

## Satire and Subversion: Orwell and the Uses of Anti-climax

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Orwell criticism has at least a good excuse. The failure to define Orwell's specifically literary achievement is perhaps even a fortunate fault, in view of the genuine interest of his politics (described by Crick as "original and heterodox"), the strength and quirky appeal of his character ("this strange and saintly man"—Lord Ardwick), and the battle with compromise that marked his adventurous life. Philip Rieff sums up the situation when he says, "For liberals, Orwell's virtue as a man has obscured his significance as a writer."<sup>1</sup> And even apart from all these virtuous distractions, explaining the special effects of Orwell's prose is, naturally, very difficult. We can make the routine genuflection in the direction of the "plain style," but thereafter, we find ourselves embarrassed for an answer to the simplest questions. What is it that makes the plain style plain? Certainly, no such definition as "simple grammar and familiar words" can be adequate. As Orwell himself says, the crucial thing is "to let the meaning choose the word." But in this case, we are frustrated by the still-surprising fact that, even moving up in search of evidence from sentence-level to larger structure, Orwell's meaning is often far from clear. Indeed Orwell's work has become surrounded by what Raymond Williams describes as a "turbulent, partisan and wide-ranging controversy." Here, for example, is Alan Sandison on provenance:

Critics have for some time sought to establish a satisfactory provenance for George Orwell so that his moral and creative vision could be more properly understood, but independence and variety rather than agreement characterise their solutions. Malcolm Muggeridge for example, in his introduction to *Burmese Days*, describes him as 'a throwback to the late Victorian days,' while John Weightman reviewing the lately-published *The Collected Essays, Letters and Journalism of George Orwell*, suggests that his natural society is that of Samuel

Johnson and the Augustans. In *The Crystal Spirit* (1967), George Woodcock places him somewhere between these two extremes as 'the last of a nineteenth-century tradition of individualist radicals which bred such men as Hazlitt, Cobbett and Dickens'. In a more recent work on Orwell *The Makings of George Orwell*, Keith Alldritt sees him as the dialectical product of his attraction to, and reaction against the *symbolistes*.<sup>2</sup>

The same difficulties plague the interpretation of individual works. The essay on Dickens is deservedly a classic, for example, but what exactly is Orwell's argument? That Dickens stands condemned as an apolitical writer who never writes about work, whose ideal is moneyed idleness, who ignores the working class; or that Dickens is a liberal spirit, a free intelligence, generously angry with the harsher orthodoxies of his time? At least in terms of large-scale argument structure, Orwell's method as an essayist is, here as elsewhere, profoundly dialectical, involving unsignalled changes of direction, and unresolved contradictions between competing voices and perspectives. There is nothing plain about this.<sup>3</sup>

There are, then, three principal areas of difficulty for readers of Orwell, concerning the nature or function of the plain style, concerning the tradition within which Orwell thinks and writes, and concerning Orwell's "message" or purpose.

The present essay offers no account of what makes the plain style plain, that being too difficult a question. It does attempt, however, to illustrate one of its principal functions, a function which, I believe, requires us to give Orwell credit for a degree of rhetorical originality which a complacent or casual citation of the plain style could lead us to overlook. And it attempts to relate this rhetorical originality to Orwell's "meaning" and provenance, locating these within a philosophical rather than literary tradition. My first claim, in brief, is that fundamental insights into Orwell's prose style, purposes and provenance will emerge from close attention to his distinctive use of anti-climax.

## I. Cases

Definitions of anti-climax in the reference literature, it seems to me, seize on superficialities. According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and*

*Poetics*, the term can be used either “(1) to designate an ineptly expressed idea meant to be superlatively grandiose or pathetic . . .” or “(2) to designate a deliberately ironical letdown of this kind.” This surely places too much stress on contexts where the author intends or the reader expects something either grandiose or pathetic: is it impossible to experience anti-climax in going from the merely interesting to the banal?

J. A. Cuddon defines anti-climax as “a bathetic declension from a noble tone to one less exalted. The effect can be comic and is often intended to be so,” showing the same preoccupation with bathetic collapse, and the same limitation to contexts now described as “noble.”<sup>4</sup> *The Harper Handbook* places still greater emphasis on the power to amuse, holding anti-climax to be “a sudden descent from the impressive to the trivial, especially at the end of an ascending series for ludicrous effect.”<sup>5</sup> And Holman’s *Handbook* advises us that “anti-climax is both a weakness and a strength in writing; when effectively and intentionally used it greatly increases emphasis through its humorous effect; when unintentionally employed its result is bathetic.”<sup>6</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* rightly downplays the comic element, defining anti-climax as “an abrupt lapse from growing intensity to triviality in any passage of dramatic, narrative, or descriptive writing, with the effect of disappointed expectation or deflated suspense.” Though this is an improvement, it is still seriously misleading. It is quite possible to construct an anti-climax in which the descent is from growing triviality to an intense reality, as my first two examples below will demonstrate.

