Interview with Orwell Scholar John Rodden

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John Rodden has published ten books about Orwell and his legacy, including The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of “St. George” Orwell (1989), Scenes from an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell (2003), Every Intellectual’s Big Brother: George Orwell’s Literary Siblings (2007), The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell (2007), The Unexamined Orwell (2011), and with John Rossi, The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell (2012). His work on Orwell also partly inspired him to take a deep interest in the history of Socialism, including the rise and fall of totalitarianism in Germany. He has written a quartet of books focused on cultural politics in Germany before and after reunification: Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of East German Education, 1945-1995 and Textbook Reds: Schoolbooks, Ideology, and Eastern German Identity (2006), The Walls That Remain: Western and Eastern Germans Since Reunification (2008), and Dialectics, Dogmas, and Dissent: Stories from East German Victims of Human Rights Abuse (2010). He has, moreover, published books and numerous journal articles on the modern British novel, public intellectuals in the USA and Britain, and contemporary Latin American literature.

Interviewing John Rodden is a treat and a challenge. He has considerable expertise as an interviewer himself and has interviewed important writers, academics and public intellectuals such as Isabel Allende, his former colleague at the University of Virginia; Camille Paglia, the enfant terrible of American academe; and the late Christopher Hitchens. He has, in fact, written an innovative study of the literary interview as a serious genre worthy of scholarly analysis, Performing the Literary Interview: How Writers Craft Their Public Selves (2001). The following two-hour interview was recorded in Austin, TX on February 15, 2014.
HV: Before we discuss George Orwell, I would like to talk about another aspect of your work. In your book *Performing the Literary Interview*, you describe a typology of three roles or scripts that interviewees assume during interviews. There are the “traditionalists” who focus on discussing their work (writings, works of art, music—as the case may be) rather than themselves. *Raconteurs*, a French word for storytellers, play with the interview and interviewer and use the interview format as an opportunity for self-discovery. Advertisers, as the word suggests, promote themselves and their work fairly explicitly. If I were to say that you are mostly a traditionalist with a splash of the *raconteur* and just a pinch of the advertiser thrown in, what would be your response?

JR: Ha! I would say that you are basically right, but not too much of the advertiser, I hope. Just a tiny pinch. But in numerous personal essays, however indirectly, I have openly written autobiography, or found myself engaging in veiled autobiography as I talked about my intense admirations for certain writers and intellectuals and how they have shaped me. I would call this “neo-traditionalism,” insofar as it discloses personality through the act of identification, what I have termed “transference heroics.” One adopts an “intellectual big brother,” such as Orwell, in the course of seeking to fulfil one’s own personal needs and aspirations, indeed as a way of discovering and/or creating one’s best self.

HV: Let us then go on to George Orwell, the “intellectual big brother” you just mentioned. And I might add that you published a reflection on intellectual brotherhood, “Homage to My ‘Intellectual Big Brother,’” in *George Orwell: Critical Insights* (2013). My question concerns Orwell’s place in contemporary culture. Orwell died in 1950, but for many decades his work was enormously influential and you published your first book on Orwell, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, in 1989. This was at a time when public interest in his work remained very considerable. The fateful year 1984 had just passed and had occasioned much discussion among academics and ordinary readers alike. Meanwhile, the first biography of Orwell by Bernard Crick was out and Peter Davison had just published the first volumes of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*. Now that another quarter-century has passed since you first started writing about Orwell, does his work still seem as important today as it did in the closing decades of the twentieth century?

JR: Yes, it is as important today as in earlier decades, but it is not as timely, especially not outside the English-speaking world. It is easy to forget in Britain that Orwell’s books were not published in Europe, let alone Asia, in the sequence in which they appeared in English. To some extent, this was even true in the USA, in
so far as his early books utterly disappeared from view and the works of mid-career
were seldom published, so that his last two books introduced a virtually unknown
writer to the American public. Elsewhere, this was even more so the case. Orwell’s
books were published beginning with *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, i.e.,
beginning with the very end of his career. It was only after his death and the
enormous success of his last two books that his earlier work interested foreign
publishers. Even in those languages in which some of his earlier work was
published earlier than 1945 to 1950, it sold meagerly and achieved little critical
notice in the foreign press. This was the case in France, where some of his earlier
work appeared in the thirties and forties. The result of this different sequence in his
publishing history has had enormous importance in the foreign language media. It
established Orwell conclusively as the leading literary Cold Warrior of the
post-WWI era, whose slogans and catchwords from *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
became battle-certified as the Cold War of the 1950s and 60s between East and West
dawned. Orwell was considered a champion of the so-called Free
World of the West and became probably the most prominent voice representing
Western cultural and political values. So the fact that his final two books were
published first in the non-Anglophone world reinforced and highlighted Orwell as a
Cold Warrior. The reverse order also contributed to his Cold Warrior image in the
US. Furthermore, it was during this period that Orwell became institutionalized in
Germany in school curricula, with *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* gaining
entry to Gymnasium English courses. The same was true of the latter development,
if to a much lesser extent, in other foreign languages and certainly throughout the
British Commonwealth.

