CHAPTER VI

POINTS OF VIEW IN CRITICISM

Orwell’s critical essays were written over a number of years. As a result, naturally, the chronology remains somewhat obscure. But this is not to suggest that it would be impossible to find one’s way about in the years during which he presented a series of significant critical statements. It must be borne in mind that this short chapter may not be able to do justice to the subject. In this chapter we do not attempt an exhaustive coverage. We intend to make only a concentrated study of those essays which should show Orwell’s talent as a literary critic to advantage. Frankly speaking, there are other critical essays of Orwell which we can appreciate, but because of the lack of sheer illustrative value, they have not been included in this chapter.

The years during the second world war were the most congenial period in Orwell’s literary career. This congenial and optimistic period turned out to be

“A critical period to digest the rapid onrush of new experience in Orwell’s life” ¹

Still, this does not mean that Orwell was able to write at this crucial hour some of his best and certainly his most light-hearted work mainly because he managed to creep inside the whale. Instead the war acted as a strong preventing force. On 10-6-1940, he wrote in his war-time diary:

"Everything is disintegrating. It makes me writhe to be writing book reviews, etc., at such a time, and even angers me that such time-wasting should be permitted." 2

Mr Wain also seems to be readily endorsing it:

"No doubt the war presented Orwell from embarking on anything that could not be finished in a week or two and this of itself would turn him away from novels and towards criticism; but, if this is so, then the war was co-operating with Orwell's deeper impulses. He wanted to write criticism during these years; the evidence is there in the zest and freshness with which he plunged into the work." 3

Here we have an important point to make, which is a reference to Orwell's self-styled life of a traveller. Honestly, this style did not give him many chances for a systematic and concentrated study of literature. Mr. Hollis's comments on this are really revealing and worth quoting:

"Orwell was, as was to be expected from a precocious youth, followed by exile in Burma and adventures in the underworld of Paris and London, a man of wide but erratic reading. There were large gaps in his reading." 4

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Mr. Hollis's observation has no doubt a measure of truth; yet one may disagree with him as his laying so much emphasis on Orwell's lack of education as if it had really handicapped him as a literary critic. Instead one may say that though Orwell as a scholar may not have come up to common expectations, his wide reading and experiences appear to have compensated for it. Mr. Brander has the following to say in this connection:

"By the time he came to literary criticism - the right time, after much reading and experience in living - he was well exercised as a writer and had plenty to say." 5

At this point we would do well to bear in mind that as we turn to Orwell's critical statements, and his points of view in criticism, it may not be a depreciation of Orwell as a literary critic to say that we do not get in them a clutter of academic scholarship.

Let us begin with his essay on Dickens, who was the first as well as the greatest influence on Orwell. No doubt, in Orwell, the Dickensian exuberance of character-creation may be lacking, but still there were some striking similarities between Dickens and Orwell. In Orwell's essay on Dickens, it is not difficult to enlist certain examples primarily meant to be a description of Dickens which seem to give us an adequate information about Orwell himself. Apart from this, one may be permitted to say that there could be some important reasons behind the fact that Dickens appeared to Orwell to be a highly suitable subject to write about. In connection with this Sir Richard Rees remarks as follows:

5. Lawrence Brander, *George Orwell* p. 38
“Dickens, on whom Orwell wrote, in 1939, one of his longest essays, was obviously a congenial subject, and the essay, although not strikingly original or profound, is one of his most attractive studies. He had a number of qualities in common with Dickens, some of them obvious, such as hatred of oppression and bullying, the delighted interest in the details of the lives of ordinary peoples and the championship of the conventional virtues. But they also had in common the rare gift of disinterested partisanship - shrewdly perceived and defined by G.K. Chesterton in his book on Dickens or a “secret moderation.” In Simone Well’s language, they “knew where the balance lay” and were ready to change sides, like Justice. Unlike most crusaders, they were always aware of the danger of hypocrisy and cant and of exceeding the limits of commonsense. They both grew more pessimistic about the future as they grew older, though in Orwell’s case a considerable degree of pessimism was chronic and it was during the brief period which we are now considering that it perceptibly lightened.”

