George Orwell’s Ethnographies of Experience

The Road to Wigan Pier and Down and Out in Paris and London

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ABSTRACT

George Orwell is most widely known as the teller of dystopian tales of oppression. A closer look at his oeuvre reveals a courageous truth seeker who frequently lived and worked with his literary subjects. In his fieldwork he used the methods of classic ethnography including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and field notes. This article argues that Orwell was an ethnographer in his research methods and that both Down and Out in Paris and London and The Road to Wigan Pier are ethnographic texts with valuable insights into marginal groups in the early to mid-twentieth century in Europe. The writer’s clear-sighted and humane depiction of ‘otherness’ shows his skill as an ethnographer. His personal investment with his subject matter, reflexivity and attention to broader social and political phenomena in his narratives mark Orwell as an autoethnographer.

KEYWORDS

autoethnography, didactic, ethnography, novel, Orwell, poverty

George Orwell, like few other writers, wrote of personal experience. His background as a journalist certainly contributed to this aspect of his vocation but there also seems to be something ingrained in his character as a man; a need to know the truth. His plainspoken style often rankled his leftist friends when he punctured a shibboleth of their faith or deflated the myth of the workingman hero. Orwell was indeed on the side of the downtrodden, but he was more on the side of verity, the only path to real reform and a better society.

Orwell the truth seeker needed to see things for himself. Whether it was war, poverty, awful working conditions or the lifestyles of tramps, this writer got to know his subject matter at close quarters. In doing so he gave a voice to people that society would just as soon ignore. In this sense the name Orwell stands as much for conscience as for dystopian surveillance. Millions know the author of 1984 and
*Animal Farm* as the wielder of dark tales about political oppression and totalitarian nightmares but far fewer understand the experiences that formed the writer. First and foremost Orwell was concerned with people and decency. There is always the sense in reading him that his was a reasonable voice seeking reasonable and just answers in an unjust and unreasonable world.

The notion of Orwell as an ethnographer is a natural extension of his truth-seeking instinct. In order to know the world, he needed to know other people, often in his case the people at the bottom rung of society or those that had fallen through the cracks altogether. His method frequently was to live or work with his study group and to understand as much as possible their worldview, as any proper ethnographer would. Because his studies were reflexive and dealt with issues in society more broadly, Orwell can be seen as an autoethnographer. His own stories and those of his subjects intertwine and often create poignant and moving literature.

Orwell is noted for his lucid prose and a clear-sighted understanding of his subject matter. A leftist by inclination who risked his life in the Spanish Civil War fighting for Republican values and social democracy against fascism, he was not averse to calling things as he saw them. When champagne socialists romanticised the working classes and poor, Orwell set them straight. He was a humane chronicler and a realist.

This article addresses *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in 1937, and *Down and Out in Paris and London*, published in 1933. These books are exemplary of Orwell’s ethnographic writing, but research on Orwell the ethnographer could certainly include *Burmese Days*, *Homage to Catalonia* and many others. It was the author’s aim to expose little-known worlds to the reading public. His project was self-consciously didactic and frequently political in purpose. How could the British public know its self-interest if it did not know the truth? How could empire be critiqued if its underbelly was not exposed? How could empathy be practiced without appreciating the ‘other’? Orwell’s attitude towards language in these books is overtly personal (Sabin 2007). He was a writer strongly motivated by moral concerns and especially the plight of the poor, showing continuity with the primary influences of his literary life, Dickens and Jack London, who delved into the worlds of England’s downtrodden in their books (Beadle 1978).

*The Road to Wigan Pier* saw Orwell living with coal miners and the unemployed in Lancashire and Yorkshire in the north of England. A tall man, he went down in the mines to see for himself the conditions...
of the workers who made the energy which the average Briton took for granted. This was a deeply uncomfortable and illuminating experience. Living in boarding houses showed him the lifestyles of the unemployed and the drudgery of long-term daily inactivity. As he noted in a letter to his publisher Victor Gollancz: ‘It is not easy to get hold of any facts outside the circle of one’s own experience, but with that limitation I have seen a great deal that is of immense interest to me. … I hope I shall get a chance to write the truth about what I have seen. The stuff appearing in the English papers is largely the most appalling lies’ (Sabin 2007: 43).