**HV:** But the Cold War is over and so today his work is not as timely.

**JR:** That is my first point. His work is not as timely because the Cold War is
over and we today are at a much greater historical distance. To younger generations
it probably seems as if an incommensurable gulf exists between the era of the 1940s
and 50s and the second decade of the twenty-first century. Fascism and to a great
extent even communism are no more. Communism is more like a defunct
experiment which exists merely in six countries today. Even in the PRC, which has
risen to dominance not only in Asia but also throughout the world, it is so mixed
with capitalism and concessions to free enterprise values that it represents nothing
like the communism of Mao Tse-tung. In the immediate post-World War II epoch,
however, the attempt to fight state socialism using Orwell’s arsenal of catchphrases
was extremely attractive for two reasons. First, because a dead man cannot object.
Let us not forget that Orwell died less than one month before Joseph McCarthy
came on the scene in the US and launched the so-called Red Scare, i.e., the communist hysteria that peaked in the US, but existed also to a less extreme extent in Europe. Second, the anti-communist agenda, involving what Orwell referred to in the pre-McCarthy era as “100 % Americanism,” was promoted in the 1950s and 60s via the mass media, including film and television adaptations of Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four. Moreover, there were translations in at least five dozen languages and even many of the major dialects. Today, however, we are far removed from the historical backdrop against which Orwell wrote, and as a geopolitical fire alarm, Orwell’s warning is much more attenuated. It no longer resounds with the high decibel level of the 1950s and 60s, but comparisons between Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four and the current state of the world are still made and are still compelling. One only needs to look at all the references to Orwell in the English-language press, and the foreign press to a lesser degree, in relation to the recent scandals about international government surveillance associated with Edward Snowden, Wikileaks and so forth. Time and again, correspondents draw allusions to Nineteen Eighty-Four or use proper adjectives such as Orwellian to describe the invasion of privacy, the abrogation of civil rights, and official intrusions into the lives of both private citizens and other governments—even allies, as the Obama administration has recently experienced to its embarrassment in relation to breaches of national security.

**HV:** The adjective “Orwellian” is also used to refer to a particular prose style which Orwell championed, but that would not have been a major concern in many foreign languages which have very different rhetorical traditions.

**JR:** That is why he has never been known, or only to a limited extent, outside the English-speaking world for his essays, journalism, realistic novels of the 1930s, and documentaries such as Homage to Catalonia and The Road to Wigan Pier. Nor has he been known, as I discovered when I spoke at the Berlin Centennial Conference on George Orwell in 2003—a public symposium sponsored by former political prisoners under East German Communism—as a man and writer, although some readers do value him as a model stylist. That latter perception is contingent on whether readers’ level of English is skilled enough to appreciate the purity and simplicity of Orwell’s prose style. By contrast, in the English-speaking world, he is honored, as I once put it, as the prose laureate of English. So Orwell has achieved a much narrower and more limited reputation in the non-English-speaking world.

**HV:** Orwell, you stated, remains as important today as previously, though less timely, less urgent, and less immediately relevant. Do you believe this trend will continue twenty, thirty or even fifty years from now?
JR: I believe that it will. Orwell and his work will increasingly be valued as a warning and as a historical landmark. In the latter case it will be remembered by literary and political historians as an invaluable bulwark against tyranny, for its power—as much as any other work of the creative imagination—to steer the course of history in the direction of democracy and against dictatorship. To put it simply, it will be remembered that 1984—or rather, Nineteen Eighty-Four—led to 1989, that is, to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism, and not to Room 101. Orwell never celebrated capitalism and free enterprise and so, just as in the 1950s and 60s when his work was exploited to attack not only communism, but also socialism and sometimes even democratic socialism, it may be exploited again. Political coffin-snatching and grave-robbing resulted in Orwell the socialist hijacked to discredit socialism. The outcome was a simplistic caricature, with the implication being that Orwell turned rightward at the end of his life, perhaps even into conservatism or neo-conservatism and abandoned socialism. But historians who possess intellectual integrity will instead observe that Orwell’s work has greater credibility than other critics from the same historical moment because he was a socialist—albeit a democratic socialist—who was castigating the shortcomings and abuses of state socialism, i.e., he was holding his own side to a very high standard. He was protecting not just equality, but also liberty, and insisting that, if it came down to a choice, liberty and its defense must precede and even exceed concerns about equality. I believe he would say the same thing today in the ongoing battle between freedom and security in the wake of September 11, 2001. Yes, these two values need to be carefully balanced, but when it comes down to the painful choice as to which to prioritize: freedom first, freedom first.

HV: In The Unexamined Orwell, you also draw a distinction between Orwell’s “work” and his “Work.” The work, then, is not as important today, but the Work is.