Let us try to illustrate from the text itself and for this let us turn to some points which Orwell made on Dickens at the end of the essay. Let us see the points which may enable one to feel that Orwell, in describing Dickens is actually describing himself. Here is an example:

“From the Marxist point of view, nearly all that Dickens stands for can be written off as a bourgeois morality. But in moral outlook no one could be more bourgeois than the English working classes. The ordinary people in the western countries have never entered, mentally, into the world of realism and power-politics. They may do so before long, in which case Dickens will be out of date as the cab-horse. But in his own age and ours he had been popular chiefly because he was able to express in a chronic, simplified and therefore memorable form the native decency of the common man.”

6. Sir Richard Rees, George Orwell, p. 77
7. George Orwell, Charles Dickens, Critical Essays, pp. 58-9
Here Orwell’s imagination of a picture of Dickens is very much worth a close scrutiny:

“... in the case of Dickens I see a face that of Dickens’s photographs, though it resembles it. It is the face of a man about forty, with a small beard and high colour. He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is 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’ - in other words, of a nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxy’s which are now contending for our souls.”

*Generously angry*- these two words make the whole point clear and complete: indeed, their aptness is extraordinary. At this point, we may be permitted to compare Orwell’s approach to Dickens with that of Edmund Wilson in the latter’s famous essay, *Dickens: the two Scrooges*. One thing which these critics appear to have in common is the fact that both have looked upon Dickens’s works mainly as expressions of his personality. For instance Wilson says that “it is necessary to see him as a man in order to appreciate him as an artist.” But, it must be pointed out that the similarity between these critics of Dickens is confined to their approaches and it does not extend to their findings. John Kilham says:

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8. Ibid. pp. 59-60  
10. Quoted by John Kilham, *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, p. 35
"With Orwell it is the personality which confronts the world ('one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page'); in Wilson it is the 'animula vagula blandula' shut deep within that face, whose compulsive needs forced Dickens to write of prisons, murder and rebellion, what Orwell called his 'Victorian morbidness and necrophilia.' 11

From the above statements it appears that Orwell's main interest lies in the central message conveyed by Dickens. It is significant that Orwell sums up this message in these words:

"If men would behave decently the world would be decent." 12

No doubt the simplicity of this message is deceptive: In fact, it cuts very much deeper. Besides, it is not necessary to add that to Orwell this did not appear to be, such a platitude as it sounds. 13 In fact, how could it seem a platitude to a writer in whose own writings the common element was a sense of decency? This Dickensian virtue did not escape Mr. Spender's attention who called him "an Innocent." a kind of English Candide of the twentieth Century." 14 Mr. Spender continues:

"The Innocent" is ordinary because he accepts the value of ordinary human decency; ....... ordinary and yet extraordinary, because his faith in qualities of truth and decency drives like a drill through the facade of his generation. 15

11. Ibid pp. 59-60
12. Orwell George, Charles Dickens, Critical Essay,' p. 5
13. Ibid p. 19
15. Ibid. p. 51
It is early to see that all this may have enabled Orwell to challenge some of the points made by G.K. Chesterton and T.A. Jackson. At the outset he takes up this issue and writes:

"Dickens is one of those writers who are well worth stealing ... When Chesterton wrote his introductions to Everyman Edition of Dickens's works, it seemed quite natural to him to credit Dickens with his own highly individual brand of medievalism, and more recently a Marxist writer, Mr. T.A. Jackson has made spirited efforts to turn Dickens into a blood thirsty revolutionary." 16

Orwell goes on:

"In the first place he was not, an Messrs. Chesterton and Jackson seem to imply, a "proletarian" writer. To begin with, he does not write about the proletariat, in which he merely resembles the overwhelming majority of novelists, past and present. If you look for the working class in fiction, and especially English fiction, all you find is a hole. If you ask any ordinary reader which of Dickens's proletarian characters he can remember, the three he is almost certain to mention are Bill Sykes, Sam Weller and Mrs. Gamp. A burglar, a valet and a drunken midwife-not exactly a representative cross section of the English working class." 17

And again,

'Dickens is not a revolutionary writer. There is no clear sign that he wants the existing order to be overthrown, or that he believes it would make very much difference if it were overthrown. There is not a line in the book that can properly be called Socialist; indeed, its tendency if anything is pro-capitalist, because its whole moral is that capitalists ought to be kind, not that workers ought to be rebellious." 18

16. George Orwell, Charles Dickens, Critical Essays,' p. 1
17. Ibid p. 3
18. Ibid p. 3-5
Orwell sums up his argument in a nutshell with the following words:

"Once again, individual kindliness in the remedy for everything."  

