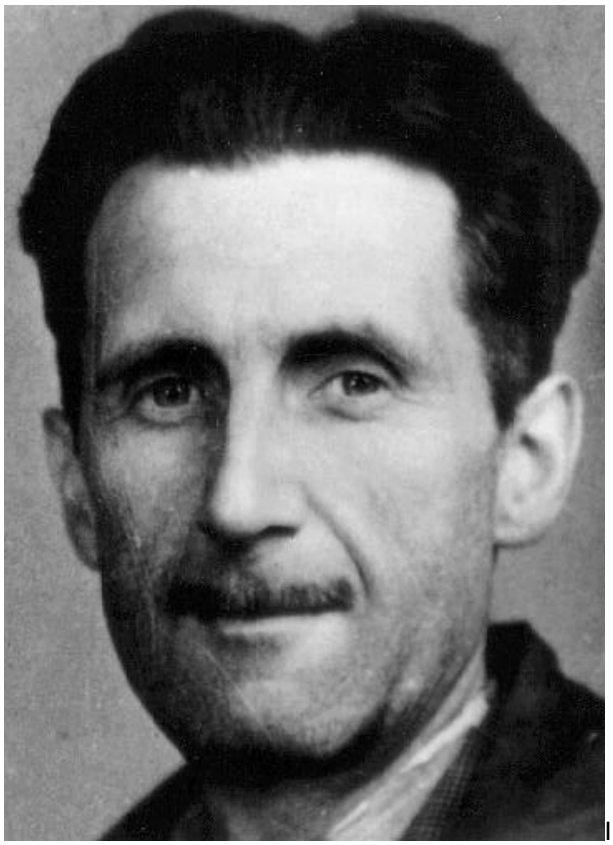
George Orwell's Radiant Idleness [1]

March 10, 2014 Authors [2]
Critics [3]

"My Favorite Critic" by Fred Setterberg

Bracing Opinions from a Working Man of Letters

I first read George Orwell's literary criticism during my mid-twenties while working in a warehouse. At break time, I'd slip behind a wobbly tower of wooden pallets, crack open my lunch bucket, and pull out a volume of *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters.* For the next twenty minutes, I'd wash down selections with a thermos of black coffee and relish the breather from sweat and sheer boredom.



In a 1946 essay titled "Why I Write," Orwell recalled his youthful aspirations:

> I wanted to write enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings, full of ...purple passages in which words were used partly for the sake of their own sound.

History derailed those ambitions as Orwell tacked toward the crises of the 1930s. He tramped his way through Paris and London, embedded himself in a community of English miners to report on domestic poverty, and fought with an anarchist brigade against Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

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As a young man, I found his example thrilling. Here was a writer at work in the world—a man of letters inclined to get his hands dirty.

My own filthy hands were applied at the end of each working day to my portable Smith-Corona typewriter: I was teaching myself to write. In an occasionally exhilarating, often dispiriting cycle, I’d sign on for some days, weeks, or months in an industrial job, put a little money aside, quit, and then persevere over a subsequent interval to make a living as a freelance writer in the still lively but ever penurious alternative press. When I ran out of money, I traipsed back to the warehouse.

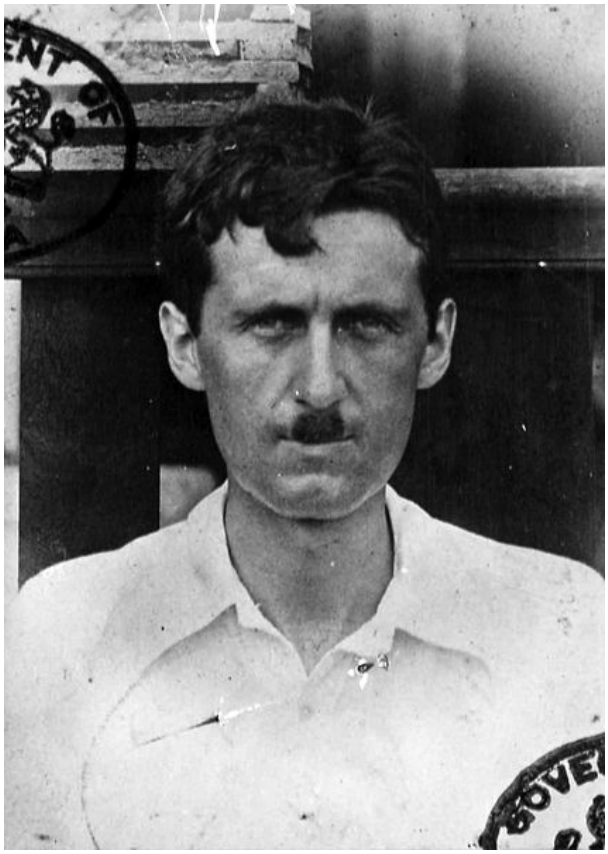
Orwell was my model of a working writer, and the man labored prodigiously—as the four volumes of collected essays attest, to say nothing of his six novels (with *1984* and *Animal Farm* best remembered), three books of journalism (including the superb *Down and Out in Paris and London* as well as *Homage to Catalonia*, the finest book I know about the Spanish Civil War), and a raft of features and editorials broadcast over the BBC during the Second World War. Orwell’s example suggested that writing wasn’t an effete pastime—even writing about writing. The typewriter was just another tool that took some diligence to master.