JR: Yes, the distinction is between Orwell the writer and man and “Orwell,” the literary figure, the political icon, the cultural talisman. Given this kind of distinction, I would say that his Work, i.e., the work of “Orwell,” is arguably not only as important today, but almost as timely as during his lifetime and during the succeeding decades. This “Orwell” is traceable to the writer Orwell from “Why I Write” who showed how an engaged citizen speaks out and maintains moral and intellectual integrity. This is the Orwell who demonstrates, both in terms of literary power and moral credibility, the act of writing from the bones, i.e., you live what you write and write from the depths of your experience. I would say that this is one of the lasting and durable strengths of his prose: an ever-living voice testifying as
an honest human being expressing difficult truths, i.e., a prose that communicates a very human portrait of the intellectual. Ultimately, then, his Work remains important and timely, not only because of the fact that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a universal metaphor in the world war of words—not only due to its warnings against excessive government power, invasion of privacy, bowdlerization of language—but also because “Orwell” answers the question of how to be an outspoken citizen generally and how to be an intellectual in particular. As magnificent as some of Orwell’s literary essays are, he is not first and foremost an armchair critic pronouncing his views about high culture and the classics, but rather an intellectual who wrote for his age, not the ages. Ironically, he has managed to achieve an audience for both.

**HV:** As I mentioned in my introduction, you have published extensively on a wide range of subjects: public intellectuals in the US, the English novel, the politics of culture in Germany and so forth. Yet you are best known for your work on Orwell. In an article entitled “The Orwell Century and After: Rethinking Reception and Reputation,” published in 2008 in *Modern Intellectual History*, the British scholar Anna Vaninskaya recognizes you as “the most prolific Orwell critic publishing today” (598). Why do you think Orwell became such a major focus of your work? Do you feel any special affinity with him or particular aspects of his thought and literary legacy?

**JR:** So much of a person’s response to anyone has to do with his or her generational relationship. This is also true with respect to a writer, as I discovered in conducting numerous interviews with Orwell’s friends and acquaintances, and also with his immediate intellectual contemporaries who responded to him as generational coevals. By contrast, I am two or three generations removed, not only from Orwell’s era, but even from the publication of his posthumous work, most of which was published before I was even born. As a result, by the time I came to a serious inquiry into Orwell’s work, the scholarly ground had already been well-tilled. By the mid-1980s, more than three decades after his death and his publication in foreign translations, I realized that Orwell had become a world-historical figure. And so the task was as much to make sense of his Work, of the unique phenomenon of his posthumous fame as “Orwell,” as it was the interpretation of his writings themselves. My point here is that “Orwell,” even more so than George Orwell, became the focus of my interest and has remained so during the last quarter-century. Yet, if the scholarship on his writings had already reached a very sophisticated and in certain areas near-definitive level, this was not at all true of Orwell as a cultural symbol and political hero. No scholar or intellectual had
closely investigated his outsized reputation. So in my first book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, published in 1989, I set myself this challenging task. My aim was not only to discuss Orwell’s writings, but also Orwell the cultural hero. For me he was, as I said in a later book, my “intellectual big brother.” Here, too, I realized that I was simply following in a long line as a generational successor. In *Every Intellectual’s Big Brother*, published in 2006, I described how other intellectuals had been attracted to Orwell and how we were all part of a shared family, all of which contributed to my own deep connection to Orwell, and eventually led me to study the work of his admirers and even his antagonists. I found myself powerfully drawn to those who have esteemed Orwell, even if at a different generational moment and for different reasons than myself, such as the group of New York intellectuals associated with *The Partisan Review*, who were writing between the 1930s and 1990s, some of whom got to know Orwell personally through extensive correspondence, like Dwight Macdonald. I began to write about and even to interview and meet many of these generational peers of Orwell’s, who were my own American intellectual elders. If I could not meet Orwell personally, I could at least get to know his “Yankee siblings,” and in fact get to know them far more easily than Orwell’s aging British colleagues across the Atlantic.

**HV:** You are describing scholarly ground that remained to be plowed, viz. the intellectual contemporaries and descendants of Orwell whose writings invited inquiry. But was there also a spark, a connection at a more personal level?