At this stage, it will be worthwhile to quote another critic of Dickens, A.J.O. Cockshut, who seems to be in perfect agreement with Orwell.

Mr. Cockshut writes:

"at the political and social level as George Orwell and others have shown, Dickens is nearly always much more conservative than he thinks he is."  

This is not a mere endorsement of Orwell's point of view: it is also a clear pointer to the outstanding originality of his perception and stand, a quality which recognised ungrudgingly by Hollis, as would be clear from the following remark:

"... seeing how much people have written and talked about Dickens, that they should be at all original."  

We begin to see Orwell as a critic with, "a competence in what is sometimes called 'pure' literary criticism."  

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19. Ibid. p. 7
20. A.O.J. Cockshut, Edwin Drood: Early and Late Dickens Reconciled, Dickens and the Twentieth Century, p. 238
21. Christopher Hollis, A Study of George Orwell, p. 121
22. Ibid p. 20
In this essay on Dickens by Orwell, Mrs. Q.D. Leavis also discovers "nuggets of criticism"\(^23\) She writes:

"..... you can see his superior literary sensibility on the one hand to the Marxist critics of Dickens (Pro & Con) and on the other to the Hugh Kingsmill type."\(^24\)

Mrs. Leavis further remarks that Orwell’s essay is full of fine perceptions and considered opinions. Therefore she rates it better than Spender’s essay on Henry James, *The Destructive Element*.

Let us take her opinion in detail where she describes Orwell as a critic whose first aim is to say something which he has quite clear in his head-like the pamphleteering Shaw without the irresponsibility (which produced the paradoxes and the cheap effects) He really knows the stuff he is writing about (for instance, Dickens) and has not got it up in a hurry for the occasion (like Spender on Henry James in *The Destructive Element*)\(^25\)

Let us also quote a similar praise of Orwell’s essay from Mr. Pritchet:

"Orwell’s essay on Dickens is the best thing he has ever written, and this brings me to my last point that Orwell’s writing has a soldierly bleakness and greyness; it moves rapidly, clearly, simply, full of quick asides, rash assertions, comfortless, afterthoughts, like cold water. Except for the sound of his own arguing voice in his prose—which is what gives it life—his style is a neutral style. The rain falleth upon the just and upon the unjust

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\(^23\) Q.D. Leavis, *Review of Inside the Whale*, Scrutiny, September, 1940 p. 175  
\(^24\) Ibid p. 75  
\(^25\) Ibid p. 174-5
- but in Orwell none falls on the just. Indeed there are no just men. And yet - the decent. There are the decent. At the back of Orwell's mind there are always the decent. And that is what makes him to English, so uncompromisingly English for all his maxims. He is the most honest writer of our time. 26

One may add here that the honesty referred to above may be looked upon and rated not merely as a moral virtue, but also as a literary one. In addition to this point, there is another, made by Orwell that relates to the principle of survival. That Dickens has successfully passed the test of times, surviving triumphantly generations, should not be considered a small feat. In Orwell's opinion, it amply speaks for Dickens's greatness, almost of the kind and calibre one associated with Shakespeare.

The above statements confirm our belief that Orwell's essay may well rank with the works of Chesterton and Gissing. In fact, what is more important to our present purpose, at this point is to see how far Orwell's Dickens is the real Dickens. In this connection we would do well to remember that what may have struck Orwell as the most fascinating aspect in a study of Dickens was perhaps the relation between the writer's life and art. It is precisely in this that Orwell will seem to have initiated a new approach to Dickens, thereby playing a vital role in "saving Dickens from the lumber-room." 27

26. V.S. Pritchett, George Orwell, Included in Living Writers, pp. 114-5
27. John Gross, Dickens: Some Recent Approaches, Dickens and the 20th Century, p. 10
Like the essay on Dickens, the other critical essays, already analysed threadbare textually (in Chapter V) present a very convincing picture of Orwell’s competence as a literary critic and attest to the pureness of the quality of his criticism.