It’s a great strength of Orwell’s literary essays that they always feel compelled, not assigned. They never seem to have been knocked off merely for the money, though most originated in the scramble to make a living. Orwell insisted that books truly mattered—particularly in times of upheaval. This conviction suffused his best criticism, whether he was writing about Arthur Koestler, whose novel *Darkness at Noon* depicted the Moscow show trials, or utterly apolitical writers like Henry Miller and P.G. Wodehouse.

As a perennial book reviewer, he assailed “the disgusting tripe” penned by book blurbers and denounced as a “swindle” the interlocking commerce of publishing, promotion, and reviewing; most reviewers, he noted in his 1936 essay “In Defence of the Novel,” were too worried about getting paid to express their true thoughts, which in most cases would be: “This book inspires in me no thoughts whatever.” It's the impatience of a man who knew his own reading and writing were authentic labor—although he was too well-informed by his own shoe-leather research to confuse the exertions of a freelance scribe with the toil of coal miners.

Of course, Orwell’s prose and perceptions were stuffed with politics. As a mature writer, he asserted (in “Why I Write”) that “every line of (my) serious work” was “written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism.”

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His admittedly vague leftism (which often boiled down to a faith in "common decency," an expression he used to describe Socialism in *The Road to Wigan Pier*) both reflected and shaped my own preferences—especially as I struggled to grasp the texture of an era whose sensibility lingered on in my own family like acrid puffs from Churchill's cigar. Though I was raised in the 1950s, our blue-collar household retained more than a whiff of the Great Depression. Orwell (far more than the Prime Minister) would have been a welcome guest at our Sunday dinners, joining the fray of incessant argument and hazy speculation about a world beyond our collective ken and influence.

In a word, Orwell could be counted on to deliver the *news*. Frequently, it was news about books and writers whom I hadn't yet read. An ornery zeal pulsed through his critical writing about figures now consigned to the ruminations of grad school specialists—Charles Reade, Tobias Smollett, George Gissing. I entirely credit Orwell with persuading me to pick up Gissing's *New Grub Street*, a harrowing account of late Victorian scribblers hacking out a ruinous living from skinflint magazines and piratical small publishers.

While hardly an inducement to cobble together a writing career, the novel does propose a bracing vision of the worst that could happen—namely, the falling dominoes of failure, poverty, illness, and death. Gissing—as with so many of Orwell's critical subjects—complemented his own penchant for (as he said of himself) "facing unpleasant facts." I appreciated the warning, and then ignored it. In those days, there were still plenty of small magazines and newspapers to skim a scant living from, and enough warehouses and factories to underwrite the effort.

Today, I continue to read Orwell with pleasure, benefitting both from the cantankerousness of his attitudes and the soundness of his prose. But it's no longer the politics or the portrait of a bygone era that keep me coming back. Instead of taking inspiration as I did in my youth from his example as a writer, I'm drawn these days to Orwell's unapologetic zest for reading. As a critic, Orwell proved most adept when he allowed himself to be swept away by great writing. As a practicing novelist, essayist, and reporter—all roles I've had an opportunity to pursue myself, appreciating the cruel difficulties of each—he was a superb appreciator.

