

significant is the avoidance of any more informative verbs, or decorative ones: even simple locative verbs like 'stood', or 'placed', are absent, and there is a marked scarcity of prepositions indicating spatial relationships between the objects listed, only 'towards' and 'beyond'. Just enough information is given to allow readers to understand the use of these spaces in future scenes: the four rooms of the Club are carefully distinguished, so that we can construct how, later, the English with their sexual and political tensions occupy parts of this building in their various role-playings and crises.

But the sparse description means also sparseness of the rooms and objects described: Flory's bedroom, it is hinted, is under-furnished by British standards; the Club is tatty and institutional; there is nothing personal, nothing luxurious. Some simple negative words carry a "large weight of meaning: 'only four rooms', 'open doorways', 'no ceiling', 'only rafters', 'no furniture'. In the description of the Club, a string of adjectives indicate seediness and neglect: 'forlorn', 'mildewed', 'old and mangy', 'littered', 'unhomelike', 'dusty', 'tepid'. Both places are infested, with sparrows, flying beetles, silver fish, a 'tuktoo'. These locations are both described and judged, and they are judged negatively: they symbolise the dehumanisation of the English in Burma, and are fitting settings for the inadequacies of social and sexual relationship which their situation brings about, and particularly for the racism which is enacted in the book. In describing the Club, Orwell lays the ground for a critique of it and its members; this typical mixture of description and evaluation will be discussed in the final section of the present chapter.

The second passage, the description of Flory's bedroom, moves from a matter-of-fact account of the room to an evocation of a mood symbolised by the light and the sound of the Burmese natural world. Orwell's correlation of the characters' feelings and the sensations of landscape and climate in *Burmese Days* will be discussed in Chapter 7.

NATURALISM AND SURREALISM IN *DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON*

Down and Out has its sources in Orwell's personal travels of 1927–9: his voluntary tramping in the East End of London, followed by eighteen months trying to live as a writer in Paris, where he became genuinely destitute and worked as a *plongeur* or dishwasher.⁸ Orwell vouched for the authenticity of the book: 'nearly all the incidents described there actually happened, though they have been rearranged' (*Wigan Pier*, p. 133). The English and French experiences have been transposed. The book starts in a poor quarter of Paris with depictions of a hotel and bar and its neighbourhood, and of various eccentrics (his term) who live at or frequent the hotel and bistro. By Chapter

3 the narrator has lost his money; he teams up with Boris, a Russian waiter, to search for work, and the next several chapters follow their adventures and financial decline until they secure work at a hotel. Boris is a caricature, a Dickensian grotesque; their hunt for a job, a picaresque farce. The structure so far is rambling and anecdotal, a series of comic or pathetic incidents, and curious tales narrated by the ‘eccentrics’.

Chapter 10 has the narrator and Boris employed at the ‘Hôtel X’, and here begins a section of some sixty pages depicting the hotel and restaurant world seen from below. This sequence can be regarded as the imaginative centre of the book. Orwell devotes great descriptive and poetic energy to presenting the squalid conditions of the kitchens; the power hierarchy in the work force, with the lowest grade, the *plongeurs* (at which level Orwell was employed) being essentially slaves; the cheating of, and contempt for, customers. In his review, C. Day Lewis commented ‘if you wish to eat a meal in a big hotel without acute nausea, you had better skip pp. 107–109’.⁹ Here is art as political writing. There are a number of often-quoted set pieces, including recurrent treatments of a motif that clearly preoccupied Orwell: his vision (from a position of privilege) of labour and working life as a descent into hell; there is a version of inferno at his first entrance into the Hôtel X:

He led me down a winding staircase into a narrow passage, deep underground, and so low that I had to stoop in places. It was stiflingly hot and very dark, with only dim, yellow bulbs several yards apart. There seemed to be miles of dark labyrinthine passages—actually, I suppose, a few hundred yards in all—that reminded one queerly of the lower decks of a liner; there were the same heat and cramped space and warm reek of food, and a humming, whirring noise (it came from the kitchen furnaces) just like the whir of engines. We passed doorways which let out sometimes a shouting of oaths, sometimes the red glare of a fire, once a shuddering draught from an ice chamber. (*Down and Out*, p. 54)

The narrator moves from the Hôtel X to a pretentious but filthy and disorganised restaurant; the squalor and chaos are again portrayed in detail. He escapes by borrowing the money to return to England, but before he relates his return he offers a chapter of ‘opinions about the life of a Paris *plongeur*’ (Ch. 22).