Perhaps most readers will admit some feeling of dissatisfaction with these definitions, but charitably put their dissatisfaction down to the obvious impossibility of defining living practice in three or four sentences and a stock illustration or two. I believe, however, that the above definitions are not just forgivably approximate, but critically disabling. In particular, as I hope to show, the prevailing associations between anti-climax and “ludicrous effect” or “disappointment,” (in the most common sense of the word, implying the legitimacy of the expectations which are not met), prevent us from seeing how effectively anti-climax can be used for serious, and in fact subversive, purposes.

Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, so often cited, is a good place to begin:

Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,  
 Or some frail china jar receive a flaw;  
 Or stain her honour, or her new brocade;  
 Forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade;  
 Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball. (2.105)

This shows a clearly *satirical* edge. The repeated comic "descents" insinuate that, for the nymph, chastity is just another commodity, and faith a form of fashionable show. Now it could be argued that anti-climax can be called *subversive* on just these grounds; that it is typically satirical, or humorous, or carnivalesque. Against this view, I want to suggest that satirical anti-climax is almost necessarily a conservative device, and that the later Orwellian form is perhaps the first which really deserves the epithet "subversive."

In 1931, Orwell wrote "The Spike," describing his confinement with almost fifty other tramps in an official hostel. The final four short paragraphs of the essay, which deal with the tramps' release on Monday morning, unobtrusively establish an extended contrast with the "gloomy, reeking spike." The road is quiet and deserted, following the vivid noise and crowding of the spike. There is blossom on the trees; "Everything was so quiet and smelt so clean."<sup>7</sup> One of the tramps comes up to Orwell with "a friendly smile," speaking "cordially" after the complaints and bad temper of the spike. Orwell point by point establishes that the spike and all it stood for has been left behind, encouraging us to picture freedom, fresh air, countryside and comradeship. But this escapist picture of tramping is cruelly brought up against reality in the final sentence of the essay. The tramp, repaying Orwell's loan of some tobacco, puts "four sodden, debauched, loathly cigarette ends into my hand." There is nothing either comic or trivial about this anti-climax, as the piling-up of disgusted adjectives makes clear. Our experience is not one of deflated suspense or the collapse of grandiose or pathetic expectations. Rather, in addition to our sense of a return to reality, we are left with unanswered questions and irreconcilable reactions. Is the tramp's gratitude for Orwell's casual kindness heart-warming or disgusting? Does Orwell's acceptance of the cigarette ends spring from hypocrisy or fraternity? And what is our reaction as readers to a narrator who leads us to believe we have escaped from the squalor of the spike, only to

drag us back again in the decisive final sentence? We are in each case torn in two directions, between what we would *prefer* to believe, and what we are forced by the rhetorical device to internalise and accept as true. Just as the tramps cannot after all escape the degradation of the spike, so citizens and readers are not to be permitted to avert their gaze from the social conditions they condone.

A very similar anti-climax ends "A Hanging," also written in 1931. The last page or so, after the hanging has been carried out, reports the increasing good humour of the execution party. Orwell says he felt "an impulse to sing, to break into a run, to snigger" (23-24). Francis the gaoler tells an "extraordinarily funny" story and everyone laughs. The previously irritable superintendent "grinned in a tolerant way." Everyone, "native and European alike," is invited for a drink. After the horror, there seems a prospect of good fellowship, of escape. Until, again, the remorseless final sentence: "The dead man was a hundred yards away." As in "The Spike," the ugly truth re-emerges, conclusively destroying any illusions we had begun to entertain. We have an anti-climax whose energising contrast lies not between the noble and the trivial, but between illusion and what, within the text, has been established as the truth.

In this case, various distancing devices have been used to undercut the apparent good humour, and the idea of the hanged man has been partly kept before us, so that the "drop," when it comes, does not confound our innocent hopes, so much as demonstrate our complicity in Orwell's nervous reaction. Orwell-as-policeman, like the others, would prefer to forget what has happened. But Orwell-as-narrator refuses to let himself, or us, forget. The Podsnap tendency to sweep unpleasantness behind us is given brief encouragement, in order that its final refutation may be more complete.

