“A Hanging”:
George Orwell’s Unheralded Literary Breakthrough

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Abstract
“A Hanging,” written under George Orwell’s birth name of Eric Blair, is a literary feat and artistic landmark in the development of “Blair” into “Orwell” that has gone little-noticed by most Orwell readers. This essay discusses the contribution of “The Hanging” to that development in close detail, and it also addresses long-standing debates about its genre and biographical statues.

Keywords
Burma, Peter Davison, Bernard Crick, Adelphi, Burmese Days
Eric Blair, the Sahib from Southwold

Slightly more than eight decades ago, Eric Blair—a little-known, aspiring London author—published a powerful piece of short prose entitled “A Hanging.” Soon he would become better-known under the pen name “George Orwell,” which he used for the publication of his first book, Down and Out in Paris and London. Blair adopted the pseudonym in order not to embarrass his family about his forthcoming Jack London-type book on sharing Depression-era poverty with the East End tramps.

“A Hanging,” which appeared in the Adelphi in August 1931, is regarded as a classic today, even if it is seldom anthologized in literature textbooks or taught in introductory rhetoric and composition courses to undergraduates. Published little more than two years after he returned from what he called “five years in an unsuitable profession” (CW 18: 319) as a policeman in British-occupied Burma, it is based on Blair-Orwell’s experience of working in the Indian Imperial Police.

After graduating from Eton, Orwell chose not to go on to university but instead joined the Empire’s Indian police service in Burma, the first Etonian to adopt that career. Between the ages of 19 and 24, while his peers back in England were attending seminars and enjoying undergraduate night life at university, Orwell was administering matters of life and death in Burma, in charge of a vast geographical district whose population was equal to a medium-sized European city (Shelden 97). He also had an experience uncommon for literary Englishmen of his generation. He served under Burmese officials, giving him an insight into how a “provincial” region of the British Empire functioned (Shelden 94-95).

Orwell served in Burma (now Myanmar) during 1922-27, resigning his commission in January 1928 during his leave home in Southwold, a suburb of London. Burma proved traumatic for Orwell. Perhaps motivated by pride, he stayed five years but came to hate the work he had to do. The tension of ruling over a people who hated him and on behalf of an Empire he rejected took its toll on Orwell personally, especially once he realized that he had made a serious mistake.

At some point during his service in Burma—he never specified when—Orwell recognized that he had to leave. More importantly, he came to recognize that what he wanted to do was to be a writer. Orwell had tried to deny this truth. But in
doing so, as he recalled in “Why I Write” (1946), “I was outraging my true nature . . .” (CW 18: 316).

Back in England, as he later wrote, all doubts about his future ended. “I was already half-determined to throw up my job, and one sniff of English air decided me” (Wigan Pier 137-38). Orwell believed that his time in Burma had coarsened him, nearly turning him into a brute. He “was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate” (Wigan Pier 137). When he informed his parents of his plans to leave the Imperial Police and to become a writer, they were shocked, particularly his father whose life had been spent in Imperial service.

Orwell never returned to Asia. But his first successful publications in England drew deeply on his Burmese experiences. Furthermore, like Winston Churchill who used his time in India as a soldier to educate himself by reading widely, Orwell also completed his formal education in Burma. He kept up with his reading and carefully studied the Burmese people and their ways. Unlike most Englishmen in Burma, he avoided the white man’s club with its billiards, its whisky and soda, its false bonhomie, its expat hauteur, and its ersatz upper-class tone and arrogant contempt for Asians, a milieu that he later would savage in his satirical novel, Burmese Days (1934).