Not all that he wrote pleased Gollancz. The second part of The Road to Wigan Pier was a scathing attack on liberal British hypocrisy that shocked Gollancz and prompted him to write a foreword to the book to mollify his left-wing readership. Orwell the truth seeker was not afraid to ruffle feathers.

Down and Out in Paris and London gave readers an inside look at what it took to create a fine dining experience in an upscale Parisian hotel. Told with wry humour, Orwell detailed his real-life experiences in Paris’ Latin Quarter living amongst slum dwellers and working as a plongeur, a dishwasher – the lowest grade in the caste system of France’s eateries. Paris comes alive in the hands of this skilled chronicler of everyday life, from the cafes to the Paris metro and all of the characters he encountered working at the Hotel X and drinking in working men’s bistro.

The second part of Down and Out in Paris and London finds Orwell living in doss houses and tramping with capitalism’s flotsam in Britain. The dreariness of this world comes through in sharp resolution. Finding value in those that society valued least, Orwell’s depiction is sympathetic and matter-of-fact.

The reader who thinks of Orwell as the pessimistic chronicler of future nightmares will be surprised by these books. They are filled with humour and pathos. There is immense charity of spirit in Orwell’s realism. Orwell the ethnographer is a generous and hopeful man, finding what there is to be found in his experiences. His is a friendly, veritable voice making society’s ‘others’ familiar to the masses. His time with the deprived and working poor was analogous to that of an explorer. His descent into these worlds was marked by courage. Orwell the ethnographer was the intrepid scribe of worlds where Britain’s wealthy socialists feared to tread. Because they admired working people and the poor from a distance, their vision was distorted. Orwell’s ethnography corrected this distortion and made real the nameless and
faceless lumpenproletariat as much for the liberal establishment and academia as for the average Briton.

**Orwell, autoethnography and narrative**

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to incorporate and analyse personal experience and foreground autobiographical data. An autoethnographer is first and foremost a storyteller (Ellis 2004). Truthfulness in creating a narrative begins by overcoming the comfort of the familiar, whether it be rooted in personal experience or official stereotypes (Sabin 2007). Autoethnographies, as is the case with Orwell’s works discussed here, ask that the researcher come to understand the lifeworlds of others while reflexively appreciating their own role in this process. Orwell was particularly adept at this, which makes his narrative choices, authorial voice and admissions of fallibility exemplary as autoethnography. The use of poverty as a literary subject gelled with the author’s moral sentiments and political stance. His methodology fed into his narrative accounts, which describe Orwell’s real-life adventures living and working with the poor in Paris and London. He frequently focused on anecdotes and character sketches to drive home his themes: the poor are not monsters, nor are they heroes and poverty is a moral problem.

Autoethnography is a methodology which is particularly well suited to writers, including writers of fiction, as the centrality of the author’s voice and their experiences expressed through an engaging narrative is at its core. Autoethnography emerged as a response to the ‘crisis of conscience’ wrought by postmodernism in the social sciences. Scholars were troubled by ontological and epistemological limits in their research and eliciting ‘facts’ from their studies, recognising the impossibility of universal narratives (Ellis and Bochner 2000). This left the door open for the acceptance of more personal and partial ‘truths’ in academic writing. The success and value of an autoethnographic text can be understood by whether the story speaks to the reader about their experience or about the lives of others (Ellis 2004). Orwell’s engaging lived ethnographies are at once didactic and empathetic. They are strongly imbued with the author’s ethical notions, of the decency that is so often a concern in his oeuvre, but also with humour, nuance and a gift for compelling storytelling.

For George Orwell the political is never far from the surface. The intersection of the political, social worlds and his perceptions and
Artistry are the stuff of his authorial voice. That he was a polemical writer and a fierce seeker of truth seem at first glance to be at odds. The polemical writer is often a political hack with an axe to grind that makes the facts fit their worldview. But Orwell had the courage of his convictions. He was a firm believer in social democracy. Therein lies his polemics but there it ends. His politics were both moral and pragmatic. Oppression in any form sickened him, in part a result of his time in the Imperial Police in Burma where the costs of empire were brought home in stark relief. But apart from the moral repugnancy of one group’s dominion over another, Orwell simply felt a social democratic society would function better than one ridden over roughshod by rapacious capitalists. Orwell’s political mission and social conscience formed his methodology of discovery and production of texts.