In these two cases, anti-climax is not the comic or ironic descent of textbook definitions, from the lofty to the low: it is a complex and decisive *tour de force*, defining the writer's stance and the meaning (however complex) of the essay. Yet it properly deserves to be called anti-climax, because its essential *modus operandi* is the raising and sudden meaningful disappointment of certain expectations in the reader, ("disappointment" now in its less common sense, which, precisely, does

*not* imply the legitimacy of the expectations which are not met). Understood in this way, we can see that anti-climax also acts to subvert the naive reader's trust in the narrator, *not* as a truth-teller since the narrator in both these examples insists again on what we "know" from the body of the essay to be true. Rather, the narrator is seen to be influenced by all-too-human hopes and preferences, which the reader becomes alerted to. And since these hopes and preferences—for freedom and friendship, cleanliness and good humour—are also probably the reader's own, we find ourselves compelled to "factor these out" before Orwell, shockingly, does the job for us. To wish not to be deceived by a narrator so humanly like ourselves, is to begin to wish not to be self-deceived. And this attack on specific self-deceptions, by directly exposing complicit notions of, for example, tramping or Empire-building, is only the first level at which Orwellian anti-climax works its subversive effect.

The second level consists not in this explosion of received opinions, but in their gradual erosion. In this connection, it would be valid to interpret litotes as a form of anti-climax, since it too is something "lower" than expected, in quantity, explicitness or emphasis. It too acts as a corrective to high hopes. But I leave to one side Orwell's superb control of understatement, and instead present a few examples of unarguable anti-climax, which function not as decisive confrontations with the truth, but as those lesser "prickles," to use Forster's term, which constantly prevent us from "nestling up" to Orwell's prose.

Near the beginning of "Shooting an Elephant," Orwell describes his violent and confused emotions as an enforcer of imperialism. He writes, "I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism" (25). Here the word "normal," where we might perhaps expect "terrible" or "appalling," punctures our shocked reaction to the extreme violence of the preceding sentence. The anti-climactic use of "normal" cruelly reveals how unthinking and how much in need of thought both the emotional reaction and the comfortable assumptions which sustain it, really are.

In "Such, Such Were the Joys," Section Three ends with the following wonderful sentence, describing Orwell's emotions as a schoolboy of thirteen or less: "And yet all the while, at the middle of one's heart, there

seemed to stand an incorruptible inner self who knew that whatever one did—whether one laughed or snivelled or went into frenzies of gratitude for small favours—one's only true feeling was hatred" (441). This clearly is a kind of anti-climax, building up expectations about the innocence of childhood, about the nobility of an "incorruptible inner self," about the cool objectivity of a narrator who can observe his own actions without fear or favour, only to "disappoint" them in the final word. Yet it is certainly neither comic nor trivial. Nor is it *ironic*. On the contrary, Orwell's directness and honesty startle deep-seated and powerful assumptions into consciousness, where they can be questioned.

Later in the same essay, the same technique, and even the same word, is used again. "Take religion, for instance. You were supposed to love God, and I did not question this. Till the age of about fourteen I believed in God, and believed that the accounts given of him were true. But I was well aware that I did not love him. On the contrary, I hated him, just as I hated Jesus and the Hebrew patriarchs" (450). There is here a challenge to our ordinary expectations about religious belief, and to our expectations about the narrator, whose confession of hatred, as above, conflicts starkly with the apparent objectivity of his descriptive powers and matter-of-fact tone. But there is also a disturbing implied question for the reader: if we too were to look steadily into "the middle of the heart," how much hatred would we find? Once we have identified with the narrator, the unpleasant possibility arises, "If I am like him, and he is like that, then perhaps without knowing it, I am like that."

