



The Biography Orwell Never Wrote

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Gordon Bowker



In view of Orwell's famous testamentary request for no biography it is interesting to ask what sort of biography he might have written himself. He was certainly not antagonistic to the genre, as some have suggested. In fact, in his reviews and letters there is ample evidence that he valued literary biography as a means of illuminating an author's work. His first published book review was of Lewis Mumford's biography of Herman Melville, from which it is clear that he had already given the literary life-story some serious thought. He read and reviewed numerous biographies during his life, at various times bemoaning the lack of 'definitive' biographies of Conrad, Conan Doyle and George Gissing, and in 1934 he even offered himself to write a centenary biography of Mark Twain for Chatto and Windus. His interest in the form never diminished, and after the war, in the wake of the publication of *Animal Farm*, he tried to persuade Fredric Warburg to publish Trotsky's biography of Stalin.

As for himself, Orwell never refused requests to supply autobiographical details to publishers, critics and writers' directories, and was happy to cooperate with the biographer of his friend L.H. Myers. When another friend, George Woodcock, informed him that he planned to make him the subject of a biographical essay, he readily approved. However, when he was dying in University College Hospital, his new wife, Sonia, refused to provide details of his life, even to his French translator which points, along with other factors, to *The Biography Orwell Never Wrote* Gordon Bowker that testamentary wish for no biography having probably been part of a prenuptial settlement. (There was an agreement, we know from Orwell's last will, concerning Sonia's non-involvement in his son Richard's upbringing, and her role as joint literary executor, and, we gather from what she claimed to friends, about the future publication of Orwell's early novels.)

Had he himself produced one of the biographies he called for, or the one he offered to write, what might it have been like? 'The qualities needed for a biographer,' he wrote, 'are piety and wit,' (1) and the opening sentence of his review of the Melville biography is quite revealing. 'This admirable book,' he wrote, 'is rightly termed a biography, but its chief concern is to analyze Melville's intellect - in Mr. Mumford's words, "his ideas, his feelings, his urges, his vision of life".' Mumford's method, which he terms 'the analytical, interpretative method', was the one he favoured.(2) On the other hand, he disapproved of the strictly chronological life which 'enumerates the various activities' of the subject, with 'a morbid interest in everything'(3) and he had no time (at least where biographies of authors were concerned) for mere studies of character which disregarded literary work.

Having dismissed the mere 'character' study of literary figures, he nevertheless did not believe that tackling that aspect of a subject should be avoided. Clues to the inner life should be sought in the authors' works, he argued, even claiming to 'see' in Pip's attitude towards the convict in *Great Expectations* 'the attitude of Dickens himself'.(4) The extent to which he thought the 'inside story' was important can be seen in his review of a biography of Stendhal, in which he wrote, '[His] life was of the kind that is absorbingly interesting when one sees it from the inside, as one does in certain passages in his novels,'(5) and in one of Tolstoy saying that, 'The most valuable part of [this] biography is the careful exposition that he gives to each of Tolstoy's books in turn, showing just how it related to Tolstoy's spiritual development.'(6)

Nor did he believe that in all circumstances the empirical method alone should be relied upon, arguing that some 'inherently probable' historical claims, like Trotsky's assertion that Stalin had Lenin murdered, even when difficult to demonstrate fully, ought to be allowed.(7)

His approach was therefore, refreshingly free of theoretical dogma, so I think it is safe to say that he would not have approved of what we might call the 'Marxist biography', such as Ralph Fox's 1933 biography of Lenin, in which the great Bolshevik's life is portrayed as an expression of the inexorable march of history towards the inevitable goal of communism, and he dismissed attempts to prove that Dickens was 'a revolutionary'. Nor would he have approved of the so-called 'psychobiography' which attempts to link aspects of personality to some source such as Freud's 'subconscious' or Jung's 'collective unconscious'. But he was not averse to using terms like 'paranoia' and 'sadism', which some critics believe wrongly to indicate a biographer's

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attachment to psychoanalysis, but which in fact long pre-date Freud. He wrote of Gogol having 'a sort of religious paranoia', of 'the paranoiac' would-be novelists he met in Paris in the 1920s, of some of the customers at the Hampstead bookshop where he worked being 'unmistakeable paranoiacs', and of the 'paranoiac suspicions of the NKVD'. And he also wrote about the 'sadism' in Kipling's novels and in American gangster movies. This by no means indicates that Orwell was a closet Freudian. He was, it is true, not averse to interpreting his own dreams in Freudian terms (notably his 'death dreams' at the end of his life), though seemingly not at all seriously, and he regarded psychoanalysis as a fad of the wealthy.

One distinctive feature of an Orwell biography we might have found would have been a serious attempt to relate his subject's life to the present, as he did in his 'imaginary radio interview' with Swift, a writer with whom, like Melville, Dickens and Gissing, he felt a particular affinity.⁽⁸⁾ My guess is that, given a choice, one of these (let's add Mark Twain to the list) would have been Orwell's chosen subject, and he did write long essays on more than one of them which give us a flavour of what might have been. He did believe that literary biographies should attempt to examine what he called 'the mental furniture' of writers and so we could have expected an Orwell biography to involve a strong imaginative, interpretive element attempting to illuminate the inner world of his subject, drawing on clues to be found in his creative works. But he would by no means have ignored the social and political context either. What is more, I think we can say with confidence that he would have written a 'warts and all' biography. As he said, in his essay 'Reflections on Gandhi', 'Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent.'

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Notes

1. Review of *The Life and Times of Henry Crabb Robinson* by Edith J. Morley, *Adelphi*, October, 1935; *Complete Works of George Orwell*, (London: Seeker and Warburg, 2000), Vol. 10, p. 398.
2. Review of *Herman Melville* by Lewis Mumford, *New Adelphi*, March-May, 1930, in Davidson, Peter (ed.), *Complete Works*, Vol. 10, p. 183.
3. *Complete Works*, Vol. 10, p. 398.
4. 'Charles Dickens', 11 March 1940, *Inside the Whale* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940) p. 43; *Complete Works*, Vol. 12, p. 36.
5. Review of *Stendhal* by F. C. Green, *New English Weekly*, 27 July 1939; *Complete Works*, Vol. 10, p. 378.
6. Review of *Tolstoy: His Life and Work* by Derrick Leon, *Observer*, 26 March 1944; *Complete Works*, Vol. 16, p. 36.
7. George Orwell - Fredric Warburg, 4 May 1946; *Complete Works*, Vol. 18, p. 305.
8. 'Imaginary Interview: George Orwell and Jonathan Swift', Recorded, 2 November

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1942; broadcast, BBC African Service, 6 November 1942; *The Listener*, 26 November 1942, as 'Too Hard on Humanity' (1637) *Complete Works*, Vol. 18, pp. 154-163:

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