Ethnography itself is performance emplotted by powerful stories (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Orwell’s performances, as soldier, dishwasher, tramp, unemployed working stiff and so on, created his performance as a writer. Orwell’s great gift as an ethnographer was his ability to relate to all sorts of people on something like equal terms. This was a remarkable feat in the first half of the twentieth century in Britain, a society deeply divided by class. As a man from a solid middle-class background and an Old Etonian, he came from very different worlds than his subjects. His fellow travellers, the middle-class intellectuals who shared his political sympathies, preferred to admire the poor and working people from afar, sometimes with ludicrously romantic notions. Orwell’s lived ethnography was immediate, potent and highly readable.

The challenge of mutual understanding among people is arguably one of the greatest dilemmas of our time (Muncey 2010). Orwell’s political project demanded a fair assessment of those he was attempting to ‘save’ or at least to elevate from a lifestyle akin to serfdom. Orwell felt the best way to help with this aim was to show the reading public what was right under their noses. Because Orwell himself is at the centre of these stories and they are reflexive and intersect with important social and political issues Orwell is an autoethnographer and the Road to Wigan Pier and Down and Out in Paris and London, among others of his works, are autoethnographies. It is hard to see how a more ‘scientific’ study of the subjects of these books could have rendered a more useful result, especially for Orwell’s political purpose. The reading public seldom see scientific reports and since Orwell intended to reach the masses as well as middle-class intellectuals his narratives of personal experience are in themselves a fine argument
for autoethnography as a worthwhile methodology of discovery. Autoethnography offers nuanced, complex and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences and relationships (Adams et al. 2015). Orwell’s ethnography of the particular promotes empathy.

Autoethnography has been used as a way of telling a story that invites personal connection (Frank 2000). The average modern reader can certainly relate to a book like Down and Out in Paris and London with its depictions of the struggles of working people. The ‘Paris’ part of the novel (for the purposes of this article I will refer to this book as a novel, although it is sometimes called a memoir) details the nameless narrator’s struggles to find work and then his time as a plongeur or dishwasher in an upscale hotel. When I have taught this book in undergraduate courses, many of the students have been food service workers, one of the popular workplaces for young people in the United States. Their affinity for Down and Out in Paris and London was often instant and enthusiastic. The author’s experiences and literary imagination combine to create compelling characters, situations and themes both political and social. There is humour, an underrated aspect of Orwell’s oeuvre, and pathos. Orwell invites the reader into these worlds and, frequently enough for him and his ethnographies, underworlds. His pellucid style is appealing and accessible. The reader readily connects with Orwell’s subjects.

At its most basic and fundamental core, ethnography is concerned with culture and its meanings. Classic ethnographic methods are those that have been traditionally used by anthropologists such as secondary data analysis, fieldwork, observing activities of interest, recording fieldnotes and observations, participating in activities during observations and carrying out various forms of informal and semi-structured ethnographic interviewing (Whitehead 2005). These methods have been applied to an expanded set of social situations to include just about any setting in which humans are interacting (ibid.). Orwell certainly used all of the methods of the ethnographic discipline mentioned above. A keen observer and journalist with strong analytical faculties for determining what things were important and what could be ignored, he was very well disposed to the ethnographic project.

The primary function of the ethnographer is the collection of data through fieldwork. For early social anthropologists this meant fieldwork in ‘primitive’ societies, ‘to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world’ (Malinowski 1961). For Orwell, especially in light of his politics, the ‘native’s point of view’ was that of the working poor and destitute. He held very much in com-
mon with those like Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss in the heroic age of anthropology who showed the reading public exotic ‘others’. Only with Orwell, these exotics were coal miners, tramps, the long-term unemployed, dishwashers and caravan dwellers.