In these ways, anti-climax functions not merely to challenge specific beliefs but to provoke a more general self-examination. The same thing can be seen in the following passage from "Looking Back on the Spanish War." A soldier who had been publicly accused of stealing from Orwell, later stands by him loyally. Orwell, deeply impressed by this un-bourgeois behaviour, writes,

Could you feel friendly towards somebody, and stick up for him in a quarrel, after you had been ignominiously searched in his presence for property you were supposed to have stolen from him? No, you couldn't; but you might if you had both been through some emotionally widening experience. That is one of the by-products of revolution, though in this case it was only the beginnings of a revolution, and obviously foredoomed to failure. (228)

We see here Orwell's very characteristic juxtaposition of belonging and detachment: they had *both* been through the experience of revolution, but only *he* thinks it is going to fail. In the context of the essay, this sudden detachment (an anti-climactic polarisation between involvement and objectivity) poses various questions unwelcome to the Left of Orwell's time; is there any necessary link between the fleeting human experience of fraternity and the larger political process, the revolutionary millenium they are fighting for? But it also provokes questions of a more personal and moral nature. Is Orwell's perseverance, believing the cause to be lost, nobly self-sacrificing, or is it Quixotic, or stubborn, or in some way, self-indulgent? For Orwell, and for the reader, the anti-climactic descent from hope to pessimism, and from belonging to detachment, is an occasion for self-examination.

Orwell does, of course, occasionally use anti-climax humorously, but even here his fundamental purpose is to raise doubt, not laughter. In "Confessions of a Book Reviewer," picturing the reviewer as a broken-down hack, he says, "If things are normal with him he will be suffering from malnutrition, but if he has recently had a lucky streak he will be suffering from a hangover" (373). The real target of the joke, as of the whole essay, is not the apparently harmless drudge of a reviewer, but our unthinking respect for what we see in print, and for the "experts" who produce it. Orwell makes us laugh, and the word "ironic" from the Princeton definition will serve nicely in this context if not elsewhere. But he makes us laugh only in order to make us question.

These examples illustrate a cumulative effect of subversive anti-climax: it is subversive in this second sense, not because it attacks specific hopes and beliefs, but because, as a kind of epistemological ambush, it makes us nervous about taking anything for granted. This obviously connects (as a rhetorical means to a broadly political end) with Orwell's principled refusal to conform to *any* of "the smelly little orthodoxies now contending for our souls," a refusal on which he believed his existence as a writer depended (84). The "descent," in Orwell, is typically from some illusion sanctioned by an "orthodoxy" to grim reality. But submission to an orthodoxy is not merely a matter of belief—the deeper springs of personality are also involved.



The growing pessimism of Orwell's general outlook finds clear and typically frank expression in "Benefit of Clergy": "any life," he says, "when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats" (254). Anti-climax too has the dynamics of defeat, the defeat of expectation or of hope. As Orwell uses it, anti-climax can deliver almost as unpleasant a buffet as some of the defeats of real life, and a kind of "structural defeatism" is, I want to suggest, the third and most general level at which anti-climax can produce a subversive effect.

Perhaps the best illustration of this sense of defeat is the conclusion of "Shooting an Elephant" (30-31), where the last paragraph, a more extended anti-climax than we have seen so far, perfectly expresses the narrator's emotional exhaustion and surrender. After the terrible paragraphs describing the elephant's protracted death, after pouring "shot after shot into his heart and down his throat," we surely expect some great gesture of rebellion or self-disgust. Instead, the narrator merely goes back to "the Europeans" and lets it be thought that he shot the elephant because it had trampled a "coolie." After the highly-emotional language of the elephant's death ("devilish," "terrible," "frightful," "agony," "tortured" and so on, reducing the narrator in the end to the impotent repetition of "dreadful . . . dreadful"), there is only a burnt-out flatness and cliché ("of course," "endless discussions," "a damn shame"). After the vivid physical and moral awareness of the killing, there is only pragmatism and hypocrisy. The defeat of our best expectations in this bitter anti-climax perfectly matches the narrator's moral defeat. Anti-climax makes us *taste* defeat.

Anti-climax is, in the same way, the most structurally apt vehicle for Orwell's *historical* pessimism, his dread of the power of twentieth century states, using the means of mass communication, to organise themselves for purposes dictated from the top. He describes "No orchids for Miss Blandish" as "a header into the cesspool" after the world and values of Raffles, and in this it is symptomatic, for Orwell, of the transition to a genuinely twentieth century form of life: it is "a day-dream appropriate to a totalitarian age" (273). Many of the cases of anti-climax we have looked at have something of this quality, rousing the reader to a shock awakening from the various day-dreams, whether collusive or escapist, of a totalitarian age.