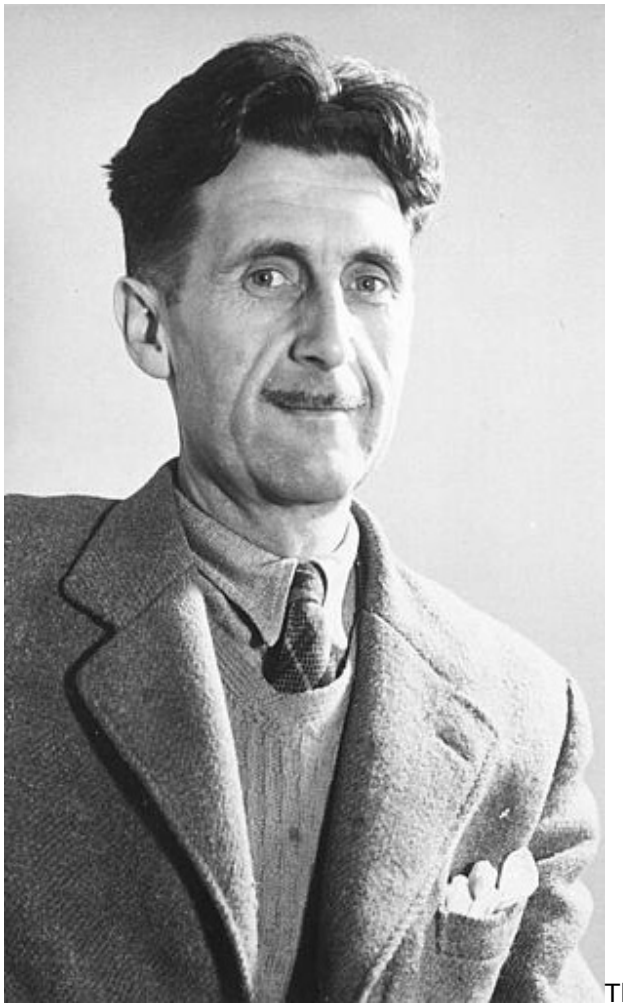
Take his long, marvelous essay on Charles Dickens, published in 1940. True to form, the essay is replete with nuanced estimations of Dickens's politics and ideals. Although Dickens "attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has

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never since been approached," Orwell argued that "he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure" and that "the strongest single impression one carries away from his books is that of a hatred of tyranny."

Paging through Dickens's novels, Orwell saw

> the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is generously angry…, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls.



That's how most of Orwell's admirers, regardless of pedigree, characterize him today.

While acknowledging Dickens's desire for a better world, Orwell equally valued his ability to conjure up the present imperfect one. Recalling his first reading of *David Copperfield* at the age of nine, Orwell wrote that the "mental atmosphere of the opening chapters was so immediately intelligible to me that I vaguely imagined they had been written *by a child."* Later, with abundant examples, he proved a nice point that the signal virtue of Dickens's prose is its "unnecessary detail":

> He is all fragments*,* all details—rotten architecture, but wonderful gargoyles—and never better than when he is building up some character who will later on be forced to act inconsistently.

Most tellingly, Orwell was wise about Dickens's deficits in failing to write about work in a century characterized by its

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total reorganization. For Dickens's heroes, work is neither the curse of Adam nor a means to fulfillment. Rather, Orwell wrote, "there is no objective except to marry the heroine, settle down, live solvently and be kind…. That is the spirit in which most of Dickens's books end—a sort of radiant idleness."

It may seem odd to hear George Orwell cozying up to the warm cubby of Charles Dickens—Orwell, the journeyman tramp, anarchist militiaman, lifelong socialist, and dogged freelance scribe. But the man and the critic was a bundle of contradictions, which I see as another point in his favor. Orwell was inherently incapable of writing criticism tied to any orthodoxy or ideology. He was too honest, cranky, and idiosyncratic. Too much the writer to be too much of a critic.

I understand Orwell's sympathy for Dickens, the great Victorian sentimentalist, on a visceral level. It's all in that lovely last phrase:

Radiant idleness.

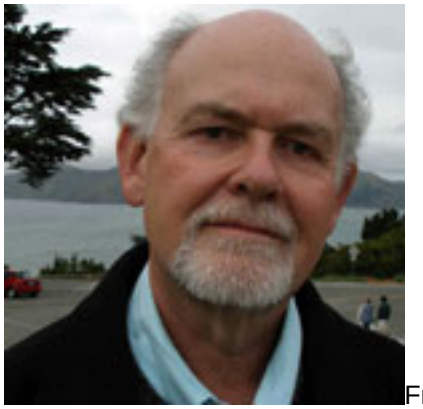
Precisely what I longed for decades ago, reposing on my warehouse pallet as I encountered great literature by way of a great critic—dreading the moment when the lunch bell would make me rouse myself up and get booklessly back to work.

Publishing Information

- *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell,* Volumes 1 through 4, by George Orwell (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).
- Text of individual works mentioned in this essay can also be found online at the following links from Dag's Orwell Project [4]:
  —"Charles Dickens" [5] by George Orwell from *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1940).
  —"In Defence of the Novel" [6] by George Orwell, *New English Weekly*, November 1936.
  —"Why I Write" [7] by George Orwell, *Gangrel*, Summer 1946.

Art Information

- George Orwell [8] (photo from Branch of the National Union of Journalists, 1933); public domain.
- George Orwell passport photograph [9]; public domain.
- George Orwell [10]; courtesy Random House.



Fred Setterberg is the author of *Lunch Bucket Paradise: A True-Life Novel*, published by Heyday (2011) and *The Roads Taken: Travels Through America's Literary Landscapes* (Interlink, 1995), which won the AWP Prize in Creative Nonfiction.

To learn more, visit Fred Setterberg's website [11].

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