations are, according to Rodden, made by institutional audiences, a wider application of his method could give insight into a plethora of political, religious, artistic, academic, commercial, technological, journalistic, and generational contexts, both marginal and mainstream. Although more or less fragmentary accounts of authorial reception scenes abound,¹⁷ and the Continuum series on *The Reception*

¹⁶ Paul Berman, in a review of the first edition of *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, "The Business of Immortality," *New Republic*, 12 Mar. 1990, also concludes that Rodden's "theoretical apparatus offer[s] a good model for the writing of cultural history," and demonstrates how it could be applied to the phenomenon of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

¹⁷ Michelle Weinroth's *Reclaiming William Morris: Englishness, Sublimity, and the Rhetoric of Dissent* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) is notable; others range from Gill Cockram's examination of the various audiences (positivists, New Liberals, socialists) for John Ruskin's economic thought in *Ruskin and Social Reform: Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), to Robert Douglas-Fairhurst's *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford:

of British and Irish Authors in Europe is filling in the Continental side of the story,¹⁸ no writer has been the subject of as comprehensive a treatment as Rodden gives to Orwell. Even Jim Secord's extraordinarily in-depth study of the reception of one work, Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*—particularly notable because its authorship remained secret for so long—does not have Rodden's chronological and international reach.¹⁹

But if Rodden's approach is to be extended to other writers, one must bear in mind that it harbours a paradox at its very heart. It claims to owe its existence to Orwell's status as the pre-eminent political writer of the twentieth century; its very *raison d'être* is the vast and unabating fame which has fed the many iterations of the Orwell legend, his esteemed place in intellectual genealogies and networks of influence. But for all his cultural impact and his role as an exemplar to countless individuals, Orwell founded no political movement, inaugurated no new school of thought. Rodden must perforce treat Orwell's legacy not as a power *shaping* critical paradigms or ideologies, but as an *object* buffeted here and there by the intellectual winds, constantly re-formed and reconstructed along the lines that existing institutional structures demand. This will not necessarily be the case with every writer who comes within the purview of a Roddenesque methodology, and in adapting it to individuals who occupy a more generative position in intellectual history one would need to be especially careful. But with Orwell the paradox is evident in everything from the familiar practice of his political grave-robbers to the scarcely more scrupulous appropriations of academia. Orwell is a favourite object of study for literary critics, historians, sociologists, and political scientists: an analysis of citations in academic journals across the entire range of the humanities and social sciences shows a very healthy presence.²⁰ But his

Oxford University Press, 2002), to collections like Nick Havely, ed., *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998). There is also a separate tradition of scholarship on Shakespeare reception at home (via performance) and abroad (in translation), not to mention studies of the reception of important thinkers like Darwin and Marx.

¹⁸ But without any kind of unifying theoretical framework, though the project was born out of the intersection of reception theory and material book history. The series ranges from the seventeenth to the twentieth century and includes philosophers, historians, and scientists in addition to major writers. But it does not go beyond the middle of the twentieth century, nor does it consider non-canonical but influential authors (the closest is H. G. Wells). See also the Roundtable on "Victorian Studies on the Continent of Europe," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 12/2 (Autumn 2007), 286–319.

¹⁹ James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

²⁰ See McLaughlin, "Orwell, the Academy and the Intellectuals," in Rodden, *Cambridge Companion*, 160–78 for a detailed breakdown of the statistics.

work—unlike, say, Foucault’s—has not served as the foundation for a major academic discourse; instead, he has been “claimed” by pre-existing academic factions just as he was by political ones. Orwell has managed to be the mascot of every Western ideology from neoconservatism to democratic socialism, so it should not be surprising that he has also been proclaimed the “father” of a bewildering variety of modern fields of inquiry. Bernard Crick and Peter Stansky, Stanford professor of history and a notable Orwell critic, regard him as a pioneer of the kind of working-class social history “from below” made famous in the 1960s by E. P. Thompson.²¹ The opinion that Orwell was a founder of cultural studies in his famous essays and articles on English popular culture is even more widespread; some stake a claim for postcolonialism, basing it somewhat dubiously on his early novel *Burmese Days*;²² others point to the use of Orwell’s participant-observer documentaries in sociology textbooks. Lynette Hunter goes so far as to assert that he pre-empted Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, and Marshall McLuhan, and reacted against postmodernism before the concept even made its appearance.²³ But one can hardly speak of Orwell’s paternity with regard to cultural studies and so on, as one speaks of Derrida’s with regard to deconstruction, or of Marx’s with Marxism. While there may be passages in Orwell’s writings that *anticipate* the concerns of today’s critical schools and are happily coopted by them because of the symbolic capital associated with Orwell’s name, they can in no way be said to have *created* them. There is no Orwell “school of theoretical criticism,” no “centralised ‘invisible college’ of institutionally powerful Orwell scholars,” no “scholarly journals or academic newsletters . . . literary societies or . . . associations” devoted to Orwell, no “organised lobby” to “promote” him.²⁴

