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John Rodden, *Becoming George Orwell: Life and Letters, Legend and Legacy*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020

John Rodden is the author of an important study of Orwell that was published in 1989 and titled *The Politics of Literary Reputation*. That study integrated modes of analysis drawn from literary studies within the humanities with some of the modes of analysis practised more conventionally in the social sciences. The basic interest was in 'reputation history' – a variation upon the more established pursuit of reception history – and, resultantly, by means of a large-scale survey of post-1945 writing of all types, Rodden concluded that Orwell, posthumously, had assumed four different 'public faces': Rebel, Common Man, Prophet, and Saint. To a degree, the prominence of particular of those faces owed to matters of social context and locations of political power. Hence, in America during the period of the Cold War (and especially in educational settings), it was Orwell 'the Saint' – the figure deemed prescient and accurate about communism – who was often privileged.

This new study, *Becoming George Orwell*, retains the interest in the formation of reputation, which is perceived, still, as a pluralistic phenomenon: 'the effluence of influence', as Rodden neatly puts it (p. 22). But Rodden now pursues this interest, explicitly, in more personalised fashion: never before 'have I ever dared to broach at such length the issue of Orwell's complex heritage in terms of my own personal legacy' (p.14). He also does so, necessarily, against the background of social and political contexts which are since transformed. This passage of time begs at least two issues. First, how has Orwell's reputation since updated? Second (and arguably more interestingly), how have the critical questions arising in connection with Orwell's writings changed also? The advertised central topic of the new book is the creation of a 'legend'. Rodden writes that 'we need to see beyond our presentist bias and glimpse the origins, emergence and development of such a process', and that 'the task for us readers in the twenty-first century is neither to prostrate ourselves before a canonical "St. George" nor to deface his gravesite' (p. 56). That judgement is admirable both in its balance and its caution against the problems of what we might term over-topicality. On the negative column of the balance sheet, counting against Orwell, for example, are certain prejudices that seemingly infect aspects of the work; held from early to midlife about Jewish people, and, ostensibly, held lifelong about women.

The book is organised into two parts. Part 1 is 'Life and Letters'; or, basically, the man and his writings. As compared with the earlier book, this ventures into fresh territory by (re)engaging the humanities side of the interdisciplinary project; namely, by undertaking some literary criticism. Part 2 is 'Legend and Legacy' – the construction of the myth. Between these two parts is slotted a sort of intermission, in which Rodden explores parallels Orwell might have with two contemporaneous literary counterparts in France, Jean Malaquais and Albert Camus. The comparison with Camus is especially fitting, yet, in the event, is only lightly sketched, and perhaps suffers from a weakness which suffuses the book as a whole: withholding from the development of useful and variegated categories by which to perform both the interpretive and critical analysis. Loosely, an overall thesis of *Becoming George Orwell* is that legend construction falls into three stages: first of all, the man (Eric Blair); second, the literary breakthrough (Orwell); third, the public reputational breakthrough ('Orwell'). What is central to the literary breakthrough is the short, empire-set essay, 'A Hanging', which Rodden re-reads, persuasively, as anticipating the mature works both 'stylistically and thematically' (p. 87). Thereafter, it is the pairing of the late novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which comprises the primary impact upon the public reputational breakthrough. Rodden seems to think that the significance of Orwell today inheres somehow in 'voice' – and in sensing so, he might well be right. Thus, he describes this 'ever-living

voice' of Orwell's, 'this capacity to speak so compellingly on paper' which 'represents one of the vigorous and enduring strengths of Orwell's prose style' (p. 15). This prose style whittles down, on Rodden's account, to 'clarity', 'plain-speaking', 'concision', 'simplicity', and 'directness'. By the middle of his career, these items constituted the 'full resources' which Orwell had made available to himself as a writer (p. 85), and which by no means were separable from his 'vision' (p. 107).

Rodden casts *Becoming George Orwell* as a new departure (p. 14). But, to an extent, it also seems a case of missed opportunities. The missed opportunities reflect in the two issues which are represented by the passage of time. First, updating the reputation history proves partial. Within the opening few pages, appositely foregrounded are Donald Trump, 'alternative facts' and the 'infotainment industry', but, thereafter, the subject is left behind. Nearly omitted entirely is the acrimonious contest over Orwell's legacy that was attached to the second Gulf War (reflected, for instance, in the conflicting receptions featured in Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters*, and Scott Lucas, *The Betrayal of Dissent*). Second, concerning the deeper-lying, critical questions arising, this is where the limitations kick in of withholding from much in the way of concept development. To support his thesis, Rodden places considerable emphasis upon the 'interpretive frame' he tries to form out of the overlapping distinctions Orwell/ 'Orwell' and work/ 'Work'. But conceptually, this could be thicker – and venturing a bit more in the direction of theoretical discrimination (which Rodden abstains from), we could say that his is a claim, principally, about the play of *persona* in the formation of reputation. But persona is part, not the whole, of voice. Accordingly, our attention might legitimately wander to some other plausible elements of voice having recently been laboured in Orwell studies – but which are not integrated here. In *Orwell's Nose*, for instance, John Sutherland points to the range of metaphors. Other commentators have looked to the humour style (a topic which Orwell directly wrote about). And granted the stimulus presented by the emergence of the social science study of 'affect', the identity of emotional registers in Orwell's writing seems a candidate, too.

At the level of interpretation, perhaps one big chicken-and-egg question remains. As Bernard Crick once asked, did the plain style lead to the political and ideological heterodoxy? Or did the heterodoxy lead to the plain style? At the level of criticism, there are also questions remaining about the desirability of items of Orwell's prose style. Rodden recognises – and values – Orwell for his 'directness'. But are there limits to the attractions of vehemence and confidence over, say, reticence? In *The Orwell Mystique*, the feminist critic, Daphne Patai, aptly noted that saying bluntly what one thinks can be an act of aggression as much as a display of high principles. Why do issues like this matter? The wider import is perhaps in one key cultural dimension of social and political change. Once deemed a matter of who gets what, when and how, politics is now just as immediately a matter of who can *say* what – and, equally, *how* they might do so. In a sort of undeclared war, the authority of personal experience does battle with the authority of abstract ideas. In learning, then, new ways of speaking and writing, literary investigation and political inquiry surely remain mutually beneficial – and with the case of Orwell serving as a significant exemplar.

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