Here, however we may turn to yet another Orwell number, which is very striking in a special way and is associated with one of the greatest literary luminaries of the world, Leo Tolstoy. The reference, for the purposes of the present chapter, is to a critical essay, Lear Tolstoy and the Fool, by Orwell, which deserves some close analysis at this point of summing up.

‘Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool’ is a much later writing, included in the first collection of his essays, Shooting an Elephant (1950) but published after his death. This essay was an occasional writing like many of Orwell’s essays, provoked probably by a pamphlet by Tolstoy, Shakespeare and the Drama.

In this pamphlet Tolstoy says that whenever he read Shakespeare’s works he used to feel weary and bewildered. When he was an old man of seventy-five he read again the entire works of Shakespeare and felt:

“I have felt with an even greater force, the same feelings - this time, however, not of bewilderment, but of firm, indubitable conviction that the unquestionable glory of a great genius which Shakespeare enjoys, and which compels writers of our time to imitate him and readers and spectators to discover in him non-existent merits-thereby distorting their aesthetic and ethical understanding-is a great evil, as is every untruth” 28

28. Orwell George, Leo, Tolstoy and The Fool, Collected Essays, p. 415
On this point Orwell comments very aptly:

'Having dealt with 'Lear' Tolstoy draws up a more general indictment against Shakespeare. He finds that Shakespeare has a certain technical skill which is partly traceable to his having been an actor, but otherwise, no merits whatever. Shakespeare might have been whatever you like - but he was not an artist.' 29

The doctrine of Tolstoy's art, in Orwell's opinion,

'amounts to a demand for dignity of the subject matter, sincerity, and good craftsmanship. A good work of art must deal with some subject which is "important to the life of mankind ...." As Shakespeare is debased in outlook, slipshod in execution and incapable of being sincere even for a moment, he obviously stands condemned.' 30

Here an important question arises and Orwell also has drawn an attention to this. How did Shakespeare ever come to be generally accepted and admired, all through the ages, if he is all that Tolstoy has pointed him to be? 31 As if he had anticipated the question, Tolstoy had an answer ready in advance:

"The whole civilized world has somehow been deluded into thinking Shakespeare a good writer, .... Shakespeare's plays have continued to be admired over a long period because they corresponded to the irreligious and immoral frame of mind of the upper classes of his time and ours."

29. Ibid p. 416-6
30. Ibid p. 417
31. Ibid p. 417
As to the manner in which Shakespeare's fame started, Tolstoy explains it as having been "got up" by German professors towards the end of the eighteenth century. His reputation "originated in Germany, and thence was transferred to England." The Germans chose to elevate Shakespeare because, at a time when there was no German drama worth speaking about and French classical literature was beginning to seem frigid and artificial, they were captivated by Shakespeare's "clever development of scenes" and also found in him a good expression of their own attitude towards life. Goethe pronounced Shakespeare a great poet, whereupon all the other critics flocked after him like a troop of parrots, and the general infatuation has lasted ever since. 32

Orwell's essay on Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool appears originate as a scathing criticism of Tolstoy's condemnation of Shakespeare and the latter's King Lear. But in the process, it outgrows the initial plan and ultimately we get a fine piece of Shakespeare criticism.

