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D.J. Taylor, Orwell: The Life (NY: Henry Holt, 2003)

Scott Lucas, The Betrayal of Dissent: Beyond Orwell, Hitchens and the New American Century (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto, 2004)

I was introduced to Bernard-Henri Lévy this spring at a stop on his latest book tour. It was a few minutes before he was due to face the audience. After a polite hello, he turned to the organizer of the event and asked, “How many people in the hall?” The organizer named a respectable figure. Lévy responded with a menacing glare: “why so few? Your explanation?” This jaw-dropping exchange reminded me of the first lines of Lévy’s book on French intellectuals: “The scene opens in Paris, at the beginning of the eighties, with the funeral cortège of a famous person—but whose?” By making us guess-- Sartre? Foucault?-- Lévy seemed to be saying that the occupant of the hearse could be anyone; what’s important is the size of the crowd. Imagine-- all these people gathered to pay their respects to . . . a thinker! How cool to be gawked at. How cool to be an intellectual, even a dead one.

George Orwell had a quiet funeral, on a frigid January day in an unheated London church. Faithful to his subject’s modesty, D.J. Taylor doesn’t tell us how large the congregation was. Orwell too had become famous, but only when he was dying and unable to enjoy it. Once Orwell was gone, the sufferings to which he had exposed himself on his expeditions among the poor and while fighting fascism in Spain crystallized, under the pressure of the Cold War, into a sort of secular, anti-totalitarian sainthood. But his conspicuous saintliness also invited more cynical interpretations. Scott Lucas’s is one of these. Lucas reminds us that this “defender of free thought and clear prose” and “foe of Big Brother” metamorphosed during World War II into an English patriot who, upon request, submitted an annotated list of leftist sympathizers to British Intelligence. Lucas’s Orwell is too intent on acting the role of the heroically unaffiliated individual to keep faith with the common people or with socialism. Lucas can’t quite bring

himself to say that Orwell's withdrawal from leftist politics was a clever career move. But he comes close.

Much of this has already been argued by Orwell's earlier critics. The novelty of The Betrayal of Dissent lies in Lucas's enlargement of the accusation so as to take in Christopher Hitchens and other supporters of the "War on Terror." Hitchens, former Nation columnist and author of Why Orwell Matters, has repeatedly claimed Orwell's mantle. Lucas has no objection. Both Orwell and Hitchens, he says, repudiated their affiliations with the left in the *patrie-en-danger* moments of World War II and post-9/11 and threw in their lot with an arrogant empire. Each was finally less interested in changing the world than in playing solitary hero before a star-struck audience. Hitchens's "master-stroke," Lucas says, is an imitation of Orwell's: seizing for himself "the role of the honorable loner."

There is a certain logic here. And this logic may have something to do with the dynamics of media dependency, disguised as the vaunted "independence" of intellectuals like Hitchens and Lévy. Anyone who claims freedom from all parties except the party of the intelligent, while displaying his access to the most exclusive social circles, will seem to the envious outsider as if he has taken out secret membership in the party of the party-givers. And his intellectual performance will seem like the paid work of keeping the guests entertained. But Lucas is too angry at Hitchens to leave it at that. In a series of hapless attempts at a devastating put-down, he arranges for his opponent to bleat, bellow, growl, and imitate other barnyard noises. It's one thing to disagree about Iraq or to catch Hitchens in the blustery pretense that he is and always has been right, for example over the intervention in Kosovo (against, then for, and always have been for) or the weapons of mass destruction ("You can still meet people . . . who don't think Iraq has any genocidal weapons"). But it's obtuse to accuse him of changing his position as events developed. Anyone who writes to a deadline is going to have to do at least some shifting of ground. Lucas himself doesn't budge an inch. He doesn't inquire into possible reasons, apart from Orwell's betrayal, why socialism has not fared better. Nor does he update his Cold War term "dissent" to suit an era when every SUV owner considers himself a maverick. You can't

accuse Hitchens of being “unable or unwilling to deal with complexities” unless you’re prepared to deal with a few yourself.

In the renewed Cold War polemics over Orwell and his “list,” what’s been lost sight of is how well he dealt with the complexities of his time-- and what a bracing antidote to cynicism he remains as we try to face our own post-Cold War complexities.

It’s true, according to Taylor’s readable and fair-minded biography, that Orwell did not always tell the truth. Deliberately merging his life with his writing, he blurs the edges of both. When he experiments with his capacity to endure extreme discomfort, he tends to leave out the people he could and did fall back on. Like Nineteen Eighty-Four’s Ministry of Truth, he sometimes changes the historical record, for instance so as to make himself out to be discovering what others already knew. To watch this revisionism as it happens, consult Raymond Williams, who compares The Road to Wigan Pier, Orwell’s brilliant report on northern miners during the Depression, with the diaries Orwell kept while researching it. The figure of “Orwell” as a fearlessly independent social explorer and truth-teller was carefully constructed, Williams shows, by the excision of various people who had showed him where to look. Taylor, who is more interested in Orwell’s Eton connections than his socialist comrades, notes that both networks of loyal friends tend to disappear from the published account. But Taylor treats Orwell’s fictionalizing of his heroic self-image gently, as a writer’s prerogative, and this seems right.