(Orwell himself never confused either "life as a series of defeats" or historical pessimism, with despair: his was a fighting defeatism, as can be seen from "Looking Back on the Spanish War." Another false impression I may have given, by concentrating on this single aspect of Orwell's style, is that anti-climax in these essays is laboured or too calculated. In context, Orwell's use of anti-climax works marvellously well. The sparsity of other forms of rhetorical structuring, the unadorned sentences, seemingly without artifice or persuasive design, give Orwell a background of restraint from which a rhetorical device can inherit tremendous power. My aim is to explain why Orwell's choice of device fell distinctively—both for him and, I believe, for the device itself—on anti-climax.)

In this section, I have tried to illustrate three main uses of anti-climax: to attack specific falsehoods and illusions, to undermine the habit of acquiescence, and to express the individual's confrontation with defeat. It is no accident that these correspond so exactly to three very characteristic features of Orwell the writer: his power of facing unpleasant facts (such as the facts of Empire-building) his profound unorthodoxy, and his determination (understandable in the victim of a long-term incurable disease), knowing that the cause is lost, to persevere.

## II. Analysis

To appreciate the originality of Orwell's use of anti-climax, it is necessary to locate more precisely the differences between bathetic collapse and the satirical anti-climax on the one hand and Orwell's subversive anti-climax on the other.

There is certainly a difference in felt effect. Each of the three uses listed undermines both belief and relationship, acting not only on the reader's epistemological identity but on his or her faith in the narrator. The satirical anti-climax on the other hand, is essentially conservative. It targets inverted or non-standard beliefs, and by identifying them as Other, gives the reader a sense of belonging with the majority. The very fact that we as readers *feel* the satirical anti-climax guarantees that we are not among its targets. Victims such as Pope's Nymph are blind to

satirical anti-climax, because it simply reports what they unselfconsciously say or think. Thus the surprise *we* share at the inverted order of the anti-climax serves in the end to re-affirm the "naturalness" of the order we accept, and to reinforce our solidarity with the narrator. In Orwell, however, to feel the anti-climax is to feel a hit in some tender place of our beliefs: it is to feel oneself a target. How is this difference in effect produced?

In the example from *The Rape of the Lock*, our expectations about the uniformity of discourse imply that a stain on a piece of brocade is uniform in importance with a stain on a person's honour, and this obviously conflicts with our normal beliefs. The conflict is resolved by projecting the narrator's words into the mouth of someone who does not share our beliefs about morality and for whom an apparent uniformity of discourse is therefore preserved. Failure to preserve uniformity of discourse has, of course, a highly disruptive effect. In cases of bathos, we find ourselves moved to laugh at the perpetrator's inability to preserve uniformity of discourse, and indeed a single lapse of this kind can damage a text or character beyond redemption. Alfred Austin's celebrated lines *On the Illness of the Prince of Wales*, "Along the electric wires the message came / He is no better, he is much the same," have outlived what was intended as a serious work. Shylock's bathetic vacillation between his daughter and his ducats is a defining moment, establishing his greed for money as stronger than his grief for Jessica. In the subversive anti-climax, however, neither laughter nor the resolving act of projection is possible, partly because no scapegoat is available, and partly because the "descent" is presented as undeniable truth, either because it re-asserts what we have already seen to be the case, or because it is the testimony of a plain speaker or an "incorruptible inner self." In the same way, the expectations which are disappointed in the subversive anti-climax are the genuine beliefs and hopes of most readers, not the eccentricities of a satirical target. (It has been claimed, for example by Northrop Frye, that satire essentially involves, "at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognises as grotesque,"<sup>8</sup> which if true, is alone sufficient to show that Orwell's use of anti-climax is not satirical.) In this context, then, how is the reader to respond to or resolve the lapse in uniformity of discourse? The satirical anti-climax reinforces

the solidarity of the in-group (including the narrator) by projecting inverted beliefs onto a (usually exaggerated) stereotype or narrator. But subversive anti-climax denies us both these forms of exculpation. The dissonance it creates is turned against the reader and can only be resolved, if at all, by painful self-examination.

At this stylistic level, therefore, Orwell can be called a "moral" writer. If Dickens' regular invocation of the kindly old gentleman distributing guineas, indicates to Orwell a belief in individual decency and kindness as the fundamental requirement for a good society, so Orwell's trademark use of the subversive anti-climax, by provoking a many-layered self-examination in the reader, reveals his belief in individual cognitive responsibility as the pre-requisite of any worthwhile political advance. Epistemologically, we must be anarchists before we can be democrats.<sup>9</sup> It is worth stressing this point because Orwell is still quite widely regarded as a satirist (a view which has given comfort to right-wing readers of *Animal Farm*, for example). At best, this label obscures or neglects the distinction between satirical and subversive uses of anti-climax. Satirical anti-climax resists the pull of shared belief only playfully, to make our final surrender all the more conclusive. Subversive anti-climax genuinely aims to destroy the sharing of belief: we must each take responsibility for our own cognitive identity. It attacks communal responsibility, not for the sake of carnival, but in the name of a generated epistemic subject.