Once again, Orwell pushes forward the principle of survival as the ultimate factor:

'Ultimately there is no test of literary merit except survival, which is itself an index to majority opinion. Artistic theories such as Tolstoy's are quite worthless, because they not only start out with arbitrary assumptions, but depend on vague terms ("sincere," "important" and so forth) which can be interpreted in anyway one chooses.' 33

It may be recalled that in his appreciation of Dickens also, Orwell had applied the principle of common consent. It goes without saying that if Shakespeare has successfully stood the test of time, he cannot be challenged

32. Ibid pp. 417-8
33. Ibid p. 419
now in the way Tolstoy did. If one compares this principle of literary criticism with Tolstoy's the latter would not stand a test of close comparative scrutiny because of its insistence on negative criticism like 'a sort of mass hysteria, hypnosis' or 'epidemic suggestion.' Orwell's reflection on Tolstoy's negative commentary is noteworthy:

In any case it is impossible that he should fully have believed in his main thesis - believes, that is to say, that for a century or more, the entire civilized world had been taken in by a huge palpable lie which he alone was able to see through. Orwell suggests that another possible clue is the choice of King Lear. Orwell wonders how if a critic wanting to do dirt on Shakespeare, could choose, King Lear an unquestionable Shakespeare masterpiece. Perhaps Tolstoy may have been differently motivated as "he was aware, consciously or unconsciously, of the resemblance between Lear's story and his own." Both Tolstoy and Lear shared "the most impressive event. . . was a huge and gravitous act of renunciation." Both of them made a parade of their renunciation of this world and cherished entirely unreasonable claims to the prestige commanded by the really powerful.

36. Ibid p. 433
37. Ibid p. 420
38. Ibid p. 426
There are two morals that can be drawn from 'King Lear,' one 'explicit' and the other 'implicit.' The Fool draws the first moral as follows:

"Don't relinquish power, don't give away your lands." 39

If you do so, you will be apparently powerless and defenceless and naked. Orwell describes the other moral as below:

'Give away your lands if you want to, but don't expect to gain happiness. If you live for others, you must live for others, and not as a round about way of getting an advantage for yourself.' 40

Without any doubt, the renunciation of Lear and Tolstoy both were frustrated because they sought to practise self denial for selfish reasons. We may be able to see Tolstoy's resentment if we presume that in reading Lear's story he may have seen his own case reflected. There is, in Orwell's opinion, something more to it, which is striking:

"The more pleasure people took in Shakespeare, the less they would listen to Tolstoy. Therefore nobody must be allowed to drink alcohol or smoke tobacco. True, Tolstoy would not prevent them by force. He is not demanding that the police shall impound every copy of Shakespeare's work. But he will do dirt on Shakespeare, if he can. He will try to get inside the mind of every lover of Shakespeare and kill his enjoyment by every trick he can think of, including-as I have shown in my summary of his pamphlet - arguments which are self-contradictory or even doubtfully honest." 41

39. Ibid p. 428
40. Ibid p. 428
41. Ibid p. 433
Orwell has doubtless argued splendidly and conducted his argument with a juridical flair. One is reminded here of the sustained argument that Swift managed in the little episode of the spider and the bee in The Battle of Books. Here, like Swift, Orwell also can be seen comfortably sitting in the Presidential chair, giving as many chances to one party as to the other. In other words, a pose of the judge's detachment coupled with the Augustan insularity is an essential ingredient of the critic's mental make up, as amply illustrated here by Orwell’s critical analysis of Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool.

At the same time, it may be noticed that the positive contribution in this literary criticism lies in Orwell's evaluation of Shakespeare and King Lear in particular. That is to reiterate our earlier stand that Orwell’s essay is a fine piece of Shakespeare criticism in its own right. The Tolstoy episode was just an occasion that set the ball rolling. Orwell’s heart is not there, but in the greatness of Shakespeare and his masterpiece, King Lear.

Orwell points out that Shakespeare the dramatist cannot be separated from Shakespeare the poet. Even Bernard Shaw, who is another hostile critic 42 Shakespeare attested to the irresistible 43 verbal music 44 in Shakespeare. Yet, Orwell contends that King Lear also, great as it is, is not without a flaw. He goes on to elaborate his point:

"It is too drawn-out and has too many characters and sub-plots. One wicked daughter would have been quite enough and Edgar is a superfluous character: indeed it would probably be a better play if Gloucester and both his sons were eliminated" 45