**JR:** Absolutely! I feel a special affinity with Orwell both because of his cultural/political values and his drive and struggle, like my own, to become an independent writer and intellectual. Let me address this second aspect. What I have discovered is that it is even more difficult today than in Orwell’s day to become an independent writer-intellectual, because the Western academy has swallowed up intellectual life and regurgitated academic specialists, many of whom do not write for the public or in an accessible idiom. There is no institution, certainly not PhD programs or creative writing programs or law schools or even think tanks, that form intellectuals. That is only done in the time-honored way that Orwell did it, i.e., by combination of yearning and will and by the possibility of immersing oneself in the work of those who have preceded you as a writer and intellectual. Or as I put it in *Every Intellectual’s Big Brother*, you adopt an intellectual big brother or big sister and you ingest his or her work as a way of realizing your own best self as a writer and hopefully even as a human being. Orwell had the advantage of doing so with other intellectuals writing for little magazines and intellectual quarterlies, but these small urban communities, whose hub was typically a literary review or cultural
quarterly, are nowadays almost extinct. The university has replaced them with remunerative employment that is far more comfortable than what Orwell possessed, but it has in the process formed a very different creature than the traditional intellectual. I have written about this in my forthcoming book, *The Intellectual Species: Post-Gutenberg Prospects*, in which I describe how the species of the traditional literary intellectual, who speaks to the broader public on issues of common national and international concern, is virtually extinct. Interestingly enough, the rise of the qualifying adjective “public,” as in “public intellectual,” has coincided with the death of the species. Before, one never needed to distinguish between a public intellectual and other kinds of intellectuals, but now that the academic or the policy intellectual, i.e., the resident species of higher education institutions or Washington think tanks rules supremely, the “loose fish” in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* swimming freely against the nets that would hold them and speaking out in all directions is a dying species.

**HV:** Speaking of loose fish, allow me to interrupt. I mentioned your recent “Homage” to Orwell as your intellectual big brother, but I now remember that there was also a letter to “Dear George” in *The Cambridge Companion*.

**JR:** Yes, I identified so strongly with Orwell as an intellectual big brother that I wrote the open letter to voice my debt to him and explain why I have devoted such a substantial part of my intellectual energy to him and his legacy. I began to realize in the Nineties that I had adopted Orwell as my intellectual big brother as a way of discovering and resolving my own issues of personal identity as a writer and aspiring intellectual. Orwell came into my life at a moment in which my needs and dreams could be clarified by seeing the Orwell in myself and the John Rodden in George Orwell. I perceived how we were indeed brothers of a different generation, elder and junior men of letters. That is how my affinity with Orwell developed. Yet I should also emphasize, partly because it is the aspect of the Orwell that bulks largest, that I have devoted myself to “Orwell” and to his Work, i.e., to his literary and political legacy. For me, Orwell is not only a world-historical individual, what Jean-Paul Sartre referred to as a “singular universal,” i.e., one who somehow manages to touch on universal concerns in a single and singular life. For me Orwell is the largest literary-cultural presence since Shakespeare and the most influential writer who has ever lived. This is not at all to say that he is the best-selling writer of all time, which is certainly untrue, and it is not justified by appeals to the intrinsic quality of his work vs. other great writers. Rather, I’m speaking simply of the plain fact of his political and cultural impact globally. No one before or after him has managed to contribute so many incessantly quoted words to our global cultural
lexicon, so that even his name as a proper adjective is quoted tens of thousands of times per year. His “literary bandwidth,” i.e., the level of “Orwell cultural literacy” among serious readers and even the broader public, knows no comparison. It is in that context that I speak of him as the most “influential” writer who has ever lived. I was not alive when he lived, not even when most of his posthumous work was published, but I witnessed the rise of “Orwell” and I honor and respect the Work that both George Orwell and the symbol of “Orwell” represent.

**HV:** I am sometimes frustrated by the negative side of the legacy, i.e., the way in which the Work, as you call it, has been used *ad nauseam* in contemporary discussions about the invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq, the New World Order and so forth. Do you share this concern?

**JR:** “Orwell” is, indeed, in some respects a double-edged sword. This is the towering figure who is often a bogeyman, associated with the “Orwellian” specter of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Big Brother who is quoted and misquoted endlessly. “Orwell” has a dark side, but I have been concerned with both the darkness and the light, that is, with the literary legacy in all of its ambiguity. Orwell can be used to positive ends, but he has at least been equally abused to ends that he would never have supported or perhaps even never have envisioned. Certainly he would have objected to the monochromatic view of him as a Cold Warrior and even more fiercely, as he even did during his lifetime, to his reputation as an anti-socialist in some quarters. I have sought to be his defender in so far I have sought to clarify with scholarly accuracy his legacy and not to indulge in the practice of robbing his grave or moving his coffin to the left or right for my own political purposes. But every person has his blind spots and biases. I have simply sought throughout my work to declare my own interests and convictions and thereby to expose my own “color filter,” so that readers may appreciate how my own work inevitably represents Orwell from my own history and subjectivity.

**HV:** In the article I quoted earlier, Vaninskaya also comments: “A student could ask for no better introduction to the intellectual and cultural history of the twentieth century, filtered as it is through an original, specially developed ‘conceptual vocabulary’ (the glossary of his terms runs to thirty pages), than Rodden’s Orwell volumes” (600). You seem to have studied Orwell in such a way that through his work you take an in-depth look at very large swathes of twentieth-century culture. Was that, indeed, your aim and, if yes, how did this become possible? What I mean is that it may appear ironic that such a huge project of taking stock of modern society should have proceeded on the basis of Orwell of all people, a man who distrusted system-building, made things difficult for
biographers and exegetes of his work, and generally claimed rather individualistic and contrarian positions for much of his life.