This distinction between originating subject and passive object is crucial, and it separates Orwell from some of his peers in the “most-appropriated” pantheon. Marx’s thought may also have been a political football, distorted, extended, retailored by multiple sets of disciples and detractors (in fact, a study of Marx’s reception history across the world would absolutely dwarf that of Orwell), but he did found a discernible theoretical method and political ideology. Orwell

²¹ Bernard Crick, *Crossing Borders: Political Essays* (London: Continuum, 2001); Peter Stansky, *From William Morris to Sergeant Pepper: Studies in the Radical Domestic* (Palo Alto, CA: The Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1999).

²² For a different treatment of Orwell’s association with Burma see Emma Larkin, *Secret Histories: A Journey through Burma Today in the Company of George Orwell* (London: John Murray, 2004), republished by the Penguin Press as *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

²³ Lynette Hunter, “Prescience and Resilience in George Orwell’s Political Aesthetics,” in Cushman and Rodden, *George Orwell*, 229, 235.

²⁴ McLaughlin, “Orwell, the Academy and the Intellectuals” in Rodden, *Cambridge Companion*, 168, 165, 173.

left behind no generally recognized doctrine of Orwellism; social historians and cultural critics may appeal to him as a patron saint, but their disciplinary tools have been forged by others. Raymond Williams may have envied Orwell for getting there before him, but it is Williams, and not Orwell, who is rightly regarded by both British and American scholars as the founder of academic cultural studies.²⁵ Orwell's destiny was to be not the progenitor, but the object, of a new discipline: the study of reputation. Though this nexus of cultural history, literary biography and sociology has spawned its share of theorists, there is no doubt that the current moment in Orwell's reception history is best explained using Rodden's vocabulary of reputation formation.²⁶ That vocabulary could prove equally useful with regard to other authors, but the experiment remains to be made. Rodden has as yet no prominent disciples, but if any arise they would do well to remember that, by drawing attention to the degrees of "defacement" perpetrated by different popular and academic reception groups, Rodden's approach also inadvertently emphasizes the powerlessness of one of the twentieth century's most influential writers to shape his own reputation. For an illustration of this central paradox let us glance first at the worldwide response to the Orwell centenary, before considering a few recent academic appropriations.

* * *

In the Introduction to the 2002 edition of *George Orwell: The Politics of Literary Reputation* John Rodden restated the judgment of his 1989 Conclusion that Orwell's centennial would be nothing more than an "academic affair." The fiftieth anniversary of Orwell's death had not given any indications to the contrary: the academic world had commemorated the occasion with the Madrid Conference on English Literature (issuing in the usual published proceedings), but the general reader would have looked in vain to the public domain for any such reminders.²⁷ The events of 2003, however, proved Rodden's judgment wrong. In London the Royal Society of Chemistry won the palm for strangest tribute with its commission of a study on making the perfect cup of tea.²⁸ It found, to its chagrin, that

²⁵ For an American perspective see Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²⁶ Lawrence H. Schwartz's *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) preceded Rodden's book by a year, but the work on reception and reputation that Rodden cites in *Every Intellectual's Big Brother*, 196–7, and the second edition of *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, xiv–xv, dates from the 1990s.

²⁷ Alberto Lazaro, ed., *The Road from George Orwell: His Achievement and Legacy* (Bern: Lang, 2001).

²⁸ Maev Kennedy, "How to Make a Perfect Cuppa: Put Milk in First," *Guardian*, 25 June 2003.

Orwell's 1946 recipe was flawed. Keeping to the drinks motif, Kyndal Spirits, the distillery near Orwell's one-time Hebrides residence, put out a limited-edition malt whiskey called "Isle of Jura 1984."²⁹ More mainstream manifestations of commemorative activity also proliferated. The Edinburgh International Book Festival featured Orwell symposia, there were Australian stage adaptations of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, an "Orwell Observed" exhibition and series of seminars was hosted by the *Guardian* Newsroom and the University College London Orwell Archive, TV spots like *George Orwell—A Life in Pictures* and *The Real George Orwell* appeared on the BBC and on ITV. BBC Radio Four broadcast Orwell's essays and journalism on *Book of the Week*, and Radio Three asked Margaret Atwood, John Carey, and Roy Hattersley to contribute essays on the author. Another, and rather startling, marker of Orwell's continued presence in the public mind was that infallible sign of celebrity—scandal in the press—though in this case it was a respectable publication of the rank of the *Guardian* that turned tabloid, with front-page headlines screaming, "Blair's Babe: Did Love for This Woman Turn Orwell into a Government Stooge?"³⁰ The *Guardian* had one of the highest frequencies of Orwell articles of any newspaper, and a survey of the Anglo-American periodical press in the months (June and July) surrounding the centenary date reveals literally hundreds of Orwell references,³¹ amounting to what one correspondent termed "Blair-Mania" and another dubbed "an Orwell orgy."³²