Ethnographers examine how societies organise themselves. From data collection and analysis, human societies can be viewed as a system of symbolic communication (Lévi-Strauss 1992). The relationships between the organisation of human societies and the arrangement of languages have been found to be scientifically analogous by ethnographic advocates of structuralism. Developments in ethnography have led ethnographers to question their own role in the field and in the ability of the scholar to maintain objectivity in their accounts (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The postmodern turn in ethnography recognises the limits and difficulty of genuine objectivity. A collaborative and oftentimes narrative ethnography has come to the fore in recent decades that is decidedly literary in nature (Laterza 2007). In this sense, Orwell was ahead of his time in examining life, culture and human subjects through a literary lens. The reflexive turn in ethnography and the acceptance of autoethnography as a method can be seen to be prefigured by the Orwell style; the production of texts that are at once personal, veritable and meaningful to academia as well as the general public.

There is a long association between the disciplines of the ethnographer and the creative writer (Schmidt 1984). Ethnographers who have found the structure of academic writing insufficient to deal with the highly personal experience of fieldwork have turned to the novel and other fiction forms to express themselves. It is hard to say how much of works like *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* are purely products of literary imagination. Certainly the former has the structure and narration of a novel but, as has been frequently noted, of the ‘realistic’ sort. *The Road to Wigan Pier* is much more a work of sociology, self-consciously political and polemical. The second half of the book is an essay. But certainly the colouring of both works is that of a fine and imaginative author who selects events and characters from his personal experiences for their narrative effect and the author’s political bias. Allowing that both works are in some sense fiction, the question of their value as ethnography arises.

Fiction often contains detailed ethnographic descriptions and analytical statements about social realities (Laterza 2007). This is certainly the case with Orwell’s writing taken as a whole, but especially his autoethnographies. The whole point of the works this article discusses
was to show readers social realities about which little was commonly known, or perhaps people did not care to know. Orwell was constantly shedding light on uncomfortable truths many Britons would just as soon ignore.

The primary contention about the value of imaginative writing as ethnography and the novelist as ethnographer is verity. Because fiction comes primarily from the imagination of the writer, the novel is of inherently suspect value as ethnography. But the ethnographer or anthropologist’s selectivity of facts and their manner of expression invariably make such writing a creative, imaginative process as well. With Orwell, these worlds intertwine. The journalistic truth seeker, the imaginative writer and the political polemicist meld to create unique works of clear-sighted ethnography. Autoethnographic stories are stories of/about the self told through the lens of culture. These stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name and interpret personal and cultural experience (Adams et al. 2015).

The writer was very much a man of his time. Europeans often conceptualise their heritage in terms of linear progress (Nic Craith 2008). The wheel of time seemed to be turning towards greater liberation for working people and Orwell was there to nudge it forward, away from the spectre of fascism in the direction of social democracy. His egalitarianism and sense of social justice are in many ways as Christian as they are socialist and display continuity with European civilisation and its various emancipatory movements; the end of serfdom, suffrage, parliamentarianism.

Orwell’s obsessions were the obsessions of his age, which adds value to his ethnographic discourse. The sort of working poor that he describes in these books has largely disappeared from the Western democracies. It would be interesting to see what an undercover Orwell could do with Just Getting by at Walmart as a corollary to Down and Out in Paris and London. As it is, we are left with his insightful autoethnographies of the subaltern groups that were his vocational inspiration.

The Road to Wigan Pier

Orwell was a master of drawing settings and character types, often with humour and for exemplary purposes in his truth seeking and political project. The Road to Wigan Pier begins with Orwell living with
his study group, the long-term unemployed, in shared lodgings somewhere in Lancashire. The world economic crisis of the 1930s created a flood of unemployed in the coal mining and industrial job sectors. Orwell stayed in lodgings that were part boarding house and part tripe shop, with men flung out of work but also various types of layabouts or pensioners. It is a dismal place. The author’s descriptive prose gives a striking ethnography of squalor. He gets to the essence of his living space by noting the telling detail, a gift associated with creators of imaginative fiction. ‘Hanging from the ceiling there was a heavy glass chandelier on which the dust was so thick that it was like fur’ (Orwell 2001a: 3).