Art of the Narrative

“A Hanging” tells the story of the execution of an unidentified Indian man. We learn neither his name nor anything about his background. Nor do we know his crime. He is an Everyman, described only as “a brown, sullen, puny wisp of a man with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes” (CW 10: 207). He could be anyone—and that is the point: he could be you or I. The first-person narrator also remains unidentified. Orwell does not want to limit the reader’s sympathies by diverting us with details that may distract from the work’s punch. Instead he apparently wanted to fortify its “political” purpose, as he famously phrased one of his chief literary motives years later in “Why I Write,” by implying a universality to any judgment of such executions (CW 18: 319). As he later pointedly observed in The Road to Wigan Pier (1937), “I watched a man hanged once; it seemed to me worse than a

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1 All quotations from Orwell are taken from the authoritative edition by Peter Davison, The Complete Works of George Orwell (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986-1998) and are indicated as CW followed by the volume number.
thousand murders” (CW 5: 136). In “A Hanging” the narrator reinforces this point by drawing attention to the prisoner’s humanity, as he—a dead man walking—diligently sidesteps a puddle. “He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less” (CW 10: 209).

“A Hanging” is a prose gem, a brilliant, 2,000-word burst of arresting insight and poignant feeling. Orwell is both the narrator of “A Hanging” and a detached observer of the event, an objective third-person narrative voice that calmly drives home his message. The work begins with one of Orwell’s characteristically direct descriptive openings: “It was Burma, a sodden morning of the rains. A sickly light, like yellow tin foil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard. We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row of sheds fronted with double bars, like small animal cages. Each cell measured about ten feet by ten and was quite bare within except for a plank bed and a pot of drinking water” (CW 10: 207). This opening contains some of the touches for which Orwell’s mature art would become famous: original images, vividly descriptive prose, and specific details to highlight a scene. The metaphor of the morning light “like tin foil,” the precise dimensions of the bleak cells, and the latter’s comparison with “animal cages” exemplifies the clear, crisp prose that his documentaries and journalism would soon feature. Indeed Blair’s intuition about the importance and timing of literary detail is impeccable throughout “A Hanging.” When the condemned man is told that he is to be hanged, he urinates on the cell floor. This too anticipates Orwell’s later essays and documentaries, whereby a dramatic, often understated, happening suddenly generates sympathy in or paints a powerful portrait for the reader. Within a few lines, Orwell forges an emotional identification between the reader and the condemned man.

After sketching the background for the reader, Orwell carefully divides his narrative into three distinct parts in order to convey the sheer futility and wrongness of taking a human life. First, as the prisoner is led to the gallows, Orwell introduces an incident designed to humanize the scene. “A dreadful thing had happened—a dog, come goodness knows whence, had appeared in the yard.” It came “bounding among us with a loud volley of barks, and leapt round us wagging its whole body, wild with glee at finding so many human beings together. It was a large woolly dog, half Airedale, half pariah. For a moment it pranced round us, and then, before anyone could stop it, it had made a dash for the prisoner, jumping up to lick his face.
Everyone stood aghast, too taken aback even to grab at the dog.” The prisoner’s reaction is revealing. Orwell writes that “he looked on incuriously, as though this was another formality of the hanging,” (CW 10: 205). Orwell here humanizes the prisoner, who is no longer a condemned man but someone with whom a friendly dog wants to frolic. It is as if the narrator challenges the reader-onlooker: How bad can someone be if a happily skipping, dancing, wooly half-Airedale wants to play with him?

In the next section, the prisoner approaches the gallows. An incident then occurs that gives the narrative its most memorable moment. The prisoner “walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path” (CW 10: 208). This understated, apparently casual moment precipitates the insight in the puddle scene that makes “A Hanging” conscience-pricking for us readers. “It is curious,” Orwell writes, “but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness of cutting a life short when it is in full tide” (CW 10: 208).

Having carefully, subtly humanized the prisoner, Orwell quickly describes the other participants in the execution. The hangman, “a grey-haired convict in the white uniform of the prison” quickly places the rope around the prisoner’s neck. The Indian guards in attendance are uneasy, they “suddenly changed color and had gone grey like bad coffee.” The narrator then nonchalantly delivers a remark that makes the reader’s hair stand on end. With the rope around his neck, the prisoner “began crying out to his god. It was a high, reiterated cry of ‘Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!’” The execution itself is described only briefly—“a clanking noise” as the trap door opened—“and then silence” (CW 10: 209). The ultimate success of this tableau turns on the fact that its narrative gradually and ingeniously shifts: its final paragraphs generate a perspective that ultimately induces the reader to consider ourselves as guilty parties—as executioners bereft of any moral high ground. When the dog leaps up to lick the Indian convict, the prisoner’s execution proceeds despite the distraction. The scene closes with the dog howling in a corner as the prisoner hangs lifeless before the crowd. Orwell, who does not mince words about
his position, comments that, “when a murderer is hanged, there is only one person at the ceremony who is not guilty of murder” (CW 10: 208).