In addition to the traditional use of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to lament the totalitarian tendencies of modern society, surveillance technology, and government policies like the US Patriot Act, as well as invocations of Orwell in discussions of everything from New Labour spin to Christopher Hitchens's new politics,³³ there was, of course, the matter of the infamous List of crypto-communists. Orwell had kept a list of people he suspected of communist sympathies and just before his death, at the request of his friend Celia Kirwan, he passed some of those names on to the Information Research Department as individuals not to be trusted with pro-Western propaganda. In June 2003 the *Guardian* published the list (it had already been in the public domain for a number of years), and a flurry of heated letters followed hard upon its appearance, defending "Orwell the secular saint" and condemning "Orwell the

²⁹ Gavin Bell, "The Road to Big Brother's House," *Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 2003; and Fiona Sims, "Orwellian Malt," *Caterer and Hotelkeeper*, 17 July 2003.

³⁰ John Ezard, "Blair's Babe: Did Love for This Woman Turn Orwell into a Government Stooge?" *Guardian*, 21 June 2003.

³¹ LexisNexis and other databases were used.

³² Jane Sullivan, "Orwell's 100th Causes a Doublethink," *Sunday Age*, 20 July 2003.

³³ Jim Dooley, letter, "Government Lies," *Ottawa Citizen*, 22 July 2003.

police nark” in ever more high-pitched tones. Even Bernard Crick contributed, chiding the *Guardian* for its prurient coverage. Survivors and descendants of the people involved wrote in offering their views; acrimonious exchanges between Orwell’s most recent biographers, Scott Lucas and D. J. Taylor, ensued.³⁴ Lucas was particularly prolific, swelling the already full stream of reviews and opinion pieces generated by the publication of three new biographies (not to mention one of Sonia Orwell, and the variety of centenary editions).³⁵ Their appearance in a single year would of course have been testimony enough to the pervasiveness of the Orwell phenomenon even without the controversy surrounding it. Reviewing the biographies in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books*, British academics of the stature of Terry Eagleton, Stefan Collini, and John Carey for the most part towered above the fray, but the very existence of what one contributor to the *TLS* called “the Orwell-bashing bandwagon” was enough to dispel the image of some dusty “academic affair.” Authors dependent on university syllabi for their life-support do not elicit outraged letters to the editor in the daily press, or provoke heated debates in the pages of the *New Yorker* and the *New Republic*.³⁶

Alongside the sniping and ad hominem accusations, the flow of hagiographic testimonies showed no sign of abating, as writers from Margaret Atwood to Thomas Pynchon expressed their adulation in print.³⁷ The practice was by no means limited to the anglophone scene. French author Isabelle Jarry published

³⁴ Bernard Crick, letter, “Orwell’s ‘Premature Anti-Stalinism,’” *Guardian*, 24 June 2003; Fiachra Gibbons, “Blacklisted Writer Says Illness Clouded Orwell’s Judgment,” *Guardian*, 24 June 2003; Corin Redgrave, “Idealists and Informers,” *Guardian*, 28 June 2003; Patrick Goldring, letter, “List Based on Spite,” *Guardian*, 28 June 2003; Scott Lucas and D. J. Taylor, “Take Two: Orwell: Saint or Stooge?” *Guardian*, 28 June 2003.

³⁵ The centenary editions are too numerous to list. The biographies include Hilary Spurling’s *The Girl from the Fiction Department: A Portrait of Sonia Orwell* (London: Penguin, 2003); Gordon Bowker’s *George Orwell* (London: Little, Brown, 2003); D. J. Taylor’s *Orwell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003); and Scott Lucas’s *Orwell* (London: Haus, 2003). Lucas also produced an anti-Orwell diatribe entitled *The Betrayal of Dissent: Beyond Orwell, Hitchens and the New American Century* (London: Pluto, 2004) which made him *persona non grata* with many Orwell scholars.

³⁶ Terry Eagleton, “Reach-Me-Down Romantic,” *London Review of Books*, 19 June 2003; Stefan Collini, “The Grocer’s Children: The Lives and Afterlives of George Orwell,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 June 2003; John Carey, “The Invisible Man,” *Sunday Times*, 18 May 2003; Bernard Schweizer, letter, “‘Radicals on the Road,’” *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 Jan. 2003; Louis Menand, “Honest, Decent, Wrong: The Invention of George Orwell,” *New Yorker*, 27 Jan. 2003, 84–91; Leon Wieseltier, “Aspidistra,” *New Republic*, 17 Feb. 2003, 42.