The book continues with a rambling account of life among tramps and beggars in London (which in Orwell’s real life was a voluntary descent undertaken before his trip to Paris). The procedure and structure are similar

to the first part: Orwell puts his narrator in association with two low-life characters, Bozo the ‘screever’ or pavement artist, and Paddy the tramp, and takes the reader from location to location, describing lodging houses and ‘spikes’ (‘casual wards’ for the homeless) with a documentary detail that foreshadows *Wigan Pier*. He ends with an essay on the social and economic conditions of tramps. This is a direct treatment of one aspect of the theme of the book (destitution), voiced in the form of a commentary. Critics have expressed their dissatisfaction with this essay, treating it as a deviation from a predominantly fictional mode. But the narrative fiction—the low-life stories peopled with Dickensian oddities—is itself only an instrument, as Orwell clearly announced in the first chapter:

I am trying to describe the people in our quarter, not for the mere curiosity, but because they are all part of the story. Poverty is what I am writing about, and I had my first contact with poverty in this slum. The slum, with its dirt and its queer lives, was first an object-lesson in poverty, and then the background of my own experiences. It is for that reason that I try to give some idea of what life was like there. (*Down and Out*, p. 5)

The dominant mode of representation in the first part of *Down and Out* is naturalistic: ‘sordid realism’. Significantly, Orwell invokes Zola, whom we know (note 4) he much admired: ‘I wish I could be Zola for a little while, just to describe that dinner hour’ (ibid, p. 64; peak demand at the hotel, frenzied activity in the kitchen). The point is not whether Orwell emulated Zola’s style in detail, but that his descriptive model is in general terms naturalistic in the Zola mode, and therefore literary in character.

The opening description of the street and the hotel where the narrator lived is a characteristic evocation of ‘noise and dirt’, the keynotes of Orwell’s representation in the Paris section:

The Rue du Coq d’Or, Paris, seven in the morning. A succession of furious, choking yells from the street. Madame Monce, who kept the little hotel opposite mine, had come out on to the pavement to address a lodger on the third floor. Her bare feet were stuck into sabots and her grey hair was streaming down.

Madame Monce: ‘Salope! Salope!’ How many times have I told you not to squash bugs on the wallpaper? Do you think you’ve bought the hotel, eh? Why can’t you throw them out of the window like everyone else? *Putain! Salope!’* ... Quarrels, and the desolate cries of street hawkers, and the shouts of children chasing orange-peel

over the cobbles, and at night loud singing and the sour reek of the refuse-carts, made up the atmosphere of the street.

It was a very narrow street—a ravine of tall, leprous houses, lurching towards one another in queer attitudes, as though they had all been frozen in the act of collapse ... My hotel was called the Hotel des Trois Moineaux. It was a dark, rickety warren of five storeys, cut up by wooden partitions into forty rooms. The rooms were small and inveterately dirty, for there was no maid, and Madame F., the *patronne*, had no time to do any sweeping. The walls were as thin as matchwood, and to hide the cracks they had been covered with layer after layer of pink paper, which had come loose and housed innumerable bugs. Near the ceiling long lines of bugs marched all day like columns of soldiers, and at night came down ravenously hungry, so that one had to get up every few hours and kill them in hecatombs. Sometimes when the bugs got too bad one used to burn sulphur and drive them into the next room; whereupon the lodger next door would retort by having his room sulphured, and drive the bugs back. It was a dirty place, but homelike, for Madame F. and her husband were good sorts. The rent of the rooms varied between thirty and fifty francs a week. (*ibid*, pp. 1–2)