Far from romanticising the poor he encounters, Orwell describes plainly what he sees and some tropes of the feckless emerge. There is Joe, a middle-aged man who, lacking in all responsibility, seems more of a boy. Like many of the unemployed men Orwell encounters, Joe is an avid reader of newspapers and a ‘typical unmarried unemployed man, a derelict looking, frankly ragged creature with a round, almost childish face on which there was a naively naughty expression’ (Orwell 2001a: 7).

These sorts of depictions of unemployed men, utterly lacking in sympathy and somewhat mocking, were the kind that the left-wing middle-class did not want to hear. The notion that some men are merely lazy or lacking in ability or initiative runs counter to the argument that fat cat capitalists are responsible for all of Britain’s economic woes.

Other ethnographies of the desperate were more considerate. Orwell wrote The Road to Wigan Pier during the Great Depression and his description of the exploited among the lodgers he stayed with is moving. His discussion of the lives of newspaper subscription salesman has all of the hallmarks of Orwell’s ethnography; his humour, clear-sighted descriptive prose and pathos. ‘The newspaper-canvasers were a type I had never met before. Their job seemed to me so hopeless, so appalling that I wondered how anyone could put up with such a thing when prison was a possible alternative’ (Orwell 2001a: 8).

Orwell continues with an even-handed appreciation of these people and their dilemma. The canvassers’ job is at once possible to accomplish yet impossible in human terms. He describes in broad sociological terms the types of men prone to exploitation by the large newspaper publishers in Britain and their terrible predicament. ‘The newspapers engage poor desperate wretches, out-of-work clerks and commercial travellers and the like, who for a while make frantic efforts
and keep their sales up to the minimum; then as the deadly work wears them down they are sacked and fresh men are taken on’ (Orwell 2001a: 8).

Orwell rounds out his discussion with a personal anecdote about men he has known doing this type of work. His finest ethnographic writing has the quality of pathos and attention to the telling detail. Here one can sense Orwell’s empathy and the reader can relate to the notion of storing food in a suitcase as something that is out of place. Food does not belong in a suitcase. It belongs in an ice-box, or cupboard in a home. The homelessness of these men, their lack of a sense of rest and a place to rest is striking. ‘I got to know two who were employed by one of the more notorious weeklies. Neither of them could afford the pound a week which the Brookers charged for full board. They used to pay a small sum for their beds and make shame-faced meals in a corner of the kitchen of bacon and bread-and-margarine which they stored in their suit-cases’ (Orwell 2001a: 9).

Idlers, pensioners and the injured or sick unemployed, compelling as they were, held less interest for Orwell than those actually working under difficult circumstances. In the north of England where he was doing his field research this largely meant studying the habits of coal miners. Orwell was astounded and deeply impressed by the sheer endurance of these men. These were the working-class heroes his publisher wished to hear about. Orwell the ethnographer reveals the hidden worlds that keep civilisation functioning. ‘Watching coal-miners at work, you realize momentarily what different universes people inhabit. Down there where coal is dug is a sort of world apart which one can quite easily go through life without ever hearing about’ (Orwell 2001a: 29).

The Orwell project, if it might be termed this, involves most noticeably revealing the different universes about which people were generally unaware and oftentimes wished to remain unaware of. Like someone who enjoys pork chops, but does not really wish to know how pigs are raised or slaughtered, average Britons liked their electric lights, cars and central heating without wanting to hear of how energy was produced. Orwell would not let them get off so easy. The Road to Wigan Pier contains memorable portraits of the lives of miners and their heroic feats working under the earth. He reminds his privileged readership of the system that supports their supposedly higher intellectual calling. ‘It raises in you a momentary doubt about your own status as an “intellectual” and a superior person generally’ (Orwell 2001a: 30).
Orwell, who stood over 6 feet 2, made the journey underground to see the ‘necessary work’ of extracting coal. A new world opened for him and his readership. Orwell connects the experiences he has with his study group, society and his own perceptions creating the standard understanding of autoethnography as a practice that links the personal, the particular and broader society. As a fine writer and man with great qualities of perception and appreciation of meanings, sociological, economic, political and cultural, Orwell creates a lasting image of the subterranean life of miners in the north of England. The sense of claustrophobia he conveys is striking. The men work in tiny spaces, heat and dust. Oftentimes the miners worked kneeling, shovelling coal with great effort, a job he described as ‘dreadful’. Orwell’s admiration for the feats of coalminers borders on homoeroticism. ‘It is only when you see miners down the mine and naked that you realize what splendid men they are...nearly all of them have the most noble bodies; wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists, and small pronounced buttocks and sinewy thighs, with not an ounce of waste flesh anywhere’ (Orwell 2001a: 20).