As the narrative reaches this climax in its third and final section, Orwell shifts direction fully, viz. away from a description of the execution itself and toward the reactions of the executioners—an implicit shift back to “us,” the readers. He describes the superintendent poking the hanging man with his stick, saying “He’s all right,” and then checking the time as though the execution represented just a tiresome inconvenience for everyone. No sense of sadness at the taking of another life emerges, but again rather something quite self-indulgent: “relief,” “now that the job was done,” expressed via a forced, Kiplingesque heartiness and by uneasy, anxious (dim) wit in order to relieve the tension (CW 10: 209). Orwell and his fellow officers are representatives of the Raj, “executing” their duties, gulping whiskeys, and kidding (among) themselves. As the scene winds down, Orwell writes:

\[
\text{. . . All at once everyone began chattering.}
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The Eurasian boy walking beside me nodded towards the way we had come, with a knowing smile: “Do you know, sir, our friend (he meant the dead man), when he heard his appeal had been dismissed, he pissed on the floor of his cell. From fright. . . .”

Several people laughed—at what, nobody seemed certain.

Francis was walking by the superintendent, talking garrulously. . . . Well, sir, all has passed off with the utmost satisfactoriness . . . I have known cases where the doctor was obliged to go beneath the gallows and pull the prisoner’s legs to ensure decease. Most disagreeable! . . . One man, I recall, clung to the bars of his cage when we went to take him out. You will scarcely credit, sir, that it took six warders to dislodge him, three pulling at each leg. We reasoned with him. “My dear fellow,” we said, “think of all the pain and trouble you are causing to us!” But no, he would not listen! Ach, he was very troublesome!

I found that I was laughing quite loudly. Everyone was laughing.

We went through the big double gates of the prison, into the road. “Pulling at his legs!” exclaimed a Burmese magistrate suddenly, and burst into a loud chuckling. We all began laughing again. (CW 10: 210)
To contrast with the banter and the laughter of the executioners, Orwell closes “A Hanging” with a single, terse, ironic, collectively self-accusatory sentence: “The dead man was a hundred yards away” (CW 10: 210).

**An Apprentice Author’s Flight of Passage**

Yet is “A Hanging” nonfiction or fiction? “Essay”? Or “short story”? Until this point, I have carefully avoided both words, in favor of terms such as “work” or “narrative.” The genre issue is significant, however, and must be addressed. It is difficult to believe that “A Hanging” is sheer fiction. The detail is too precise, the descriptions somehow too lifelike for us to suppose that such an incident didn’t happen. “A Hanging” bears similarities with other tales written about what the British considered the strange customs of the East—notably, some of W.S. Maugham’s stories, whom Orwell admired—but “A Hanging,” like Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant” (1936), has too much of the autobiographical to be a work of pure fiction.

Before proceeding any further with discussion about the genre and biographical background of “A Hanging,” a question pertinent and compelling for the general reader arises: Why should anybody care about this early literary work of Eric Blair? It may interest an Orwell specialist to know if he was writing an essay loosely (or closely) based on something he had witnessed or was an extrapolation from such an event yet wholly invented otherwise, but why should the rest of us?

I would reply with a number of reasons. First, the literary and intellectual development of the most important essayist since Hazlitt in the English language, and the most influential political writer of the twentieth century in any language should be a matter of wider cultural interest for our understanding of artistic growth and creative potential. Secondly, such an author’s decisions, whether conscious or unconscious, bear on matters of existential choice in a great writer’s complicated path toward realizing his highest gifts, and in that respect may disclose for us the psychodynamics of self-realization and indeed illuminate the highest possibilities in all of us. The question of how he sees himself—his gradual discernment of his gifts and the conflicts he reconciles between his self-image and his public images—furnishes us with invaluable insight into struggles of identity formation for a young artist for future greatness. This, of course, includes his decisions about how to proceed with concrete literary projects—for example, whether to devote himself to
the art of the novel or the craft of non-fiction. Hence the generic status and biographical exploration of “A Hanging” possesses large implications.