JR: Yes, that was my aim, and it became possible to realize because Orwell morphed into “Orwell.” The writer George Orwell became within a few short years after his death not just a literary figure, but a global cultural behemoth, recognizable as a proper adjective on every continent of the globe. As Picture Post, the London weekly newspaper, wrote in the early 1950s, “The face of Orwell is the face of the mid-twentieth century.” I proceeded to describe these so-called faces in my first book, where I presented a “portrait gallery” of Orwell’s faces in the mid-twentieth century. The portraits in that gallery derived from a variety of perspectives taken towards both the man and writer George Orwell and the cultural phenomenon “Orwell.” They included separate case histories of Orwell’s reputation in Germany and in the Soviet Union, among Jews and Catholics as well as non-denominational Christians (despite his atheism), his adoption by various groups of writers including those at little magazines and intellectual quarterlies, such as Partisan Review and Commentary and Dissent and Tribune—and on and on. It became possible to look at Orwell as a lens through which to understand twentieth century culture, precisely because George Orwell metamorphosed into “Orwell,” the historical totem with which intellectuals and political groups conjured. I went on to demonstrate in subsequent books devoted to Orwell’s cultural legacy and ambiguous political heritage that numerous other scenes for his “portrait gallery” exist. Orwell’s reputation has become ever more multi-faceted, and I used his unique reputation as a prism through which to understand and illuminate the culture he both reflected and formed.

HV: In addition to the phrase “portrait gallery,” which you used a lot in your early work, the concept of “afterlife” has also been of critical importance in your writing. Could you discuss it in its relation to Orwell’s literary reputation?

JR: This concept, the “afterlife” of a writer, is crucially important, especially with Orwell—or I should say “Orwell.” It is the latter above all who provides us with an illustrated biography of the last six decades, showing how the heritage of a writer can make it possible to understand the intricate interconnections between biography and history. In several of my books, including The Politics of Literary Reputation and Every Intellectual’s Big Brother, but also in Scenes from an Afterlife and The Unexamined Orwell, I have written case studies in literary reception as cultural history, showing how the reception history of a writer can provide us with an accessible and even revelatory view of cultural and social history. I have termed this “reputation history,” which is not merely a stream of moments in which
audiences have responded to a writer, but rather a rich and edifying glimpse into the Life and Times, and indeed the Afterlife and Times, of a writer and his age. Reputation history is a personalizing of the historical and a historicizing of the personal. Just as Orwell was a witness of his time, I have used him as a farseeing witness to events since his death, aiming through him to make public a history visible only through the eyes of his ghostly presence.

**HV:** William Steinhoff, in his *George Orwell and the Origins of 1984* (1973), describes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a “game-changing” book that altered the course of history. While I do not question the significance of Orwell’s last book, it appears to me that game-changers also need the right venue, a proper supporting cast and an occasional bit of luck. Orwell had those, did he not?

**JR:** He did. In the mid-1950s, the “portrait gallery,” to go back to that concept, detonated on the cultural front like a literary atom bomb—as a salvo against communism and as a source of both enduring catchwords and a nightmarish dystopian vision. Orwell went beyond the status of writer or even literary figure to world-historical figure, i.e., “Orwell.” As I discuss in my first book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, a single “peak moment” in his reputation history facilitated this development, the BBC-TV production of 1954. That December, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was adapted for the first time to British television. I should mention that in 1953 an NBC-TV adaptation received positive reviews but aroused no controversy. By contrast, the BBC Christmas season version in 1954 attracted the biggest audience ever accorded a program to that date in British history and occasioned a month of debate in British newspapers and even the House of Commons. Suddenly, the sales of Orwell’s dystopia mushroomed from 150 per week to more than 50,000 per day. His coinages entered the public domain. “Big Brother Is Watching You,” Newspeak, doublethink and even the adjective “Orwellian” became part of the political lexicon. Soon *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* entered school curricula and became institutionalized in English classrooms at the elementary and secondary levels. The “Orwell legend” was born. Because it was born, I was in a position by the mid-1980s, after three decades of “Orwell,” to examine his unprecedented afterlife from a variety of locations: national, generational, political, cultural, and on and on.