The ‘realism’ here is of a very literary kind. The verbless opening sentence ‘The Rue du Coq d’Or ...’ is like the title of a picture, or a scene-setting opening stage-direction: Orwell signals that he is to embark on a word-painting of ‘the atmosphere of the street’. A second verbless sentence follows, conveying an impression rather than a narrative report of an event; further on, the sentence beginning ‘Quarrels ...’, though finite (culminating in a verb that completes it), is dominated by a string of noun phrases which offer a series of discrete sensory impressions. We saw in the previous chapter that the list or series is a favourite stylistic device of Orwell’s. It is here used to suggest a crowding of sensory stimuli; we will encounter some more spectacular lists later.

Three other simple linguistic strategies dominate this impressionistic technique of ‘sordid realism’. The first is a set of nouns and verbs, in a colloquial register, designating unpleasant, intrusive or low-life objects, sensations and actions:¹⁰

yells, bare feet, squash bugs, throw [bugs] out of the window, quarrels, cries, shouts, orange-peel, singing, reek, refuse-carts, cracks, bugs (x 4), kill, burn sulphur.

The second strategy is effected through the adjectives, and is highly typical of Orwell: the passage is suffused by adjectives offering consistently negative judgements; none severe in itself, but together producing an overwhelmingly gloomy effect:

furious, choking, bare, grey, desolate, loud, sour, narrow, leprous,
queer, dark, rickety, small, dirty, thin, loose, too bad, dirty.

Once again this is, apart from 'desolate' and 'leprous', a vernacular register, part of Orwell's way of maintaining contact with 'demotic speech'. And the oppressive negativity foreshadows the gloom of such later books as *Aspidistra* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Only at the end are positive evaluations offered: 'homelike', 'good sorts'.

A third feature of this version of naturalism is a general heightening of sensation carried by some of the adjectives which suggest some extreme state of affairs, or at least a high level of energy output or sensation (for example 'furious', 'choking', 'loud', 'tall'), and by intensifiers:

very narrow, inveterately, as thin as, layer after layer, innumerable,
long, all day, ravenously, every few hours, too bad.

We can begin to see in this passage how Orwell's style tends toward hyperbole, even exaggeration and stridency. Later, in the set descriptive passages on hotel kitchen life, his use of these linguistic resources results in sensationalism or surrealism rather than naturalism, as we will see.

This realism is done in one of Orwell's mixed styles. Part of the vocabulary is 'low'; the tone is urgent as if the speaking voice wishes to break through. There may be seeds of the descriptive realism of *Wigan Pier*: the bugs on the pink paper are observed microscopically, the rents of the lodgings are stated in a matter-of-fact way, but without the foregrounded precision of the room dimensions and family budgets of *Wigan Pier*. But the painterly opening sentence, the traces of a high-register vocabulary ('sabots', 'leprous', 'hecatombs'), and the high-profile metaphors, encase the realism in a literary frame. There are two set-piece metaphors, the first extensive and complex, but ostentatious and laboured:

a very narrow street—a ravine of tall, leprous houses, lurching
towards one another in queer attitudes, as though they had all
been frozen in the act of collapse.

The first part of the complex metaphor, 'ravine', invokes landscape to picture the geometry of the street; that visual field is then replaced by an image drawn

from human disease to convey the texture of rotten, broken plaster; ‘lurching’ makes the houses lean and jerk like drunks; ‘frozen’ arrests the lurching motion, but in this sensorily confusing context the normal suggestions of ice, coldness, hardness are irrelevant or not activated—the final part of the metaphor remains dead because the context does not motivate it. The second set metaphor is more unified:

long lines of bugs marched all day like columns of soldiers

The image is visually precise, not dissipated like the previous one; and the military metaphoric vehicle evokes purpose and threat. But it is presented comically: the bugs are mocked by the disproportionately elevated classicism ‘hecatombs’ and by the farce of smoking them backwards and forwards from room to room. The unexpected learned word ‘hecatomb’, which stands out in the vernacular context, is a typical Orwell strategy: from time to time he drops in a strikingly erudite word which many readers will have to look up (I did: a hecatomb was a Greek or Roman ceremonial sacrifice of 100 oxen). Orwell’s extreme stylistic self-consciousness and his respect for the colloquial would rule out mere display of cleverness: the aim seems to be comic here, while elsewhere a learned polysyllable seems to serve to unsettle the style, to keep the reader alert.