³⁷ Margaret Atwood, “Why Animal Farm Changed My Life,” *The Age*, 12 July 2003; Thomas Pynchon, Foreword, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: Centennial Edition* (New York: Plume/Harcourt Brace, 2003).

an homage, *George Orwell: Cent Ans d'anticipation*, half-fiction, half-biography, a cloyingly over-the-top idealization of her subject which did make the original—in the context of the tired Anglo-American discussion—link between Orwell's views on language and the French battle against *anglicismes*.³⁸ Another centennial contribution full of platitudes about Orwell's honest and upright character was Arlen Bloom's essay "Angliyskiy Pisatel' v Strane Bol'shevikov" (An English Writer in the Country of the Bolsheviks) which appeared in *Zvezda*—a venerable St Petersburg literary journal catering to a non-specialist educated audience.³⁹ The author was simply unable to resist introducing worn-out clichés into what was otherwise a groundbreaking examination of previously unknown archival sources relating to the Soviet reception of and interaction with Orwell from the 1930s onwards.

Leaving behind mass-readership periodicals and other media productions aimed at a general audience to concentrate on more professional publications merely alters the terrain of the battles being fought, and switches the focus from the smearing or rehabilitation of Orwell's character to the use and abuse of his writings and concepts as tools in academic debates. Orwell is the standard under or against which critics go to war. When Raymond Williams famously observed that in "the Britain of the fifties, along every road that you moved, the figure of Orwell seemed to be waiting,"⁴⁰ he was signalling not only his professional frustration at finding that Orwell had pre-empted his "new kind of cultural analysis," but also his rejection of what he perceived to be Orwell's establishment status and embodiment of orthodox opinion. Many since then, and Scott Lucas most recently, have echoed Williams's condemnation. They are the iconoclasts—breaking the worshipper's image of St George every time someone like Christopher Hitchens or Simon Schama, who pairs Orwell with Churchill in *A History of Britain*, sets one up.⁴¹ As the contributions to the Cushman and Rodden volume show, however, Rodden is not the only critic self-conscious enough to address the "hagiography-versus-iconoclasm" issue head-on. Even Hitchens, guilty more than most of intellectual hero-worship, feels compelled to offer a disclaimer in his introduction: "George Orwell requires extricating from

³⁸ Isabelle Jarry, *George Orwell: Cent Ans d'anticipation* (Paris: Editions Stock, 2003), 55–6.

³⁹ Arlen Bloom, "Angliyskiy Pisatel' v Strane Bol'shevikov: K 100—letiyu George Orwell," *Zvezda* 6 (2003), available at <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2003/6/blum.html>, accessed 17 Aug. 2007.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Peter Marks, "Reputations: George Orwell," *Political Quarterly* 70/1 (1999), 88.

⁴¹ Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), is one of the better-known Orwell defences of recent years; Simon Schama titled the final episode of his documentary "The Two Winstons," see *A History of Britain: The Fate of Empire 1776–2000*, vol. 3 (New York: Hyperion Miramax Books, 2002).

a pile of saccharine tablets and moist hankies; an object of sickly veneration and sentimental overpraise.”⁴² How far he succeeds in that extrication is a different matter.

* * *

It is a commonplace that Orwell has been claimed (and decried) as the guiding light of almost every political doctrine in existence, from British old Labour to American neoconservatism, but nowhere is his iconic status more evident than in the use made of him as the figurehead in the battle against academic postmodernism. The irony of this particular appropriation is that the anti-postmodernists confuse bad style with bad philosophy in precisely the same manner as Orwell himself conflated clichéd prose with political evasion and insincerity.⁴³ Orwell the enemy of obfuscating language is a familiar sight: the style manual of *The Economist* enjoins its writers to follow the rules set out in his essay on “Politics and the English Language”; warnings about the “Orwellian” lingo of government departments or the corrupt “business-speak” of university advertisements proliferate.⁴⁴ Sooner or later he was bound to be harnessed to the anti-academic jargon cause. But for the culture warriors there is more at stake than mere writing practices: according to them, Orwell represents one side of the barricades in a veritable clash of world views.

The advent of postmodernism, these commentators observe, has resulted in a state of affairs closely resembling that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The spread of postmodernist rhetoric, with its pretended scepticism about everything, its attempt to reduce all reality to a “text,” and its wild claims about the instability and self-referentiality of language . . . uncannily recall[s] Orwell’s description of Ingsoc, with its denial of objective reality and embrace of an eternally mutable past.⁴⁵

That is the newfound conviction of Daphne Patai, best known as Orwell’s most virulent feminist critic.

The destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the

⁴² Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters*, 3.

⁴³ See Menand, “Honest, Decent, Wrong.”

⁴⁴ “Blair-mania,” *Economist US Edition*, 28 June 2003; Peter Jones, “Language Barriers,” *Spectator*, 14 June 2003.

⁴⁵ Daphne Patai, “Third Thoughts about Orwell?,” in Cushman and Rodden, *George Orwell*, 200.

century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in.⁴⁶

Those are the words of Eric Hobsbawm in the Introduction to his history of the twentieth century *The Age of Extremes*, and they find an echo in every lament over the Orwellian nightmare of “twenty-four-hour context-free cable TV drivelling amnesia.”⁴⁷ In the article “Orwell, the Lysenko Affair, and the Politics of Social Construction” published in the same *Partisan Review* to which Orwell had contributed over sixty years previously,⁴⁸ Gorman Beauchamp develops the argument even further: the “pioneer in postmodernism’s attitude toward fact—toward objectivity, rationality, universality, all of which are denigrated, if not denied—is Orwell’s Comrade O’Brien.”⁴⁹ If not Orwell himself, then at least his character gets the honour of inaugurating a critical paradigm. Postmodernism and the postmodern condition are, it seems, the direct descendants of the totalitarian tamperings with history and science which worried Orwell more than bombs and to which he dedicated his most famous book. The logical conclusion of this line of thought is clear: “any worldview that can conform reality to ideology, that can ‘disappear’ facts at will, that can subvert the very concept of objective truth clearly would serve the needs of authoritarians.” Beauchamp’s special targets are the social constructionists who plague the field of sociobiology, who interfere with attempts to determine the role of genes in criminality, for example, because of a misguided faith in the cultural construction of everything. Their method of scientific argument by political calumny and attempted silencing is too strongly reminiscent of Lysenko’s destruction of Soviet genetics for Beauchamp’s liking, but what intrigues him even more is “why *this* particular ideology, fact-phobic and ultra-esoteric, should become the radical academics’ substitute for activism.”⁵⁰

That really is the heart of the matter for most critics. The political defeat of the left with which Terry Eagleton opens *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, and James Miller begins his article “Is Bad Writing Necessary? George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of Language,” is said to have necessitated the

⁴⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 3.

⁴⁷ Ian Williams, “In Defense of Comrade Psmith,” in Cushman and Rodden, *George Orwell*, 61.

⁴⁸ Gorman Beauchamp, “Orwell, the Lysenko Affair, and the Politics of Social Construction,” *Partisan Review* 68/2 (Spring 2001), 266–78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 278, 277; original emphasis.

flight into a substitute philosophical leftism.⁵¹ Academics are reduced to playing at subversion by juggling words and theories because they no longer have an outlet for real political action or any influence in the wider world: to write unintelligibly about postmodern platitudes is regarded as the modern equivalent of manning the barricades. As Beauchamp phrases it, Orwell's linkage of "leftoid authoritarianism to epistemological and axiological relativism . . . accurately predicted the advent of today's postmodernism, which posits connections between the denial of objective truth and political radicalism."⁵² But radicalism and the denial of objective truth are incompatible, the Orwell champions triumphantly declare. Opaque, jargon-laden writing in literary studies, the treatment of the past as a collection of fictional texts in history, and the general anti-empiricist turn of the soft disciplines may pass for radicalism in the ivory tower of academia, but such posturing has no practical relevance outside of it. So the familiar argument goes. While polemicizing about the oppositional merits of empiricism and common speech and the authoritarian implications of social constructionism and convoluted jargon, the Orwell camp treats impenetrable writing as if it were interchangeable with extreme Berkeleian idealism. Even Eagleton, when warning the postmodernists against throwing out the political baby with the linguistic bathwater, equates the two:

Every paid-up Postmodernist knows how to laugh this doctrine [Orwell's naive theory of language] to scorn; it is just that most of them disastrously throw out Orwell's politics of lucidity along with it. His Enlightenment conflation of truth, language, clarity and moral integrity may have involved some questionable epistemology, but politically speaking it is worth a lot more than the work of those whose contribution to the subversion of Western Reason is to write unintelligibly. Orwell thought that the Spanish Civil War provided evidence that the concept of objective truth was falling out of fashion. It has fallen a good deal further since then, not least among the intellectuals who are supposed to be its custodians.⁵³

This, at length, is the view of those who have pitched their tent under Orwell's flag, their opponents having chosen Theodor Adorno—another supposed founder of cultural studies—as their patron saint.⁵⁴ In this context it is no accident that the same *Philosophy and Literature* journal that bestows Bad Writing awards

⁵¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); James Miller, "Is Bad Writing Necessary? George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of Language," *Lingua Franca* 9/9 (Dec./Jan. 2000), 33–44.