Orwell’s respect for the coal-mining community is matched by the horror he felt at their living conditions. He noted that most miners were black with coal dust and grime from the waist down six days per week. Housing shortage was a serious issue in Britain in the 1930s and many miners lived with their families in appalling conditions. Some were forced to live without sanitary conditions in caravans.

That men doing essential work for Britain’s economy and society endured such hardships was disgusting to Orwell. This revulsion spills over to the second half of The Road to Wigan Pier in which he lambastes his own social class for their hypocrisy. His ethnography produces a clear-sighted and empathetic social understanding as well as political anger and a call to action.

**Down and Out in Paris and London**

Viewed as a mode of inquiry, writing is a way of coming to know an experience (Adams et al. 2015). George Orwell’s time as a poor, struggling writer found him in Paris. Here he made ends meet as he could and produced a novel chronicling his experiences. In hindsight some have called Down and Out in Paris and London a memoir, but it was sold upon publication as a novel and has the form and mode of expression of a novel. Its nameless narrator we can take to be Orwell himself, but
the book is peopled with characters and events that are novelistic and emblematic of imaginative fiction, especially in its ‘Paris’ part. *Down and Out in Paris in London* is an example of autoethnography in the form of a novel. The writer’s personal experiences, ethnographic information, reflexive feelings and thoughts, fieldwork, study group and literary imagination come together to create an ethnography of the life episodes of the author in the time and places discussed.

Whereas *The Road to Wigan Pier* finds Orwell in a polemical stance, *Down and Out in Paris and London* makes few political statements and its social conscience is largely confined to the ‘London’ section, with its interesting commentary on tramps. This is because first and foremost *Down and Out in Paris in London* strives for storytelling and artistry and the *Road to Wigan Pier* is a report. But also, the novel is largely set in a foreign country and Orwell was chiefly interested in addressing Britain’s flaws, as he had frequently done in his work as a journalist. Orwell in many respects stood for Britain’s national conscience.

The reader will notice in *Down and Out in Paris and London* a sense of adventure and *joie de vivre*. The writer may be poor and sometimes hungry but his trials are not without the sense that he is involved with life events of importance. Paris is, after all, the place where struggling writers are supposed to live.

Of special significance in *Down and Out in Paris and London* is the novelist’s appreciation of the ‘otherness’ of his experience. This is apparent from the outset of the book where Orwell touches upon the circumstances of his lodging in a slum in Paris’ Latin Quarter. The narrator lives in a hotel on the Rue du Coq d’Or. The hotel is packed with people scraping by in various ways: ‘cobblers, bricklayers, stonemasons, navvies, students, prostitutes and rag pickers’. They are in the main immigrants: ‘Poles, Arabs and Italians’. Some have stopped keeping up appearances and are a collection of eccentrics: ‘people who have fallen into solitary, half-mad grooves of life and given up trying to be normal or decent’. Orwell notices the paradox that poverty can actually confer a kind of liberty: ‘Poverty frees them from ordinary standards of behaviour, just as money frees people from work. Some of the lodgers that lived in our hotel lived lives that were curious beyond words’ (Orwell 2001b: 3).

Again, as in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell is like an explorer. He descends into the Parisian underworld of poverty like an Englishman with a pith helmet heading into the Congo. But he is not an imperialist or evangelist of socialism looking for converts. He is one of them. He
lives with the poor, works with them, eats with them, drinks with them and learns their worldview and lifestyles. The depiction of the café life of his slum is pertinent and colourful. Cafés are the epicentre of social life in Paris for all classes. There is a strong sense of vivaciousness amongst the struggles of poverty. ‘Half the hotel used to meet in the bistro in the evenings. I wish one could find a pub in London a quarter as cheery.’ (Orwell 2001b: 6).