42. Ibid p. 421
43. Ibid p. 421
44. Ibid p. 421
45. Ibid p. 421
Still, it is difficult to deny that the poetry, the pattern, and the atmosphere of the play admirably stood the test of time. Most probably Tolstoy would have liked Shakespeare a lot more if *King Lear* were a comedy like the earlier play *King Lear*. Tolstoy says the play *King Lear*

"terminates more naturally and more in accordance with the moral demands of the spectator than does Shakespeare’s: namely, by the King of the Gauls conquering the husbands of the elder sisters, and by Cordelia, instead of being killed, restoring Leir to his former position." 46

It is not difficult to see from the above statement that Tolstoy is a critic who must look for the possibilities of edification in a work of art as the primary quality. Let us recall here another Shakespeare critic, Dr. Johnson, to show that a parallel exists between their comments on *King Lear*. Dr. Johnson too was shocked to read the last act of ‘King Lear.’ Dr Johnson felt that the last act was unidealistic, if not downright wicked on the part of the dramatist to have such a harrowing conclusion in the play. Then it is no wonder that Dr. Johnson could find a greater artistic satisfaction in the version written by a Restoration hack writer—which would very closely resemble the version *King Leir*, referred to by Tolstoy. If, for example, someone suggested to critics like Tolstoy and Dr. Johnson that Shakespeare was a realist in letting wickedness ultimately triumph, it is quite possible that they would sharply retort by saying that it was quite unfair and uncalled for the poet to celebrate the triumph of evil over goodness.

46. Ibid p. 422
Such an idealistic or moralistic approach is not likely to be fruitful in an endeavour to evaluate a work of art. It is here at this point that Orwell's fundamental virtues, honesty and decency, shine most brilliantly. One may have been easily tempted to write a downright denunciation of Tolstoy. But Orwell's decency merely says:

"It is a mistake to write Tolstoy off as a moralist attacking an artist. He never said that art, as such, is wicked or meaningless, nor did he even say that technical virtuosity is important. But his main aim, in his later years, was to narrow the range of human consciousness. Literature must consist of parables, stripped of detail and almost independent of language. The parables—this is where Tolstoy differs from the average puritan—must themselves be works of art, but pleasure and curiosity must be excluded from them. Clearly he would have no patience with a chaotic, detailed, discursive writer like Shakespeare." 47

We can now clearly see the implications of Orwell's remark that there were two Tolstoys - the earlier Tolstoy who was primarily an artist and wrote Anna Karenina; and the later Tolstoy who was more a puritan and less an artist. Orwell has rightly pointed out that most of the later Tolstoy's problems can be better understood if we compare them with those of an old, almost finished man, scolding a child for jumping up and down and refusing to see the plain fact that "the child has a feeling in its limbs which the old man has lost." 48

On the contrary, Orwell is all for Shakespeare, his humanism and art. This fact is confirmed from the following passage in Lear, Tolstoy and the Foot:

47. Ibid p. 423
48. Ibid p. 424
“Shakespeare was not a philosopher or a scientist, but he did have curiosity, he loved the surface of the earth and the process of life ... Of course, it is not because of the quality of thought that Shakespeare has survived, and he might not even be remembered as a dramatist if he had not also been a poet. His main hold on us is through language.... At every level it is the same issue - this world against the next and certainly the music of words is something that belongs to this world.” 49

This illustrates a remarkable critical insight in Orwell, a perception that goes with an unfailing feeling for language. On this Mr. Brander seems to have said the last word:

“He finds in Shakespeare the joys he sought himself; he finds in the aged Tolstoy the sin he fought relentlessly.” 50

There are some more critical perceptions on King Lear by George Orwell in his essay which are equally percipient, and may be quoted here. In Orwell’s opinion, “All of these tragedies start out the human assumption that life, although full of sorrow is worth living, and that man is a noble animal - a belief which Tolstoy in his old age did not share.” 51 Turning to a tragic situation, he observes: “A tragic situation exists precisely when virtue does not triumph but when it is still felt that man is nobler than the forces which destroy him.” 52