⁵² Beauchamp, "Orwell," 275–6.

⁵³ Eagleton, "Reach-Me-Down Romantic," 7–8.

⁵⁴ See Miller, "Is Bad Writing Necessary?"; and Robert Davis-Undiano, "Back to the Essay: *World Literature Today* in the Twenty-First Century," *World Literature Today* 74/1 (Winter 2000), 4–9.

on Adorno fans like Judith Butler should publish an exceptionally clear and straightforward essay on Orwell that argues for an old-fashioned appreciation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as literature.⁵⁵

Nothing in Orwell's writings, of course, not even his most virulent attacks on the Party-induced "relativism" of left intellectuals, suggests that he invented or even foresaw postmodernism and the opposition to it. But a particular institutional audience insists on claiming him as the prophet of the former and, correspondingly, as the spiritual leader of the latter. It is they, not he, who make the connection between Nazi and Soviet (or Soviet-inspired) ideological rewritings of history and science and the practices of today's Western academics, and extrapolate totalitarian consequences from this fact. That both activities are blatant instances of the "if Orwell were alive today he would think like me" fallacy escapes their notice. But John Rodden's work on reputation formation allows *us* to see this particular adaptation as yet another face in Orwell's portrait gallery, alongside that of the "common man" or the "rebel," though differently distorted. That Orwell's writings, given proper selection and interpretation, could serve as the weapon of choice for the anti-postmodernist crusade seems to confirm their instrumental rather than foundational value. They also provide the raw material for the type of critic more concerned with modern British politics, who proceeds to hang up his own, arguably more faithful, version of Orwell on the wall.

* * *

In an article for the *Spectator* of 21 June 2003 a correspondent described his walk through Kentish Town in London, where Orwell lived in the 1930s, and where he presumably placed the prole neighbourhood of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Looking about him, the author concluded that "the last free bit of Britain" had gone, the old working-class community had disintegrated under the dual pressures of state and market.⁵⁶ Though wandering, incoherent, and evidently conservative, the article did strike a note that is explored at much greater length and endowed with much more serious implications in Stephen Ingle's *Narratives of British Socialism*. Developing the thoughts set out in a number of his previous books and essays, Ingle identifies the "belief in the values of ordinary people" as the driving force behind Orwell's conception of socialism.⁵⁷ That this socialism was

⁵⁵ Richard A. Posner, "Orwell versus Huxley: Economics, Technology, Privacy, and Satire," *Philosophy and Literature* 24 (2000), 1–33.

⁵⁶ Harry Mount, "Proles Apart," *Spectator*, 21 June 2003.

⁵⁷ Stephen Ingle, *Narratives of British Socialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 51.

ethical rather than theoretical is an axiom accepted by most Orwell scholars,⁵⁸ but Ingle makes it central to his explanation of the decline of old Labour politics and its working-class base. According to Ingle, the mining communities of Orwell's day, upon which he based his myth of a decent and egalitarian morality, were first undermined by the affluence, increasing social opportunities, and welfare-state provisions of the post-war years, and then finished off by Thatcherism. The tide of consumerism eroded the cohesiveness of tribal social networks; neoliberalism broke up the communal value system and swept away the last vestiges of hope. Dependent for its existence on the very economic adversity it was the goal of socialism to overcome, the working-class community could not survive this onslaught of "progress." And the implosion of Orwellian values in their heartland was paralleled by the abandonment of the socialism and visionary politics of early Labour.

Although certain aspects of Ingle's discussion are debatable, for the most part this particular appropriation of Orwell has a sound basis in his writings—whether the widely known evocations of the ideal working-class family, or the sections of *The Road to Wigan Pier* which describe the cheap luxuries and palliatives that had guaranteed the passivity of the miners. The same cannot be said of the tired uses to which "Orwellian" political clichés are still being put by the likes of Hitchens, who in his January 2003 Introduction to the new edition of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and more recently in the *Cambridge Companion* essay, invoked yet again the Orwellian spectre of totalitarianism in Iraq in a manner hallowed by the old Cold Warriors. Hitchens, in a sense, is an easy target. As far as reassessments go, John Newsinger's *Orwell's Politics*, a scholarly monograph published three years before *Why Orwell Matters*, is significantly more substantial.⁵⁹ It anticipates Hitchens's discussion of the List and Raymond Williams's double standard, and explores Orwell's American connection with incomparably more skill and persuasiveness. But, of course, the most successful applications of Orwell's writings to present-day concerns are precisely those that deal with issues to which Orwell himself responded. When Newsinger wryly notes that "confronted with the phenomenon of New Labour he would have regarded his change of name from Blair to Orwell as astonishing prescience," he has a thorough examination of Orwell's relationship with the Labour party of the 1940s to back this view up.⁶⁰ Similarly, Ingle's framing of the decline of socialism in modern Britain in terms of the break-up of Orwellian working-class values, whether correct or not in itself, is at least grounded in Orwell's own thinking