To sum up: anti-climax should be understood, I contend, not as a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous, but as an *insult*, however constructive, to expectations which have been tacitly or otherwise encouraged. Anti-climax is seriously underestimated if regarded as a comic figure, or a mannered one, since it is capable of profoundly serious literary, moral, and (in Orwell's broad sense of the term) "political" effects. Orwell's originality was to take a comic or mannered figure and by turning its inherent dissonance back upon the reader, by preventing the reader from deflecting the insult onto someone else, to create a device peculiarly apt not only for his own personality, but for his concept of the writer's function. Orwell found the right trope for his purposes, and made it very much his own.

In this context, George Woodcock's comment in *The Crystal Spirit*<sup>10</sup> deserves remark. Woodcock says "it is interesting to observe that while Orwell is always anxious, like the good journalist he was, to provide an opening that will immediately involve the reader, he is so little concerned about his endings that more often than not he goes out with an anticlimax." While splendidly alert to the figure's frequency in Orwell, this seems imprisoned by the concept of anti-climax as a "let-down" in the colloquial sense. The result is Woodcock's bizarre claim, all the more strange for the emphasis he elsewhere places on Orwell's craftsmanship, that anti-climax in Orwell merely shows a kind of habitual carelessness about endings. I hope I have done enough to show that Orwell's use of anti-climax is far from careless or accidental: only a genuinely dissonant device could properly express Orwell's dissident and solitary voice.

### III. Perspective

The word "anti-climax" receives its first official mention in Johnson's *Dictionary* where he expressly says the figure was "unknown to the ancients," and indeed the new term was perhaps coined for a phenomenon which was in some ways new, at least in English. (Montaigne's *Essais*, which date from 1580, derive some of their characteristic detachment from the use of anti-climax.) Ancient, mediaeval and even Renaissance rhetorical texts such as *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 86 BC), Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* (c. 1200), or Wilson's *Arte of Rhetoric* (1553) make no mention of anti-climax, perhaps the nearest approximation being the descending *gradatio*, a late and elaborate example of which is De Quincey's, "If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination."<sup>11</sup> Descent here is by a series of steps, not by a rise and fall. Zeugma can of course be used to produce an anti-climactic effect (as in two of the lines from Pope, cited above), and there is no doubt that the comedy of bathetic collapse is very old. In closing, however, I would like to take as a working hypothesis the idea that anti-

climax is in some sense new in English, from approximately the end of the seventeenth century. Only from this time onwards, I shall conjecture, does anti-climax really emerge to take its place within the rhetorical canon.

Anti-climax always has the nature of an insult, a provocation to revolt: its *first* effect is to disturb the reader's naive trust in the narrator. In the satirical anti-climax, this alienation is quickly projected onto the scapegoat (so that the narrator is taken only to have reported what the scapegoat said or thought). But in other uses, it creates an altered relationship with the narrator, and perhaps we can trace a line of historical development in this respect. Here for example is Hume (from "My Own Life"), describing the trials of a young author:

In the same year was published at London, my *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*: which, in my opinion (who ought not to judge on that subject), is of all my writings, historical, philosophical or literary, incomparably the best. It came unnoticed and unobserved into the world.<sup>12</sup>

This is satire, as in Pope, but now directed against an earlier, more optimistic self, and it serves to detach the present narrative voice both from the earlier disappointment *and* from the reader's present opinions: if the reader fails to notice and observe the present essay, Hume can smile at that too. Anti-climax is here satirical, but it also quietly asserts the narrator's independence.

Mark Twain's essay, "Thoughts of God," begins as follows:

How often are we moved to admit the intelligence exhibited in both the designing and the execution of some of His works. Take the fly, for instance. The planning of the fly was an application of pure intelligence, morals not being concerned. Not one of us could have planned the fly, not one of us could have constructed him; and no one would have considered it wise to try, except under an assumed name.<sup>13</sup>

This wonderful descent from preacher to policeman, from Bible to booking sheet, defines the narrative voice for the remainder of the essay, at once iconoclastic and hilarious. The reader is jolted from one relationship to quite another, and this serves to assert the narrator's freedom of role. As in the example from Hume, anti-climax creates a

distance between the narrator and the reader, but now without even the affectionate scapegoating of an earlier self. Twain's anti-climax is essentially subversive, a precursor of Orwell's more characteristic, serious and systematic use.