Third, “A Hanging” is not merely some isolated instance of literary juvenilia by an unknown “Eric Blair,” but rather, as we shall see, may be understood as a significant, if unexpected and “premature,” achievement whose full flowering will be witnessed in later years with Orwell’s greatest essays and two crowning masterpieces of fiction, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These three issues warrant more extensive discussion. For any interested and informed reader about literary culture and intellectual history, such an exploration proves worthwhile for reasons quite apart from the details that preoccupy Orwell scholars. Still, the details matter.

Of first importance is the role of “A Hanging” in Orwell’s artistic development and how it sheds light on the existential crossroads of young Blair in his mid-twenties. I would argue that “A Hanging” is the first glimpse we have of the future George Orwell. The genre status of the work is a vital matter because Blair had simply not yet reached a level of literary skill capable of writing a work of pure fiction of high caliber. This is, above all why “A Hanging” is probably autobiographical—not a work of sheer imagination. As I will soon discuss at length, nothing else he wrote at that time shows the naked, overwhelming emotional power of “A Hanging.” In this short piece of 1931, Orwell momentarily exhibits the supreme literary talent that would blossom in mid-decade. The struggling journeyman somehow accesses the prose gift that would soon distinguish the literary signature of the unerring master of crystalline prose. The mature Orwell is, of course, often celebrated for his prose style as “the crystal spirit.” His famous essay, “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War,” ends with a poem featuring that image and it is also used as the title of George Woodcock’s much-admired book, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (1966). In “A Hanging,” England’s prose laureate—The Crystal Spirit—is already visible on the horizon.

Scholars have disputed for years whether or not “A Hanging” is straight autobiography. One of Orwell’s biographers, the late Sir Bernard Crick, expended enormous effort in his pioneering study, *George Orwell: A Life* (1980), to find out whether Orwell had ever indeed witnessed or participated in a hanging during any of his numerous postings in Burma. Crick was able to establish the exact number of executions, and to specify their type, in every location in which Orwell worked as a policeman. Yet he could find no irrefutable biographical evidence, either in official correspondence or from any witnesses, as to whether or not Orwell was personally
in attendance or involved in the executions. Thus, ever since the publication of Crick’s thoroughly researched first full biography of Orwell, a consensus among scholars had reigned that “A Hanging” is faction, an autobiographically based essay in which Orwell employed fictional techniques and unleashed his imagination to transform a (probable) real-life event (or a composite of events) into an enduring work of art. Similar debates have long raged as to whether Orwell ever shot an elephant in Burma, given that the precise genre of his other celebrated essay about Burma, “Shooting an Elephant,” is also ambiguous.

I will address both controversies shortly and in greater detail. In both cases, however, the biographical issues should not distract us from admiring the literary excellence of the narratives. For instance, “A Hanging” represents an astonishing performance by an unknown twenty-eight-year-old writer. It also demonstrates the first signs of the prose style showcased in Orwell’s great essays of the 1940s (such as “Politics and the English Language” and “Such, Such Were the Joys”), writings that have established him since his death in 1950 as what might be called (as I have titled it in one critical study) Every Intellectual’s Big Brother (2007). Characterized by acute observation, telling description, and pointed commentary, the essays of his last years also exhibit a powerful, understated language that makes them unforgettable.

It all began with “A Hanging,” which marks Eric Blair’s breakthrough both in artistic and in professional terms, when he “overreached” himself, as it were, in an exceptional artistic flight to the higher plateau where the crystal spirit presided, and fleetingly accessed “George Orwell,” the writer whose fiction and essays of the later 1930s and 1940s would revolutionize English prose. For “A Hanging” signifies a leap of talent far above his previous work. Moreover, it was really his first publication that deserves the name “literature.” Until this point, Blair had published nothing more than a few book reviews and a couple of newspaper articles, along with a pedestrian piece of expository prose about his experience with the tramps of London. Nothing prepared literary London for this essay, and it strengthened his resolve to persist and complete “Lady Poverty,” his work-in-progress on low life in London and Paris. It was that manuscript that he revised and completed the following year under the title Down and Out in Paris and London, published in January 1933.