⁵⁸ See, for example, Norman Dennis and A. H. Halsey, eds., *English Ethical Socialism: Thomas More to R. H. Tawney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

⁵⁹ John Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1999).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, x. Cf. Bernard Crick, "E Blair on T Blair's Call to Arms," *Guardian*, 23 March 2003.

about the conflict of consumerist utopias and socialist human brotherhood, and the question of whether powerlessness is a prerequisite of working-class decency, in a way that more fanciful applications of Orwell's writings are not.

A typical example of the latter is Jonathan Rose's polemic on recent American attitudes to sexual harassment. All the clichés of Orwell the prophet and founding father are there in full force: Orwell "anticipated, with uncanny insight, how the sexual harassment hysteria [of the 1980s and 1990s] would work"; "Sexual mores are socially constructed, and those who construct and enforce them enjoy enormous power. It sounds like Foucault, but Orwell had advanced a similar theory much earlier"; "The sexual hypocrisy described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is mirrored in our own contemporary American mores"; "Something similar [to what happened in Oceania] is happening to us"; "Orwell would have recognized a parallel here"; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an "allegory for gay liberation," and so on. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it will be recalled, is also supposed to be an allegory for postmodernism, although neither postmodernism nor the "sexual harassment industry" (unlike, say, the Labour Party and the British working class) were even a twinkle in the eye of history when Orwell wrote it. With Rose, two potentially excellent essays—an enlightening examination of Orwell's views on homosexuality and sexual repression, and a heartfelt indictment of the sexual harassment hysteria and witch hunt—are marred by being fused into one unconvincing argument of Orwell's prescience. "Stretching a point to make a point," as Rose himself admits.⁶¹ Similarly, perfectly valid polemics against postmodernism are yoked to Orwell's crusade against the totalitarian manipulation of information as if the latter were a genuine precursor of the former. Why? Reader identification with the author may be one potential answer, "literary grave-robbing" may be another, but whatever the cause, Rodden is sure to have created the vocabulary to describe it.

In a book published in the Transitions series in 2003 John Brannigan warned, "we need to be cautious of the extent to which Orwell is constructed as the founding figure, or progenitor, of specific lines of literary and political descent."⁶² Though it is true that his influence on, for instance, older Labour MPs or the Angry Young Men of the 1950s has been documented, none of the modern debates considered here owe their existence to Orwell, though all make use of his concepts as tools or ammunition, with varying degrees of faithfulness to the source. This process deserves critical study, and after one hundred years of Orwell John Rodden's reception theory is the only thing around which can put responses

⁶¹ Jonathan Rose, "Abolishing the Orgasm: Orwell and the Politics of Sexual Persecution," in Cushman and Rodden, *George Orwell*, 32, 33, 34, 40, 41, 29.

⁶² John Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.

and constructions as different as Ingle's and Beauchamp's in perspective, as part of an overarching metanarrative of reputation.

* * *

But what about Orwell as literature? Where does the "Rodden approach" leave the study of Orwell's texts, texts which, for all their phenomenal popularity with the general public,⁶³ with critics, and with "public intellectuals," have failed to garner canonical status? According to Rodden and McLaughlin, Orwell may be written about, but he is not taught outside of school. His books have generated a vast secondary literature (not to mention an even vaster non-academic discussion), his twenty-volume *Complete Works* grace the library shelves, but he has failed to penetrate the university English syllabus to any great degree or to inspire a specialist journal or society—an utterly exceptional state of affairs for a writer of his stature. Could the Rodden approach change this? It will be recalled that the new Orwell *Cambridge Companion* focuses quite heavily on Roddenesque issues (he was, after all, the editor), and as Joanne Shattock—a *Companion* editor herself—has indicated, the volumes are expected "to reflect state of the art scholarship and criticism, to offer an overview of a field, and if possible to hint at where each individual field is heading."⁶⁴ So it seems that Orwell studies is headed inexorably in the direction of reception, and this, rather than a half-baked polemical application of Orwellian slogans, may be the way to enhance its academic status.⁶⁵ After all, "reception" is one of the foremost growth areas in the arts, humanities, and social sciences—in English, Classics, sociology, art history, archaeology, theatre, film and media studies, and even musicology—and it is not unheard of for authors to be carried to new heights of prominence on the wave of a critical trend. Perhaps the obsession with relevance, with the question "Does Orwell matter today, and why?" which has characterized so many discussions of the author over the last few decades, is a function not just of the political nature of the response he evokes, but of the field's inherent suitability to reputation-oriented approaches. Perhaps Orwell's writing will enter the canon not on the strength of its "literary merit" (here opinions are divided)

⁶³ *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* consistently make it into the top ten of various national lists and polls of "best" or "favourite" books.