These examples illustrate (but do not prove of course) an increasing narrational independence, kept engaging or acceptable in Hume by an at least partial projection onto an earlier self, in Twain by humour, and in Orwell, by the plain style. Searching for an explanation for the "newness" of anti-climax, we may perhaps take a hint from this new readiness to inflict a dissonance or insult on the audience. Various possible explanations suggest themselves: escape from the protocols of patronage, resistance to capitalism's commodification of the written product, tension between the writer's traditional purpose of "instruction" and the rise of a mass culture. Perhaps the process of secularisation has a role here too, since from the perspective of lost Christian faith, the whole pattern of human life (ending "not with a bang but a whimper") is that of anti-climax.

My own suggestion is that anti-climax, or a heightening of interest in it, is perhaps a product of the scientific revolution, surprising as that may at first appear. The reification of ideas, a fundamental strategy of classical empiricism, is a consequence of applying the methods of the new sciences to the operations of the mind. Hume, for example, is quite explicit about the status of associationism in psychology as "the application of experimental philosophy to moral subjects," an internal counterpart to Newton's unifying and explanatory force of gravity.<sup>14</sup> It seems to me no coincidence that just as Hume was analysing our fundamental beliefs in terms of the imagination's propensity to carry us from one impression or idea to another, in accordance with non-rational principles of association, writers in English were discovering the power of *thwarting* normal associations of ideas, a technique which in its developed Orwellian form, is used to startle reason from the line of least cognitive resistance. In this view, the same forces which led to Hume, Hartley, and the birth of modern psychology, with its methodological preference (to put it no stronger) for causal over reason-giving explanations of mental phenomena, led not only to a new vocabulary (the terms "independence," "autonomy," "spontaneity," along with the

splendidly period distinction between “volitions” and “velleities,” are all seventeenth century creations),<sup>15</sup> but also to anti-climax as an assertion of our freedom *not* to follow the most obvious or most strongly conditioned line of thought. Anti-climax, thus understood, would function as an assertion of the libertarian precondition of rationality, the ability to do or think otherwise. It would be a practical form of resistance, a rhetorical reaction to the triumph of efficient causality, proclaimed by Hume, in the moral sciences. And as that triumph of efficient causality becomes increasingly accepted, increasingly the dominant scientific attitude, so the individualism proclaimed in anti-climax becomes increasingly embattled, and therefore increasingly explicit. The figure inherently defies the most strongly conditioned line of thought, but in its satirical form it is overtly performing quite other functions. Orwell’s special achievement is to purify it of these adventitious functions, turning it entirely to epistemological defiance. The unifying theme of the three essays of *Inside the Whale*, to take one example, is the writer’s relationship to conventional opinion, spinelessly promulgated by the more or less anonymous writers of the boys’ weeklies, and defied in their very different ways, by individualists like Dickens and Miller. The corollary of this libertarian defiance is the writer’s duty of readiness to stand alone.

If this perspective on anti-climax is correct, Orwell’s use of it connects with lifelong philosophical concerns of his which find their final expression in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In that work, Smith is all along the subject of a psychological experiment, whose purpose is precisely to destroy his capacity for epistemological self-determination. Suitably conditioned, and suitably demoralised, his causal revulsion from the rats overpowers his human feelings for Julia, just as the causal imprinting of O’Brien’s voice overcomes his ability to see and judge for himself. (Thorndike’s term for conditioning, “stamping in,” surely connects with O’Brien’s “boot stamping on a human face”). This is to approach *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as centrally concerned with human plasticity to causal influence, as opposed to an account like Sandison’s, in which Smith shows from the beginning a genuine if only half-understood desire to submit.<sup>16</sup> And there is a corresponding difference in our views of Orwell’s provenance. The hypothesis sketched here locates the origin



of Orwell's world-view (or part of it) in a Protestant cleric whose conservative nostalgia led to revolution, George Berkeley, and specifically in Berkeley's grasp of the sceptical and anti-teleological consequences of a Lockean philosophy of science. Both of these consequences are very clearly present in O'Brien's ideology of power: Crispin Wright has noted the Party's "forthright" anti-realism about the past, for example,<sup>17</sup> and a flat Skinnerian rejection of teleology ("There is no current goal, incentive, purpose, or meaning to be taken into account")<sup>18</sup> finds its echo in O'Brien's assertion that the Party does not seek power for the sake of happiness, or wealth, nor of course to benefit the people. The Party seeks power merely as the iron filing seeks the magnet, and Winston's attempts to find a teleological explanation are therefore dismissed as self-deluding. This sceptical and anti-teleological nightmare is what Berkeley saw, and hated, in Locke. It may not be too far-fetched, therefore, to conjecture that Bishop Berkeley is the clergyman from two hundred years before, whom Orwell said he "might have been."