Orwell’s descriptive writing is finely honed in Down and Out in Paris and London and gives life to the characters he encounters, his study group in the slum. Charlie is a recurring figure in the ‘Paris’ part of the novel. Orwell calls him a ‘curious specimen’, ‘too happy and too full of life to keep still for an instant’. ‘He declaims like an orator on a barricade, rolling the words on his tongue and gesticulating with his short arms. His small, rather piggy eyes glitter with enthusiasm. He is, somehow, profoundly disgusting to see’ (Orwell 2001b: 6).

Charlie relates an awful story of an experience in an ‘exclusive’ bordello and his understanding of ‘true love’ to a near-empty bistro. It is appalling and humorous at once. The narrator includes this event ‘just to show what diverse characters could be found flourishing in the Coq d’Or quarter’. Down and Out in Paris and London is full of these ‘set pieces’ in which the author’s insight and wit come together to create meaningful impressions.

Orwell’s first-hand experiences provide a personal narrative of poverty. In this the value of autoethnography can be noted. Descriptions of the poverty of others may render a compelling appreciation, but a thoroughgoing description of what real poverty is like from the author himself brings home its subtleties and Orwell was an expert at conveying the telling detail. Few educated people from wealthy countries will know what it is like to go several days without eating. Orwell can tell us first-hand. ‘We went several days on dry bread, and then I was two and a half days with nothing to eat whatever. This was an ugly experience’ (Orwell 2001b: 37).

He notes that the primary effect of hunger is to encourage torpor and a general feeling of weakness. He is too tired to look for work, but tries fishing, of course catching nothing. Intellectually, he only feels up to reading Sherlock Holmes stories. ‘Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else’ (Orwell 2001b: 37).

Like any ethnographer, Orwell is keen to know the folklore of his study group. His Parisian slum has its own oral history. Charlie relates the story of the death of an infamous miser after being cheated by an
interloping ‘Jew’ in a cocaine trafficking scheme. Roucolle, the miser, had lived in the neighbourhood and died a few years before Orwell’s arrival. ‘He ate cat’s meat, and wore newspaper instead of underclothes, and used the wainscoting of his room for firewood, and made himself a pair of trousers out of a sack – all this with half a million francs invested’ (Orwell 2001b: 129).

*Down and Out in Paris and London* is filled with these telling and often humorous anecdotes. They are the stuff of his ethnography of poverty and autoethnography of experience. A single anecdote lights up a whole world of vision (Muncey 2010). Orwell’s vision is at once humane and didactic.

The London section of the novel is more self-consciously political and polemic and also depressing by contrast with Orwell’s Paris experiences. It relates his time tramping and staying in doss houses with London’s forlorn and broke. He exists on a diet of ‘tea and two slices’ and is constantly on the move from one ‘spike’ to another; a transient. If the Paris section speaks of culture and is in Technicolor, then the London part speaks of dreary monotony and is in black and white. The reader senses the dismal eternal return of hopeless men walking between spikes or sleeping rough, penniless and barely eking out an existence.

An important theme in the London section, wrought by Orwell’s experiences living with his study group, is that England’s tramps are not the social pariahs of the bourgeoisie’s fears but merely out-of-work-men. He notes that people of higher classes have never circulated with the poor and therefore know nothing about them. Their fear is borne of ignorance. In respect to begging Orwell says: ‘Yet if one looks closely one sees that there is no essential difference between a beggar’s livelihood and that of numberless respectable people. Beggars do not work it is said; but what is work?’(Orwell 2001b: 185). Orwell then mentions a few professions with which the beggar’s compares favourably. His point is that the beggar extracts very little from society and suffers immensely for it, working out of doors in all weather, standing for countless hours, meeting with all manner of indignities, whereas many ‘respectable’ people do far more genuine damage to the public.

He notes the tramp monster is a fallacy ingrained in the consciousness from childhood that does not stand scrutiny. ‘This tramp monster is no truer to life than the sinister Chinaman of magazine stories.’ Orwell debunks the notion of tramps as dangerous, ‘If they were dangerous they would be treated accordingly’ and habitual drunkards ‘an idea ridiculous on the face of it’. Quite simply tramps do not have the
money for alcohol. To Orwell, a tramp is simply an out-of-work person forced into the lifestyle of tramping by English law. ‘A tramp is only an Englishman out of work, forced by the law to live as a vagabond... the tramp monster vanishes’ (Orwell 2001b: 216).