Orwell’s fame certainly owes as much to his writerly flair as to his critiques of totalitarianism and the left. Since the end of the Cold War we have had a chance to recognize that the classics Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four are richly ambiguous masterpieces, intended to hit a variety of targets and produce a variety of effects, not to be dragooned into service as simple warnings against Soviet-style dictatorship. (Who doesn’t hear Orwellian doublethink when told by the Bush administration that war is peace and occupation is liberation?) In Taylor’s telling, Orwell is the rarest kind of success: one whose professional career benefitted from what was actually a *moral* accomplishment. If Orwell became, as is often said, the conscience of his age, it is only because he struggled long and hard against his inherited

and temperamental conservatism, overcoming Tory prejudices and, as he said in another context, abolishing a part of himself.

It's true that Orwell was in the habit of speaking contemptuously about groups for which he had enthusiastically volunteered, like the Imperial Police in Burma (where he served for five years) or artistic exiles in Paris or, later, the intellectuals in Britain. (He did not however speak with contempt about POUM, the party for whom he took a bullet in the neck in Spain, or about democratic socialists at home.) This self-castigating habit has been seen by liberal admirers as admirable. What higher claim to credibility than a willingness to dissent from your own side? It might equally be seen as self-loathing, a personality trait to which his biographers fully attest. Hitchens, in his book about Orwell, recalls that the family meal ticket was Orwell's father's employment in "the degrading opium trade between British India and China." "Orwell may or may not have felt guilty about the source of his family's income—an image that recurs in his famous portrait of England itself as a family with a conspiracy of silence about its finances—but he undoubtedly came to see the exploitation of the colonies as the dirty secret of the whole enlightened British establishment." If self-loathing feeds into Orwell's hostility toward his fellow intellectuals— they are in the position, Orwell says, "of a young man living on an allowance from a father whom he hates"-- it also informs his socialism and his anti-imperialism.

Channeling Orwell in October 2002, Hitchens wrote: "I know what he would say about the grand question of the moment which is, there's no comparison can or should be made, no moral equivalence, between the United States whatever its shortcomings and the war of theocratic absolutism, which rejoices in the destruction of non-believers." Orwell's support for the war against Nazism was not in fact of this "no comparison" kind. Unlike Hitchens, he never thought that all you need to know, politically speaking, is that someone, somewhere, represents absolute evil. He never forgot how rational the idea of "moral equivalence" between the Nazis and the Western imperial powers looked to non-European victims of imperial domination and genocidal massacre. In order to achieve a global anti-fascist front, he repeated, Britain would have to commit not only to giving up its empire, but to remedying the devastating inequality of

resources to which the empire had contributed. In “Not Counting Niggers,” he refused the “first duty of a ‘good anti-Fascist,’” which was “to lie about” the disparity in income between England and India. Orwell was trying to sustain divergent political commitments at the same time. He refused to let them settle into Hitchensian simplification.

When Bernard-Henri Lévy stages his rite at the tomb of the unknown intellectual, he whistles past the real and enduring mystery that brings out the crowds: where does dissent come from? In Orwell’s case, the answer is an unstable mixture of adventurous empathy, class confidence, self-hatred, love of clarity, and a childlike inability to get used to the idea of blatant injustice. For critics on the left, Orwell is one of those Establishment-bred leftists who ultimately gave up on their romance with the proletariat and reverted to type. In fact Orwell never stopped thinking about the proletariat, but he learned to think about it differently. “The overwhelming bulk of the British proletariat,” he wrote in 1936, “doesn’t live in Britain but in Asia and Africa . . . This is the system which we all live on.” Note the “we all.” Anticipating his line during World War II, he sees the nation here as a unity transcending divisions of class. But it’s not an anti-fascist unity of the decent. On the contrary, the nation is united in guilt, in common *indecent*. When he insisted that the British working class was not simply a victim of capitalism but also its beneficiary, Orwell was of course thinking like a member of the British upper-middle-class, whose guilt he thus diluted. But he was also carving out a proper space for British middle-class radicalism. And in so doing he was assuming a necessary political responsibility. Anyone interested in today’s anti-sweatshop and anti-war movements, both of which have strong middle-class constituencies, will want to keep thinking with him.

This thinking isn’t as easy as what usually counts as politics: Hitchens’s resuscitation of Nineteen Eighty-Four’s Two Minutes Hate sessions, or Lévy’s blaming of Pakistan in Who Killed Daniel Pearl?, or even Michael Moore’s blaming of Saudi Arabia in Dude, Where’s My Country? “One mightn’t think it when one looks round the back streets of Sheffield,” Orwell writes, “but the average British income is to the Indian as twelve to one. How can one get anti-Fascist and anti-capitalist solidarity in such circumstances?” The Labor Party has its

internationalist traditions, but remarks like this are still going to be a hard sell in Sheffield.

Anyone who talks about distant suffering or struggles that are not on the current domestic agenda will inevitably be accused, as Orwell was, of political quietism. Yet for most of Orwell's career, the dismantling of the empire seemed as distant and inconceivable as the global redistribution of resources and the regulation of sweatshops sounds now. Naomi Klein and her friends in the movement for global justice have given Orwell a new political life. They make a more congenial circle for him than Hitchens and his.