If anti-climax is a distinctively modern artefact, then, I suggest, it is Orwell who brings it fully into the postmodern age. To find beauty in what is *not* reinforced, truth in what is *not* reposeful, comes to seem a—fragile—proof of human freedom. And even if the historical perspective of this concluding section proves in the end to be untenable, I nevertheless hope that something of the importance of anti-climax for Orwell's style and vision has emerged from it.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Philip Rieff, "George Orwell and the Post-Liberal Imagination," *George Orwell: Modern Critical Views*, ed. H. Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986) 46.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Sandison, *George Orwell: After 1984* (1974; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) 3.

<sup>3</sup>As John Rodden says, "His clear style implied a clear message. . . . But the plain style can mask a submerged complexity," *The Politics of Literary Reputation* (Oxford: OUP, 1989) 24.

<sup>4</sup>J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 44.

<sup>5</sup>Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker and George Perkins, *The Harper Handbook to Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985) 38.

<sup>6</sup>Clarence Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972) 31.

<sup>7</sup>All references to Orwell will be taken from *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1984). References to "The Spike" will be found on pages 19-20. Page references to *Essays* will be made parenthetically in the text.

<sup>8</sup>Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957) 224.

<sup>9</sup>Irving Howe wrote of Orwell, "He wasn't a Marxist or a political revolutionary. He was something better and more dangerous: a revolutionary personality" ("Orwell as a Moderate Hero," *Partisan Review* [Winter 1954-55]: 105-06).

Taking the word "revolutionary" in an epistemological sense, I am happy to agree that Orwell was a revolutionary personality, and part of my contention in the present essay is that his principal weapon in the revolutionary struggle was a historically new development of anti-climax. Two qualifications might be entered, however. The first, to be pedantic, is that "anarchic" might be more accurate than "revolutionary," and the second is that Orwell's epistemological anarchy, if implemented, would obviously have profound political consequences.

<sup>10</sup>George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) 268.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas De Quincey, "On Murder," vol. 13 of *The Collected Writings*, ed. D. Masson (London: A. and C. Black, 1897) 56.

<sup>12</sup>David Hume, "My Own Life," *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London, 1886; rpt. Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964) 4.

<sup>13</sup>Mark Twain, "Thoughts of God," *The Oxford Book of Essays*, ed. J. Gross (Oxford: OUP, 1991) 266.

<sup>14</sup>Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: OUP, 1968) Intro. xx.

<sup>15</sup>Raymond Williams' book *Keywords* (Huntington, NY: Fontana, 1976), charts the seventeenth century creation and subsequent development of such words as "determination" (in its scientific sense, leading to the nineteenth century "determinism"), "individual" (in the modern sense of a single distinguishable person), "matter" (as contrasted with "idea," and hence the term "materialist" in its modern sense), and "mechanical" (in the sense of unthinking or routine). The word "conscious" also seems to be a seventeenth century coinage. Against this background, some matching rhetorical innovation almost begins to seem inevitable.

<sup>16</sup>Winston's release at the end of the novel is itself a grand anti-climax of course, whose function is to make us analyse what it is exactly, if not his life, which Winston has lost. The answer, I claim, is that he has lost his capacity to determine his own thoughts and feelings, the very capacity which Orwellian anti-climax exists to stimulate and defend.

Winston's release, like the example from "Shooting an Elephant," is an anti-climax at the level of narrative structure: it is, we might say, chapter-sized (or even novel-sized) rather than paragraph- or sentence-sized, and some readers may feel that tropes on such a different scale cannot possibly be identical in effect. My argument, on the contrary, is that once we grasp the subversive nature of Orwell's use of anti-climax, unities of theme, tone and rhetoric such as this become apparent.

<sup>17</sup>Crispin Wright, "Anti-Realism, Timeless Truth and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," in *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 176-77.

<sup>18</sup>B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behaviour* (London: Macmillan, 1953) 89.