49. Ibid. p. 431
50. Lawrence Brander, George Orwell, p. 55
51. George Orwell, Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool, Collected Essays, p. 429
52. Ibid p. 422
Again Orwell takes up the role of the Fool in the tragedy *King Lear* and begins with a reference to Tolstoy's objection to the presence of the Fool in the play. Finally Orwell follows with his own point triumphantly:

"The fool is integral to the play. He acts not only as a sort of chorus, making the central situation clearer by commenting on it more intelligently than the other characters, but as a foil to Lear's frenziness. His joke, riddles and scraps of rhyme, and his endless digs at Lear's high-minded folly, ranging from mere derision to a sort of melancholy poetry ("All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou was born with"), are like a trickle of sanity running through the play, a reminder that somewhere or other in spite of the injustice, cruelties, intrigues, deceptions and misunderstanding that are being enacted here, life is going on much as usual."\(^{53}\)

These are very fine observations and no wonder Mr. Brander praises this essay without reserve: "In this essay more than anywhere else the reader is able to measure Orwell's mental and spiritual resources in his later years."\(^{54}\)

In a nut-shell, these essays seem to present within their limited range, a clear graph of Orwell's mind and art.

Mrs. Q.D. Leavis while reviewing his first volume of essays in 1949 sought to place Orwell in a special line of literary criticism, "peculiar to himself and which is practically needed now."\(^{55}\) She further remarked:

\(^{53}\) Ibid pp. 422-3  
^{54}\) Lawrence Brander, *George Orwell*, p. 56  
"He is evidently a live mind working through literature, life and ideas. He knows what he is interested in and has something original to say about it. His criticism is convincing because his local criticism are sound (always a test), and though he is not primarily a literary approach he is that rare thing, a non literary writer who is also sensitive to literature." 56

With the following words, Mrs. Leavis concluded her review of Orwell’s essays:

"Whether he will come to anything as a literary critic will probably depend on whether he can keep clear of the atmosphere of Bloomsbury and the literary racket. And there are other dangers. He reminds one of Mr. Robert Graves in his promising period in the ‘twenties, and Mr. Graves’ history since, from the standpoint of literary criticism, has been rather a sad one..... If the revolution here were to happen that he wants and prophesies, the advent of real socialism, he would be the only man of letters we have whom we can imagine surviving the flood undisturbed." 57

To a great extent Mrs. Leavis was right in her judgement, as Orwell’s later writing amply proves. Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool is a mature essay and makes one feel that his interest in writing literary criticism had been steadily growing. His maturer essays are worth much more as they lead us to believe that he possessed a competence in what is often described as pure literary criticism. It was indeed unfortunate that circumstances, a growing awareness of the grimness of politics, and his own failing health obstructed the progress of critical activity in a big way.

56. Ibid. pp. 175-6
57. Ibid. p. 176
Orwell himself was painfully aware of the difficult times:

"... not only is our subject matter narrowed, but our whole attitude towards literature is coloured by loyalties which we at least intermittently realize to be non-literary. I often have the feeling that even at the best of the times literary criticism is fraudulent, since in the absence of any acceptable standards whatever - any external reference which can give meaning to the statement that such and such is 'good' or 'bad' - every literary, judgement consists in trumping up a set of rules to justify an instinctive preference. One's real reaction to a book, when one has a reaction at all, is usually," I like this book" or "I don't like it," and what follows is a rationalization. But "I like this book" is not, I think, a non-literary reaction: the non-literary reaction is: This book is on my side, and therefore I must discover merits in it. Of course, when one praises a book for political reasons one may be emotionally sincere, in the sense that one does feel strong approval of it, but also it often happens that party solidarity demands a plain lie. Anyone used to reviewing books for political periodicals is well aware of this." 58

Here it is simply gratifying to note that Orwell refused to sacrifice art to journalism or to end as a mere topical writer in the conventional sense of the term. Dogmas did not mislead him from the primary pursuit of and passion for art.

This partially explains why it would not be fair to say of Orwell's literary criticism what N.C. Clay said of Auden's: "Mr. Auden's criticism is an example of a trend of modern thought-the reference of works of art to the social conditions of the time." 59 Not that we cannot connect Orwell with this trend. But, finally, we can say with Mrs. Q.D. Leavis that "in literature as in politics he has taken up a stand which gives him freedom," 60 freedom which he ever cherished as the most positive ideal in his life as an artist.