**HV:** Was your systematic study thus ironic, or contrary to Orwell’s sensibility, as I implied in my earlier question?

**JR:** Not in the least regarding “Orwell.” Nor is my approach somehow ironic given what Orwell the writer also represented. That is, I have not been “taking stock of modern society” and it was not at all ironic that such a project of examining the
modern world through the prism of Orwell, and I quote your question, “proceeded on the basis of a study of Orwell of all people, a man who distrusted system-building, made things difficult for biographers and exegetes etc. . . .” My observations about the nature of fame were empirically based, revisable and provisional. My project was an example of anti-system. I took an inductive approach, not a deductive approach. I examined the reception materials—the actual historical responses to Orwell’s work by book reviewers, essayists, and others—and proceeded “scene by scene,” or case by case. Each case was grounded in particular individuals and groups and reception evidence and there was nothing impressionistic, let alone abstract, about the approach. I made no claims about the emergence and scope of his reputation that could be generalized beyond the case of Orwell, but the implication throughout the book was certainly that other writers could be examined with my conceptual toolbox. I am gratified that, since the publication of *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, dozens of books and articles have built on this approach to study the reputations of other writers. I have done the same myself. I have studied what I call “reputation formation” in writers as diverse as Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Isabel Allende, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and several others. I distrust system-building just as much as did Orwell. We both address large issues of public concern, above all in twentieth-century culture. It was precisely Orwell’s example that strengthened my resolve to take an inductive, evidence-based approach to the question of reputation, rather than to avoid it and either deal impressionistically with the vicissitudes of fame or to contradict his example and operate according to what sociologists such as C. Wright Mills have lambasted as Grand Theory. The latter is what I have often called nose-bleed theory, by which I mean that intellectuals and academics are often speaking at such a high theoretical level that they completely lose touch with the ground of evidence. Like Icarus, they fall. Their great systems collapse, because they are just castles in the air that have no direct connection to lived history and the material realities of society.

**HV:** You said that Orwell’s example inspired you to take an inductive, evidence-based approach to the question of reputation, but he certainly did make things difficult for biographers and scholars and specifically left instructions opposing the writing of biographies of his life.

**JR:** He did make things difficult for biographers and scholars of his work. I devoted an entire case study to the history of Orwell biography in my first book. But here again the fact that he made things difficult is exactly what contributed mightily to the transformation of George Orwell into the phenomenon of “Orwell.” As his friend Cyril Connolly, the editor of *Horizon* and his schoolmate at Eton,
wrote in his essay “Reputations”: “Since Homer, a major consolation of literary life has been the belief in reputations. ‘Not all of me shall die’—‘non omnes moriar.’ If I were in a position to advise a writer who was so ambitious as to desire recognition both in his lifetime and after his death, I would say: ‘Set posterity a puzzle. The living dislike puzzles, the unborn worship them. Keep your contemporary success within bounds. Above all, beware not to deprive posterity of all speculation, of its right to model you in its own image.’” This is an utterly remarkable observation in relation to Orwell because it is inadvertently prescient. Connolly wrote this essay in 1950 not long after Orwell’s death that January, but he could have had no idea that within four years it would apply so exactly to his oldest literary friend. Before Connolly’s eyes, Orwell would mushroom into “Orwell” the literary legend, the cultural phenomenon that bore only traces of resemblance to the man and writer whom Connolly had known so well.

**HV:** There are some wonderful passages in Connolly’s *The Unquiet Grave: A Word Cycle by Palinurus* of 1944, which is the year before *Animal Farm* was published, where he says that the true function of a writer is to produce masterpieces and he describes writing that aims to produce masterpieces as “an assault on perfection.” *Animal Farm*, I would say, was the result of such “an assault on perfection.” And yet, I agree with you that, in spite of the phenomenal success of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell’s death in 1950 left posterity with a puzzle.

**JR:** Putting the pieces of a puzzle together often entails scattering them in all directions and then attempting to reassemble them according to the agenda of the puzzle player. My aim has been to put together in some understandable order the puzzle of the puzzlers, trying to make coherent the processes of reputation-building. Here again I must emphasize, as I did in *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, that at no time has the study of reputation amounted to a system of thought proposing itself as philosophical axiology or literary hermeneutics. My work on “reputation formation” has never offered a set about prescriptive principles of reputation building. I have taken pains to avoid advancing any grand system to apply to some category called “literary figure” or to broach any full-scale sociological “theory of reputation.” My conviction has been that a massive theoretical construct is much too coarse an instrument for approaching the multiple interpersonal and institutional contingencies bearing on the formation of any reputation or on the phenomenon of reputation generally. Instead, my aim has been a materialist one and an inductive one, viz. to offer a set of questions and concepts, what I have called “terms of
repute,” whereby the fragmentary evidence recoverable about authors’ reputations can attain greater intelligibility and broader significance.

**HV:** The theme of the special issue is “Orienting Orwell: Asian and Global Perspectives on Orwell,” and this means that we view Orwell as profoundly linked to Asian cultural contexts. In fact, the Orwell conference at Tunghai University in May 2011, which occasioned your first visit to Asia and to Taiwan, was a precedent for this endeavor and addressed the same theme. Do you believe that this is a valid approach and, if yes, how would you evaluate Orwell’s Asian roots and interests?