⁶⁴ Joanne Shattock, "Where Next in Victorian Literary Studies? Revising the Canon, Extending Cultural Boundaries, and the Challenge of Interdisciplinarity," *Literature Compass* 4/4 (July 2007), 1280–91, available at <http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/literature/>, accessed 18 Aug. 2007.

⁶⁵ Rodden and his contributors are not the only ones to take this road; see Roger Averill, "Empathy, Externality and Character in Biography: A Consideration of the Authorized Versions of George Orwell," *CLIO* 31/1 (Fall 2001), 1–31; Marks, "Reputations."

but on that of its importance to the culture at large: something the study of reception is best placed to reveal. Previously untaught Victorian best-sellers have already undergone a similar rehabilitation, often thanks to the rise of critical methodologies (periodical research, for example) that are particularly suited to dealing with them—better suited, at any rate, than the tools available hitherto. The invisible becomes visible when a way of seeing it and speaking about it has been found. Reception may well prove to be the native language of Orwell studies.

It is possible that we have “reached a condition,” to quote Valerie Sanders on Victorian research, “where there really is nothing new to say about the . . . novels”; “saturation point” for traditional text-based criticism may be “fast approaching.”⁶⁶ Texts are finite, but their and their authors’ afterlives are potentially infinite. There is vastly more scope for exploring Orwell’s reception in different times and climes than there is for sifting the chewed-over themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Rodden appeals to precisely this open-endedness in justifying yet another book on Orwell’s legacy.⁶⁷ The former process is also open to methodological innovation: the study of reception may go down the bibliographical or the sociological route, but it is inherently interdisciplinary, and in its book-historical (rather than theoretical) guise it will continue to be with us for some time to come. It may often be simply cultural history by another name,⁶⁸ but cultural history radiating outward from a single book or author, dependent for its organizing principle upon the missing literary centre. Here, if anywhere, deconstructive clichés are eminently applicable, for Rodden is not engaged in some kind of essentialist quest to restore the “real” Orwell from a heap of misinterpretations; he is interested precisely in those myriad remouldings for their own sakes, as well as in their political and ethical dimensions. The centre must be absent: a reception study is not primarily about the object of reception, it is not biography or source-hunting or formalist close reading, it cannot ever, in this sense, be purely literary. But neither can it exist without its literary object. No text, no reception. “Literary and stylistic issues” are not ignored,⁶⁹ but they are subsumed, like the biographical aspect, in the larger discussion of the “politics of reputation.”⁷⁰ Since the discipline of English has in any case taken a neohistoricist turn (at least in the UK), Rodden’s cultural history of different institutional audiences fits perfectly within the new paradigm.

⁶⁶ Valerie Sanders, “Where Next in Victorian Literary Studies? Historicism, Collaboration and Digital Editing,” *Literature Compass* 4/4 (July 2007), 1292–302.

⁶⁷ Rodden, *Scenes from an Afterlife*, xiv.

⁶⁸ Rodden admits as much in *Every Intellectual’s Big Brother*, 1; and *Scenes from an Afterlife*, xv.

⁶⁹ The title of a section in Cushman and Rodden, *George Orwell*.

⁷⁰ Rodden, *Every Intellectual’s Big Brother*, 4.

Everything new, as the proverb has it, however, is the well-forgotten old, and though Rodden's "uses and abuses" approach may tell us little about Orwell's writing process, it tells us much about that other venerable topic of literary criticism: the place of literature in society. Any writer who has had any degree of public recognition is a potential subject for the Rodden method. Its very flexibility—operating as it does by metaphors and tropes taken from art history and dramaturgy⁷¹—ensures its easy adaptability to other reputational circumstances. Not all authors have been the cause of such political controversy or such darlings of "public-intellectual" circles, but many can match Orwell's renown in the culture at large, and boast of the dubious honour of being hijacked by numerous groups and causes. Orwell is not the only modern author who has been lavishly admired and furiously denigrated, whose work and legacy have been adapted (not to say distorted) in line with various ideologies in many countries across the world, and have served as media cannon fodder for decades. A Roddenesque study of their reception would make a great contribution to cultural and intellectual history and to the sociology of literature.

⁷¹ Rodden, *Scenes from an Afterlife*, xv.