



Construction of poverty: around Orwell's

Coombes John E.

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Construction of poverty: around Orwell's

Down and out in Paris and London

John E. Coombes

University of Essex

The difficulties of classifying¹ *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) sets it apart from other writings with which it has often been compared. Clearly it is not an autobiography in the manner of *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* by W. H. Davies (who gave Orwell's work a notably favourable review)²; nor is it reportage in the sense of *The People of the Abyss* by Jack London (to whom Orwell made frequent admiring references throughout the 1930s)³.

Down and Out in Paris and London is a work best characterised by its hybridity: an amalgam of autobiography, reportage, and — above all — evident fictionality, it is perhaps closest of all to the major texts of Orwell's notorious contemporary (and occasional comparer, also, of French and English manners), L. F. Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Mort à Crédit*.

Though the attempt to establish a check-list of incidents narrated in the work against what has been unearthed of Orwell's biography external to it, notably by Crick, Stansky and Abrahams⁴, is by no means a sterile — and indeed a fascinating — exercise, it is not germane to my purposes here. What I am attempting is some analysis of the mutual construction of 'factuality' and 'fictionality' throughout what may be termed the internal economy of the text of *DOPL*; and thus not simply to enumerate the constituent elements of Orwell's account of poverty in Paris and London, but to investigate the nature and implications of his perceptions of that poverty.

Before embarking on a consideration of the internal discrepancies, contrasts, and parallels within the text itself, I want, nonetheless, to contrast *DOPL* with a totally forgotten contemporary piece of writing, *I was a Tramp*⁵; this may prove instructive not so much through a comparison of somewhat similar circumstances, as through a contrast of their narration.

Brown's autobiographical piece narrates a trajectory which is to some extent the inverse of Orwell's. The grandson of a once wealthy man, subsequently bankrupted, he grew up in poverty in South Shields (in the North-East of England), and when subsequently unemployed, tramped from 'spike' to 'spike'⁶; went to sea; and after this, with a resolution which must command our respect, studied for and was eventually accepted at Ruskin College, Oxford, for a Diploma in Economic and Political Science⁷. During this latter period he tells us that he walked 12 miles to college each day in Newcastle:

When I was transporting a number of books my difficulties were greatly increased, and I had one particularly arduous journey through pelting rain with three heavy works of Schopenhauer⁸.

¹ George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963). Hereafter *DOPL*. Cf Raymond Williams on classification of *DOPL* in *Orwell* (London: Fontana, 1971), pp. 41-53.

² W. H. Davies, *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955). Davies' review is in the *New Statesman*, 18 March 1933.

³ Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (London: Isbister, 1963). Notably London 'frames' his narration of his sojourn among the poor by describing his disguising of himself and, as a result, the difference in the way the poor regard him — which of course Orwell does not.

⁴ See especially P. Stansky and W. Abrahams, *Orwell: The Transformation* (London: Constable, 1981) and B. Crick *George Orwell: a Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

⁵ John Brown, *I was a Tramp* (London: Selwyn and Blount Topical Books, 1934).

⁶ 'Spike' — a civilian barracks in which vagrants were permitted to stay free for one night at a time, on condition of their performing some menial tasks. In *The Pickwick Papers*, Tony Weller sends his son out to explore them.

⁷ Ruskin — an Oxford college, financed largely by the Trades Unions, enabling working-class men and women to continue their studies. Orwell of course had no formal education after the secondary stage (Eton).

⁸ *I was a Tramp*, pp. 218-9.

Our sympathy for the plight of the autodidact need not, however, exclude analysis; and it is evident throughout that Brown's narration of his experience labours just as heavily under his impulsion to write "correctly", acceptably, to appropriate the language of an alien and expropriating class, as he ever did — physically and characteristically under the volumes of Schopenhauer. (If the extreme appropriateness of that gloomiest of all philosophers to the actual situation may be seen in isolation as evidence of black comedy, it is a mode of which the text in general remains unaware).

Such linguistic conformity may often be seen, unambiguously, as expressive of genuine pathos. Nowhere is this more clearly the case than in the repeated, timorously 'respectable' reference to "securing work"⁹; and this may, demonstrably, be correlated with the undoubted compulsion to a measure of social conformity demonstrated in the project of the autodidact. Brown's evocation of a Rouen brothel is instructive:

There was a constant procession through a little door on the left of the orchestra, but we did not pursue our investigations there ... we noticed that a new type of visitor was filling the room. The new arrivals were obviously the riff-raff of the city, whose slouching work and cloth caps worn over one ear made them easy to recognise¹⁰.