**JR:** The approach to Orwell and the Asian cultural contexts of his work and legacy is not only valid but original, fresh, significant and quite timely. It comes at a moment of heightened global awareness about the rise of Asia and the meeting of East and West in a sense utterly beyond that which Orwell had conceived it in the mid-twentieth century when the battle of the Cold War was dawning and East vs. West meant Eastern Europe vs. Western Europe, or the communist world vs. the capitalist world, or free enterprise vs. state socialism. This new global understanding of the relation between East and West has appropriately arisen with the decline of socialism and the ending of the European Cold War. Nonetheless, the People’s Republic of China, still officially a Communist nation, is without question the great Asian power which is spearheading and dominating this new awareness. Orwell’s work gained significance partly because of the ever relevant application of his works on totalitarianism to developments in the communist world and Asia, but it also fully applies to the history of authoritarianism in Taiwan until the 1980s and in numerous other places, including, e.g., North Korea. Certainly, for instance, my own essay on Orwell’s “A Hanging” in this special issue could be applied to capital punishment in Singapore. Its status as the country in the world with the highest number of executions never ceases to amaze Americans and Europeans. Many of the facts of Orwell’s birth in India and his life in Burma are discussed in several essays in the special issue, but I would like to add one event which happened fifteen years after he left Burma. He tried to secure an assignment abroad from various newspapers to visit India as a foreign correspondent, but government authorities advised against it behind the scenes, and the decision, apparently, was made or, at least informed, by a verdict from the highest echelons at No. 10 Downing Street by Winston Churchill himself. Nonetheless Orwell served as BBC Indian Talks Producer between 1941 and 1943, where he also befriended the Chinese Talks producer William Empson. These roots and interests of Orwell in the Indian subcontinent continued for virtually his entire lifetime. In January 1949, when he was sick in hospital and beyond recovery from tuberculosis, he wrote one of his
best and most memorable essays, “Reflections on Gandhi.” Thus, both as an essayist, writing about capital punishment and such “social saints” as Gandhi, and as a novelist, penning what is often regarded as second only to Forster’s *A Passage to India* as a novel about Empire, *Burmese Days*, Orwell lent his considerable literary gifts to Asian topics. More broadly, his anti-imperialist stance toward British policy in Asia applies to colonial issues long after his death. Let us remember that he was an ex-policeman. The idea of a British empire, likewise an American or Soviet, was anathema to him. Pundits and readers have never ceased to ask “If Orwell were alive today” what he would say about events in the Korea of the 1950s, Vietnam of the 1960s, Africa and Asia during the postcolonial age of the 1970s, and on and on. In all these respects, it is not only valid, but also essential to consider Orwell from the perspective of his Asian interests and political positions and social sympathies.

**HV:** In Spring 2013 Edward Snowden, a former employee of the American National Security Agency, began to reveal classified information regarding American mass surveillance of international telephone and Internet communications and this has once again occasioned a flood of references to George Orwell in the international press. Yet, Orwell himself was at one point accused of Big Brotherish behaviour when it became known that he compiled a list of people who were in his opinion “crypto-communists, fellow-travellers or inclined that way.” What is your view of the significance of this much debated list of “crypto-communists” a decade after it was unsealed by the UK government in 2003?

**JR:** Some observers might see Edward Snowden as a whistleblower not unlike George Orwell. In at least this one respect the comparison is apt. In his essay “Notes on Nationalism,” Orwell drew a sharp distinction between nationalism and patriotism. Nationalism was a jingoistic, aggressive championing of national interests. By contrast, patriotism was a feeling of home, a cultural phenomenon, a sense of community, and a commitment to the maintenance and enrichment of the social fabric. “Englishness,” which Orwell so exemplified, had much to do with patriotism and he proudly cast himself as a leftwing patriot. Yet, nothing aroused his ire more than British imperialism and the crude promotion of Empire. He loved Kipling, e.g., as a patriotic writer, not as a nationalist. Orwell also might have liked Snowden’s approach as a whistleblower. It was utterly low tech. Snowden was a middle-level official, not unlike Winston Smith. He is not necessarily lily white, no more than Winston Smith who is a corrupt Outer Party member fully willing to scream the slogans of the Two Minute Hate and enjoy watching a public execution during Hate Week. Winston Smith is as much an anti-hero as a hero in *Nineteen
Eighty-Four. To commend his rebellion against the Inner Party, as in the case of Snowden’s whistleblowing against the surveillance of private citizens and purported allies, is not to claim that either of them are unvarnished heroes.

HV: And what about the notorious list, which has occasioned such criticism of him from the Left as a hypocrite and “snitch”?