The foregoing biographical context of “A Hanging” is crucial to remember in order to appreciate fully the degree of literary growth that this short essay represented for Eric Blair. “Blair-Orwell” never showed his greatness as a novelist
during the 1930s, even though most of his literary energy was poured into the writing of fiction. He produced four traditional novels between 1932 and 1939. They achieved modest success and gained him some recognition in English literary circles. Yet only *Burmese Days* (1934) and *Coming Up For Air* (1939) were later regarded by Orwell (after he became famous) as worth reprinting. He dismissed as failures two other novels, *A Clergyman’s Daughter* (1935) and *Keep The Aspidistra Flying* (1936). Although *A Clergyman’s Daughter* has never found a following, most critics today judge Orwell more generously than he did himself, noticing positive qualities in all four novels, as does Loraine Saunders in her revisionist study of Orwell’s novels of the 1930s, *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell* (2008). So “A Hanging” is the masterpiece that Blair-Orwell probably did not immediately honor as such precisely because it was to him “merely” nonfiction. It is the essay that Orwell wrote while he was still trying to find himself, a work that foreshadows the mature Orwell’s work—which would consist in the 1940s of his landmark essays (such as “Politics and the English Language”) and his essayistic fictional forms, the fable (*Animal Farm*) and the anti-utopia (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*), which Alex Zwerdling has felicitously dubbed his “didactic fantasies” (5). “A Hanging,” moreover, represents not only Orwell’s first major publication in England, but also the only example of his best writing published under his real name (Oldsey and Browne 198). When Orwell published “A Hanging” in the *Adelphi* in 1931, the journal was co-edited by John Middleton Murry and Max Plowman. It was an exotic mix of radicalism and modernism and would serve as Orwell’s major outlet for the next few years until he switched to *The New English Weekly* because of a dispute among the *Adelphi’s* owners. Orwell felt comfortable writing for the *NEW* editor, Philip Mairet, who gave him considerable freedom to write and review what he liked, while he was laboring away at the more demanding and to him more important task of being a novelist.

It deserves renewed emphasis that “A Hanging” tells the story of the execution of a man for a crime never specified. As we have seen, he is virtually an Everyman, merely described as “a Hindu,” “puny,” and a couple of other physical details. Probably the reason is that Blair does not want to wrangle with the reader about “justified” or “unjustified” grounds for execution, that is, he does not want to risk blurring the focus of his story-essay—and the purity of his moral critique—with attention directed to the state’s judicial arguments or the victim’s personal background. The payoff in artistic power of “A Hanging” is clear—it reads as a formidable indictment of the whole concept of capital punishment. Orwell delivers
an ethical and emotional appeal, not an abstract, impersonal argument consisting of philosophical speculation or legal hair-splitting, let alone theological reflection. Christopher Hollis, who knew Orwell and visited him in Burma, maintains that his attack on the concept of capital punishment is only tenable on the basis of some religious belief, a view that runs counter to Orwell’s well-known atheism (40). Rather, the essay grabs the heart, pressing a moral-affective appeal that aims to arouse the reader’s disgust toward what the taking of a human life entails.

Fiction, Fact, or “Faction”?

Largely neglected in comparison with Orwell’s more famous essays, “A Hanging” has rarely been anthologized—unlike “Shooting an Elephant” or “Politics and the English Language,” which are Orwell’s best-known essays, and have been reprinted in dozens of English literature anthologies (Rodden, Literary Reputation 346-53). Nonetheless, “A Hanging” has generated considerable discussion. As we mentioned in passing earlier, questions have been raised whether it is a work of fact or imagination.