The ‘naturalistic’ style of the opening, then, is far from ‘documentary’. It is decorative, hyperbolic, and whimsical in tone. This is also a literary set piece, a passage of atmospheric writing which prefigures the Zolaesque kitchen descriptions at the centre of the book; it differs from them in its interweaving of distaste and humour. One of these set pieces has been excerpted earlier; I will extend the quotation here:

He led me down a winding staircase into a narrow passage, deep underground, and so low that I had to stoop in places. It was stiflingly hot and very dark, with only dim, yellow bulbs several yards apart. There seemed to be miles of dark labyrinthine passages—actually, I suppose, a few hundred yards in all—that reminded one queerly of the lower decks of a liner; there were the same heat and cramped space and warm reek of food, and a humming, whirring noise (it came from the kitchen furnaces) just like the whirl of engines. We passed doorways which let out sometimes a shouting of oaths, sometimes the red glare of a fire, once a shuddering draught from an ice chamber. As we went along, something struck me violently in the back. It was a hundred-pound block of ice, carried by a blue-aproned porter.

After him came a boy with a great slab of veal on his shoulder, his cheek pressed into the damp, spongy flesh. They shoved me aside with a cry of *'Sauve-toi, idiot!'* and rushed on. On the wall, under one of the lights, someone had written in a very neat hand: "Sooner will you find a cloudless sky in winter, than a woman at the Hôtel X. who has her maidenhead." It seemed a queer sort of place. (*Down and Out*, pp. 54–5)

Some elements of the style of the first passage are intensified here: naturalism is raised to hyperrealism. There is, for example, the crowding and diversity of violent and unpleasant sensations, hurled at the reader in rapid lists of noun phrases: 'heat and cramped space and warm reek of food, and a humming, whirring noise', 'sometimes a shouting of oaths, sometimes the red glare of a fire, once—a shuddering draught from an ice chamber'. There is the heightening of impression through constant intensifiers: 'narrow', 'deep', 'so low', 'stiflingly hot', 'very dark'. The extremes of heat, cold, noise, confinement and darkness hold the passage together as one of Orwell's literary visions of hell,¹¹ quite explicit on the next page as he moves to describe the kitchen:

The kitchen was like nothing I had ever seen or imagined—a stifling, low-ceilinged inferno of a cellar, red-lit from the fires, and deafening with oaths and the clanging of pots and pans.

Remarkably, this highly picturesque and impressionistic writing, with a strong literary heritage in images of hell, is achieved with a very ordinary vocabulary. The vocabulary is neutral (e.g. 'low', 'stoop', 'cramped', 'staircase', 'passage', 'doorways') or vernacular ('shoved', 'queer'). Much of it is native in origin rather than Latin or French.

There is little figurative language, certainly none of the ostentatious metaphors or similes found elsewhere in Orwell. Much of the vocabulary is of one or two syllables only; often a whole clause or sentence is constructed in this mainly monosyllabic mode:

there were the same heat and cramped space and warm reek of food ... After him came a boy with a great slab of veal on his shoulder, his cheek pressed into the damp, spongy flesh.