**Conclusion**

The creation of any text is an alchemical process. The final product is an amalgam of subject matter, experience, authorial voice, imagination, happenstance and will power. The production of a book is an act of endurance; the more so for an author like George Orwell who found himself so often in the trenches, sometimes literally, living with his projects in advance of writing about them. Those who argue that imaginative texts lack academic safeguards and rigour should ask themselves if their own research is as thoroughgoing and committed to truth telling as a man like Orwell’s. They could also consider whether removing oneself from the research process and its findings is either possible or desirable.

The reflexive turn in ethnography and the emergence of autoethnography as an acceptable methodology opens up space to consider authors both of fiction and non-fiction as ethnographers. All cultural products contain valuable ethnographic data without necessarily being ethnography. Was Joyce an ethnographer of Dublin or Wilde an ethnographer of London’s upper crust? Perhaps.

Because of Orwell’s methods and goals he can be viewed as an ethnographer. This is important because understanding his works in this way can provide valuable tools to the researcher. Orwell’s writing aims to dislodge readers from their familiar habits while at the same time insisting that full access into other worlds is inevitably limited by the experiences and prejudices you cannot help but bring to them (Sabin2007). Orwell understood that delving into the lives of others was a perilous task to which he could not do total justice. Recognising that personal experiences cannot tell the whole story is an essential aspect of appreciating the scope of autoethnography. Qualitative and personal, it lights up a small space, but in ways that can render meaningful results.

Foregrounding personal experience is not a call to solipsism or shoddy academic craftsmanship. Instead it animates academic discourse with lived examples and human feelings. This cannot do anything but help in the quest for knowledge and understanding. In this
sense Orwell’s non-fictions and thinly veiled fictional works of personal experience stand out as exemplary autoethnographies.

The turn towards the examination of the lives of subaltern groups in the humanities and social sciences was spurred on by Orwell. His elitist leftist friends in Oxford, Cambridge and London knew very little of the struggles of the working poor and destitute, whose cause they expressly championed. If they were prepared to listen (after all these were in the main the same people who continued to believe in Stalin) they learned something. It is now unthinkable to look at history and society as merely an investigation of its ‘important’ personages. Orwell certainly contributed to this expanded, egalitarian worldview, acknowledging he was far from the first to delve into these subjects.

Orwell’s talent and nerve allowed him to reach both the masses and the intelligentsia. He detested what he described as ‘smelly little orthodoxies’ whether of the right or left, echoing Nietzsche’s maxim that ‘the will to a system is a lack of integrity’. For Orwell the truth outweighed ideology. This made him a rather non-conformist socialist and a dangerous one to his fellow travellers who revelled in smelly little orthodoxies. His insights, intelligence, courage, subject matter and talent as a writer made for a fine ethnographer.

Orwell was a master at drawing in the reader to see and feel the worlds of his subjects. A strong current in both *Down and Out in Paris and London* and the *Road to Wigan Pier* is an appreciation of the importance of physical details and recognition of shared physical and emotional humanity (Sabin 2007). This embodied ethnography brings the reader into contact with the sights, smells and feelings of his subjects and their milieu. Orwell, like London, and Dickens before them, sought to counter society’s indifference and hostility to the poor by resorting to the literary device of presenting individual case studies of poverty (Beadle 1978). The reader is presented with a kind of sociological proof, based on personal investigation, that a sizable portion of the physically repulsive, seemingly dangerous poor are really decent, courageous people who have fallen victim to the exploitation or indifference of an inhuman socioeconomic system (Beadle 1978). In this sense Orwell was an ethnographer of empathy. Orwell’s strong moral compass may mark him as something of an anachronism in the context of academic research where one does not ‘judge’. The interwar years were a time when it was difficult not to take sides; this was a very ‘political’ era. Orwell’s stance for social democracy and against unaccountable and pernicious powers was the stuff of his polemics. But
this never clouded his commitment to truth telling and his meaningful ethnographies of experience.

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References