That issue merits closer scrutiny. Orwell’s first biographer, Bernard Crick, had reservations about the essay’s authenticity, labeling it “a compound of fact and fiction, honest in intent, true to experience but not necessarily truthful in detail” (318). When pressed for details, Crick notes, Orwell told some friends that “A Hanging” was just a story (151). After Orwell’s death, his friend Malcolm Muggeridge was approached by Sonia Orwell to write Orwell’s biography. Muggeridge eventually gave up, believing that the task was beyond him and that “A Hanging” and Orwell’s other autobiographical writings were largely fictionalized (Muggeridge 171). Other biographers have been more inclined to accept the work’s authenticity; Gordon Bowker, for instance, says it “most likely” happened (88-89). Others avoid the issue. In his biography published in 2000 Jeffrey Meyers simply says it is a “confessional” piece of writing (69), whereas in his collection Orwell: Life and Art from 2010 he includes a 1972 book review in which he refers to Mabel Fierz’s statement that Orwell told her that he was never present at a hanging. In his “authorized” biography, Michael Shelden concludes that the essay was based on a real experience (103). Orwell’s second wife, Sonia, took a straightforward view unimpeded by a scholar’s probing or a biographer’s duty-bound skepticism. When Crick, whom she had commissioned to write Orwell’s biography, expressed doubt about whether the incidents such as “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” took
place, she exploded: “Of course he shot a fucking elephant. He said he did. Why do you always doubt his fucking word!” (Barnes, “Such, Such Was Eric Blair” 2).

More recently, a new and interesting wrinkle has been added to the saga of this biographical quandary regarding the incidents on which both “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” are based by Peter Davison in *The Lost Orwell* (2010), who unearthed evidence that a British policeman stationed in Burma, Major E. C. Kenny, indisputably killed an elephant. The incident, Davison discovered, was reported in the *Rangoon Gazette* (22 March 1926), just days before Blair was transferred to a new posting away from the region. So he probably heard about the event. But whereas Blair was apparently disciplined by his superiors (ostensibly by the transfer and for the reasons cited in the narrative, i.e., destroying valuable property [ivory] and causing prolonged suffering to an animal), Major Kenny went unpunished for a similar incident. Putting all this together, my own guess is that Blair based his narrative on his own experience, but that both shootings likely served as literary tributaries that inspired Blair’s inventive imagination and enriched the seedbed that germinated this artistic triumph in “Shooting an Elephant.”

To conclude the discussion regarding “A Hanging,” is it “authentic”? Between 1923 and 1927, according to one estimate, more than 600 people were hanged in Burma (Smith et al. 56) and on two separate occasions Orwell claimed that he had witnessed executions. As I have already mentioned, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he wrote that he “had watched a man hanged once; it seemed to me worse than a thousand murders” (*CW* 5: 136-37). Eight years later, in one of his idiosyncratic “As I Please” columns in *Tribune*, he made the claim in almost identical words, adding a typical aside: “There was no question that everybody concerned knew this to be a dreadful, unnatural action” (*CW* 16: 451). The historical claim that Orwell saw a hanging and also may have shot an elephant, moreover, was not doubted by the prominent Burmese academic Maung Htin Aung of the University of Rangoon, who as a youth personally witnessed an incident in a train station when the policeman Blair hit a Burmese boy with a stick and later studied Orwell’s fiction (*Aung* 29). The likelihood of biographically based “authenticity” is heightened with recent discoveries of evidence that other Orwell writings, long believed to be fictional, were based on real experiences. For instance, a copy of *Down and Out in Paris and London* that Orwell sent in the mid-1930s to his then-girlfriend, Brenda Salkeld, contains notes attesting to some of the incidents mentioned. Moreover, some passages in Orwell’s 1936 diary, which he kept during his research trip to the north of England, confirm that many of the events mentioned in *The Road to Wigan Pier* were based on real experiences. The historical claim that Orwell saw a hanging and also may have shot an elephant, moreover, was not doubted by the prominent Burmese academic Maung Htin Aung of the University of Rangoon, who as a youth personally witnessed an incident in a train station when the policeman Blair hit a Burmese boy with a stick and later studied Orwell’s fiction (*Aung* 29). The likelihood of biographically based “authenticity” is heightened with recent discoveries of evidence that other Orwell writings, long believed to be fictional, were based on real experiences. For instance, a copy of *Down and Out in Paris and London* that Orwell sent in the mid-1930s to his then-girlfriend, Brenda Salkeld, contains notes attesting to some of the incidents mentioned. Moreover, some passages in Orwell’s 1936 diary, which he kept during his research trip to the north of England, confirm that many of the events mentioned in *The Road to Wigan Pier* were based on real experiences.
Pier really took place. Orwell may have used creative imagination in these documentaries but they appear to be firmly rooted in fact. As Bowker notes, *The Road to Wigan Pier* is another typical Orwell “political book,” i.e., the kind of book which, in Orwell’s own words, is “part reportage and part political criticism, usually with a little autobiography thrown in” (Bowker 198). Based on these findings and the solid research of the cited scholars, plus the position on this matter of a Burmese academic who grew up in British-ruled Burma and was very knowledgeable about Burmese society and history, it is reasonable to conclude that Orwell probably both witnessed a hanging and shot an elephant. If so, I maintain that “A Hanging” is properly understood as a pioneering example of a now-familiar hybrid genre known as “creative nonfiction.”