60. Q.D. Leavis, A Review of Inside the Whale, Scrutiny, Sept. 1940. p. 176
Let us now, for a moment, turn to judge Orwell as part of the contemporary critical movement which had T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme as its greatest exponents and see what we can discover. The difference is certainly considerable. It would be helpful to recall Trilling’s opinion of Eliot’s critical method in this connection. Mr. Trilling says:

“In Eliot the desire to make laws and the conscious effort for dignity have their unquestionable effort upon us. We respond to the effort; the pleasure; we are connected with large issues. Literature thus acquires a magnificent importance, life seems more interesting.” 61

Mr. F.R. Leavis says that Mr. Eliot “has not only refined the conception and methods of criticism, he has put into currency decisive reorganising and reorienting ideas and valuations.” 62

If one judges George Orwell by these high standards (perhaps the highest), he may not appear to be wholly satisfactory in his literary criticism. The total effect of his criticism may not be as really as impressive as that of Eliot’s criticism. Still Orwell could pass and succeed as a literary critic in a very different way. It is a fact that he did not formulate his personal impressions into a law. Frankly, he did not have the making of a law-giver. His best critical essays are those which are full of fine perceptions and this credit cannot be denied. Mr. Richard H. Rovere estimates him as a true critic and says:

"As a critic, he was rather old-fashioned in the sense that he paid the most attention to books that have been read by millions and left to other critics those works of genius that are admired chiefly in genius circles. It was Dickens and Kipling: staples in a national culture, rather than say, Henry James or Gerard Manley Hopkins, who drew forth his greatest critical efforts. He pioneered in the serious analyses of popular culture, writing brilliantly of “good bad” books, boys’ magazines, patriotic verse and marching songs, penny dreadfuls, and even the bawdy postcards on sale at seaside resorts. In a striking essay on Henry Miller, which was, I think, one of his few appreciations of what some people would call a Coterie writer, he found it necessary to convince himself that the lives of the odd fish of whom Miller wrote overlap fairly widely with those of moral normal people. “Had he been unable to say this he would have been unable to admire Miller.” 63

Thus, from this, a little boldly, we may describe Orwell as the great pioneer of serious reviews (which are a part of modern writing) meant for common reading. Mr. Pritchett has found Orwell’s essays on Boys’ Weeklies and P.G. Wodehouse and No Orchids for Miss Blandish to be extraordinarily original:

“Orwell has become the first critic of real popular commercial culture. No other English writer has entered the uncouth and fertile field.” 64

The above comment is obviously adequate because Orwell achieved much more and something higher. To be fair, it should be reasonably to try to find him a place of honour in the contemporary critical tradition. Speaking of the British critical tradition in the midtwentieth century, George Watson says:

63. Richard H. Rovere, Introduction to the Orwell Reader, pp. xii-xiii
64. V.S. Pritchett, George Orwell, Living Waters, p. 112
"Happily enough, there is no characteristically British critical tradition in the midtwentieth century, and no American either .... Bloomsbury is all but dead and was never the whole story." 65

But Mr. Watson points out again that

"There does, however, exist a variety of critical schools, and they are largely Anglo-American Schools. We might group them under there headings - the Moralists, the New Critics and the Historians...."66

As far as the position of Orwell is concerned Mr. Watson rightly places him in an important position among the Moralists. In this it appears that Orwell will have his literary ancestors in Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold. In the group Mr. Watson has included three other important modern critics, D.H. Lawrence, F.R. Leavis and Middleton Murry. Mr. Watson says that Orwell's moralism, in contrast with the moralism of the past is more often agnostic, exploratory, and self-consciously elitist. Its tone is not that of the common preacher anticipating assent: it is more often embittered and embattled.

Yet, for all his anger and bitterness, which were wholly justifiable and genuine, his critical activity does not seem to have been affected adversely at any point. Here also, honesty comes up as his first claim to distinction, and for this virtue, moral as well as literary, he would, ever remain an original, a pioneer.