JR: It is true that Orwell kept a private list of suspected communist fellow travelers. In 1949, already on his deathbed, he shared this personal notebook with Celia Kerwin, a friend who had begun to work for the Internal Research Department, which had recently been formed by the Labour government under Clement Atlee to counter Soviet propaganda. News of this allegedly controversial list first exploded into the headlines in 1996. Later the list was made fully public in 2003 during his centennial year. The waves of controversy were fueled by Marxist and neo-Stalinist critics of Orwell on the Left, because “the List” reinvigorated their criticism of his Cold War positions. By keeping the issue of the list alive, they gained a new line of attack against him. Moreover, it furnished them with a specific, complicated issue to use against him rather than just general complaints of *ad hominem* derision. As I put it in an essay in 2003, which I later developed into the conclusion of *Every Intellectual’s Big Brother*, the behavior of his detractors in twisting the issues involved here exemplified not the ethics of admiration but the ethics of detraction. In reality, the publication of the list in 2003 was warmed-over old news. I had first written about it in the 1980s. Bernard Crick opened the discussion of it with his Orwell biography in 1980. It is true that the Orwell Archive in London did not make it available for quotation or publication to me, nor in fact to Crick himself or anyone else. But Orwell was not snitching on fellow writers. He was simply advising the IRD, which was a liberal organization under Clement Attlee’s Labour government, nothing like the CIA or J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, not to hire and pay fellow travelers or CP members to represent the British government or conduct pro-Western propaganda. At no point did he advocate infringing on their civil rights or curtailing their freedom in any other respect. He simply argued that such people were not to be depended on to represent British interests faithfully. Ultimately, it was no different than a negative letter of recommendation or an editor advising his colleagues that a particular reviewer was not appropriate for a certain book.

HV: In that case, does the controversy over this list have any contemporary implications or is it much ado about nothing?

Neither Orwell nor myself are champions of unfettered freedom. That is a disservice to public policy and to civil rights. Every nation has geopolitical interests and we must balance security and freedom. Since September 11 the balance has swung excessively away from civil liberties and towards national security as the so-called Patriot Act of the Bush administration exemplifies and the drone policy of the Obama administration. But the fact remains that the tradeoffs are real. The search for balance is never-ending. As Stalinism was in the ascendancy in 1949 and the Red Army was occupying half of Europe, Orwell’s concern about security was well-taken. Yet he wrote a stern letter to the Duchess of Atholl when she asked him to represent a conservative position, and he always refused to write for conservative organs such as Lord Beaverbrook’s press, except on some cultural matter like the making of good tea, another example of his commitment to patriotism and his hostility to nationalism or jingoism. Let us not forget that the hymn in Animal Farm sung by the animals is called “Beasts of England,” nor that in Nineteen Eighty-Four the name of the party is Ingsoc, i.e., English Socialism; and that the currency is dollars and the Party members smoke Victory cigarettes. That is, Orwell’s position generally was always: “Let us hold our own side to the highest standards. It can happen here too. The corruptions of Socialism are not about Russia and the Soviet Union chiefly, but about dangers of excessively concentrated political power to which all of us are susceptible.”

**HV:** My last question concerns the future of Orwell scholarship. Orwell’s work has been examined from an astonishingly wide range of perspectives as literary critics, political scientists, linguists, philosophers, gender specialists, cultural historians, etc. have brought their specific intellectual methodologies to bear on his work. Do you see any fresh perspectives for further work on Orwell in the years to come or has the terrain been covered rather well and academic, if not popular, interest will gradually wane over the next few decades?

**JR:** I do not see any radical new perspectives for further work on Orwell, but I see new perspectives for work on “Orwell,” i.e., for work on his legacy, not on interpretations of his writings or even biographical examination of his life. Another way of putting it is that his life and writings have been well covered. No more than minor discoveries are likely. On the other hand, his afterlife continues to radiate in new directions and offers endless possibilities. While it is doubtful that George Orwell and his work will occasion fresh new perspectives, “Orwell” (his cultural influence and political impact) is very likely to do so. So long as the main themes of Orwell engage higher-order historical developments—such as the rise of bureaucratese, the invasions of privacy, the prospect of totalitarian power leading to
state tyranny—so long as these historical developments remain active, new perspectives on Orwell’s writings will emerge as potential applications of Newspeak, two-way telescreens, Room 101 and doublethink. However, the opportunity for fresh perspectives does not necessarily mean that interest in both Orwell and “Orwell” will not wane. I believe that it will, inevitably so. Probably, the three peaks of his reputation so far attained over the last six decades will never be reached again. The mid-1950s with the BBC 1984 adaptation, the so-called Countdown to 1984 during the years 1982 to 1984, and the centennial of Orwell’s birth in 2003 will never again be matched. Notable blips or new bounces upward in his reputation are likely to happen; the thousands of hits that one can find on the Internet between Edward Snowden and George Orwell is one example. New anniversary dates will also invite renewed reflection on George Orwell and his legacy, but the high watermark has likely been passed for good. Nonetheless, Orwell will remain in orbit as a writer with a “star reputation,” exemplified by his canonization in curricula and the circulation of his coinages in numerous languages. The 1950s, and especially the Countdown to 1984, gave a lift off effect to Orwell’s reputation. They “launched” it to the “stars.” It was flung to a level beyond the downward gravitational pull of the everyday tide of information. Thereafter was it finally and fully established at a cultural altitude occupied only by writers of the stature of a Shakespeare or a Goethe. I believe that it will remain there.