**Blair’s Literary “Leap,” Orwell’s Literary Legacy**

If “A Hanging” does indeed represent a sudden leap of achievement by Blair—which he did not immediately and fully assimilate or have under control (or perhaps even recognize)—what else did he write of a supposedly “inferior quality” at that time? The only substantial published piece coincident with “A Hanging” was his essay on his days in a tramp’s hostel, “The Spike,” a pedestrian effort that utterly lacks the sophistication of the former. When Blair wrote “A Hanging,” he was convinced that his real talent lay in fiction. He firmly believed, as Orwell expressed it in “Why I Write,” that a writer had to produce “enormous naturalistic novels with unhappy endings . . .” (*CW* 18: 317). As a result, Orwell produced only a single other lasting essay during the period 1931-36, “Shooting an Elephant,” which he did not pen until five years after “A Hanging.” So Orwell “fell back,” as it were, in his nonfiction prose, content to toss off competent yet unstrenuous book reviews and challenged himself in his fiction alone.

As a result, scholars (and anthologists) have usually overlooked that “A Hanging” is written with the same economy of style, direct approach, and attention to detail of Orwell’s best later writings. It represents a sublime, isolated, Elysian island attesting that Orwell had mastered his mature literary style more than five years before most critics have believed. Most Orwell scholars, indeed, believe that the writings that reflect the mature Orwell can be dated from “Shooting an Elephant” and from the memoir of his time fighting in Spain during the civil war, *Homage to Catalonia* (1937). Both these works reveal Orwell at his best, a skilled master of narrative and exposition, a gifted controversialist as well as a master of
documentary prose. The Orwell of the great essays and the two iconic works of imagination of the 1940s, Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four, is frequently on display in his prose writings of the later 1930s.

Indeed, “A Hanging” recommends itself to us as a literary breakthrough not only in stylistic terms and as an early instance of creative nonfiction, but also thematically. For its subject matter foreshadows not just relevant topics in Animal Farm (e.g., the satirical treatment of Stalin’s show trials), but also anticipates the related, yet broadened, themes of Nineteen Eighty-Four. The nightmare of authoritarian power and totalitarian dictatorship, the brutal tyranny of the collectivist state, the hypocrisy and cruelty of respectable “authority,” the ruthless exploitation of the powerless, and on and on. All these leitmotifs, which are already present in Blair’s “A Hanging,” would become the signature issues of the mature Orwell’s outstanding achievements, not only in his prose fiction but also in his subsequent nonfiction—even in many of his apparently “casual” book reviews and “As I Please” columns. And that literary signature, which conveyed the impression of a “plain man” persona and a “pure” style, as I have argued in The Politics of Literary Reputation, and The Unexamined Orwell (2011), would go on not just to influence but indeed to transform the mode and sensibility of English-language journalism in the second half of the twentieth century.

Works Cited


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