There is one foregrounded classical polysyllabic word, 'labyrinthine', but its meaning and its connotations of the Minotaur are entirely appropriate in the context.¹²

The relationship between language and context, and what the context does to our perception of style, is important here.¹³ A piece of language—a sentence, a paragraph, a text—has certain objective and describable structural characteristics: its words may be short or long, native or foreign, concrete or abstract, vernacular or technical, and so on; they are arranged in a certain syntax, an ordering of words and phrases. But a description of the objective features of a text's language does not predict what significance they may have for the writer and for readers within different contexts of discourse. Similar linguistic characteristics may have—will have—different social and rhetorical meanings depending on the nature of the text as a whole, its cultural context and the expectations of its readers. To take the sentence about the boy with the slab of veal, its language is objectively 'simple' in a number of ways which could be exactly stated. In the context of a literary inferno, however, the sentence carries complicated and rather sinister connotations: the anonymous boy is a diabolical helper like the 'twelve cooks [who] skipped to and fro' at the 'furnaces' on the next page; the unconcerned intimacy of his living face and the dead flesh is not only gruesome but also surreal. Suppose, however, that the context were different: Orwell might perhaps have described work at an abattoir. In that context, the sentence about the boy carrying the veal might be experienced very differently, as a plain, matter-of-fact account of a routine act of work, unpleasant in itself but without the connotations suggested by the context of the diabolical kitchen.

This example suggests that the *language* of literary naturalism and its hyperreal extension may not be markedly different from that of the descriptive realism for which Orwell is praised, and that is the case at least for *Down and Out*. The plain and vernacular basis for the descriptive style is also present in the more elevated styles. I will simply illustrate this fact with a passage from *Down and Out*, reserving a more detailed treatment of descriptive realism for the discussion of *Wigan Pier*, below. This is Orwell's first description of conditions in a common lodging house:

[T]he boy led me up a rickety unlighted staircase to a bedroom. It had a sweetish reek of paregoric and foul linen; the windows seemed to be tight shut, and the air was almost suffocating at first. There was a candle burning, and I saw that the room measured fifteen feet square by eight high, and had eight beds in it. Already six lodgers were in bed, queer lumpy shapes with all their own clothes, even their boots, piled on top of them. Someone was coughing in a loathsome manner in one corner.

When I got into the bed I found that it was as hard as a board, and as for the pillow, it was a mere hard cylinder like a block

of wood. It was rather worse than sleeping on a table, because the bed was not six feet long, and very narrow, and the mattress was convex, so that one had to hold on to avoid falling out. The sheets stank so horribly of sweat that I could not bear them near my nose. Also, the bedclothes only consisted of the sheets and a cotton counterpane, so that though stuffy it was none too warm. Several noises recurred throughout the night. About once in an hour the man on my left—a sailor, I think—woke up, swore vilely, and lighted a cigarette ... [other noises] ... Once when [the man in the corner] struck a match I saw that he was a very old man, with a grey, sunken face like that of a corpse, and he was wearing his trousers wrapped round his head as a nightcap, a thing which for some reason disgusted me very much. (*Down and Out*, pp. 131–2)

Like the other passages discussed, this one conveys a range of sensory impressions, with a strong emphasis on their effect on the narrator—here, a consistent and powerful sense of physical disgust, unrelieved by any comedy or symbolism such as is found in the other extracts. We will see below that ‘realistic’ representation in Orwell is very much something experienced in the senses and feelings rather than coldly observed and recorded. There is always a very emotive tone: involvement and opinion are never far away when Orwell writes of the life of the poor. The impression of realism coexisting with the thread of judgement and feeling comes from an insistence on particularity of reference: here, the measurements of the room, the count of eight beds and six lodgers in them, the bed ‘not six feet long’, the texture and geometry of objects—‘lumpy shapes’, ‘hard as a board’, ‘cylinder’, ‘narrow’, ‘convex’, ‘sunken face’, and so on. Orwell is also fond of material arrangements that the reader has to work at to visualise: ‘his trousers wrapped round his head as a nightcap’, a precise, grotesque and defamiliarising image.¹⁴

NATURALISM IN *HOMAGE TO CATALONIA*

In the next section of this chapter I will discuss some heightened versions of ‘realistic’ writing, and the way they carry social and political judgement. But before moving on from the subject of naturalism or ‘sordid realism’, it is appropriate to refer to its place in the third of the ‘mixed genre’ books that Orwell wrote in the 1930s, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). In December 1936, Orwell ‘had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do’ (*Catalonia*, p. 8).