Still more germane to an incidental comparison with Orwell — who, in narrating a conversation with a tramp who sees all other tramps as scum, is moved to refer, trenchantly if hyperbolically, to "the pew-renter who sleeps in every English workman"¹¹ — is Brown's simultaneous expression of shock at tramps' minor deceptions and admiration for the benevolent authority-figure of The Church Army warden: "The Church Army 'Captain' had proved himself a good Samaritan, but his beds were occupied by the greatest set of villains in England, judging by their talk"¹². (W. H. Davies', in his review of *DOPL*, to which reference has already been made, states that "In reading these extraordinary confessions, it is very curious to see how London and Paris compete in the making of strange scoundrels"¹³. In raising the notion of competition here Davies, however, as we shall see, said more than he knew).

In Brown's text, we have the repeated impression of linguistic convolutions and periphrases as an index of his incorporation (at the time of writing) into its Oxford base, by a 'tolerant' and secure ruling-class liberalism. It is not without significance that *I was a Tramp* concludes with the author's account of his meeting with Lord Nuffield, who — after an argument with the now moderately socialist and anti-communist Brown — pays for him to visit the U.S.S.R. to see what it is 'really' like¹⁴.

Of course, Orwell's writing in *DOPL* (product of voluntary, not imposed poverty) gives the immediate impression of something entirely different (and which was to be seen as the hallmark of his prose): direct, apparently unaffected and transparent, its characteristics of relaxedness and conversationality have been too frequently chronicled to need further exemplification here. Yet what *does* bear repetition is the status of all utterance both as a mediating element for ideological transformation and as the bearer of a certain residual ideological charge: Orwell's prose narration is of course no exception, and in this respect may be seen as altogether less simple to analyse than that of Brown.

In one sense, of course, the very 'effortless' clarity of Orwell's writing (later used in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as a warrant for some truly extraordinary ideological assertions) may be seen as articulating a self-confidence to which poor John Brown could never aspire. Its epigrammatic trenchancy can, indeed, direct considerable radical force at the deflation of

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40 c.g.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78. Cf *DOPL*, p. 80, on the visit of the *plongeurs* to the brothel.

¹¹ *DOPL*, p. 176

¹² *I was a Tramp*, pp. 155-6.

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ pp. 280-1.

“common” — in the event, necessarily, ruling class assumptions, as in the narrator’s thoughts on returning to England: “England is a very good country when you are not poor, and of course with a tame imbecile to look after, I was not going to be poor. The thought of not being poor made me very patriotic”¹⁵. Here the economy of patriotism is drawn, through a sardonic throwaway which undercuts conventional middle-class charitable assumptions, into a sharp, liberating irony.

Or again, it works through the barbed ingenuousness of the comment on ‘slummers’, the middle-class proselytisers ignored by the inhabitants of the London lodging house: “It is curious how people take it for granted that they have a right to preach at you and pray over you as soon as your income falls below a certain level”¹⁶. It is in instances like this that one thinks of Shaw at his best — of the cutting rejoinder of the rich man in *Major Barbara*, for instance, who when his poor interlocutor tells him that he “wouldn’t have his conscience for all his money”, replies that *he* “wouldn’t have [the other’s] money, not for all his conscience”. Of course Orwell affected to loathe Shaw; there is a page-long denunciation in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and, elsewhere, the assertion that “[Shaw’s] ... work ... has steadily got worse until its only function is to console fat women who yearn to be highbrows”¹⁷. (Orwell’s socialism was never to be comprehensively humanistic).

Yet Orwell’s revulsion from Shaw has in it elements a kind of fratricidal hatred: Shaw and Orwell inhabit, to a large extent, the same intellectual world. Even their snobberies coincide; Orwell’s contempt for the North American *nouveaux riches* at the Hotel X in Paris — “perhaps it hardly matters whether such people are swindled or not”¹⁸ — is the voice of the British post-1918 ruling class, its dominance usurped by that of another nation, just as much as is Shaw’s figure of the U.S. ambassador who concludes the action of *The Apple Cart*.

More generally, though, the clarity of the prose writing of each writer — though at times facilitating aphorisms which have a locally liberating effect — is to a large extent delusory, source of mystification rather than revelation. Its very bluntness, especially in the case of Orwell, may well remind us of Gramsci’s definition of common-sense as “the operative rationality of the ruling class”. For Orwell — as for Shaw — such language is all too often the bearer of ideologically dominant British tradition: empirical, anecdotal, eclectic, insular. It occasionally emerges comically as such at a superficial and obvious level; the narrator’s explosion on his first visit to the ‘spike’ — “I say, damn it, where are the beds?”¹⁹ — seems to justify amply Richard Hoggart’s characterisation of Orwell’s tone as “that of a peppery colonel”²⁰.

The ideological presuppositions of the narrative emerge in more subtle conjuncture in a passage where the narrator bewails surrendering his good English clothes at a Paris pawnshop: “70 francs for £10 worth of clothes”. But it was no use arguing ... Afterwards when it was too late, I learnt that it was safer to go to a pawnshop in the afternoon. The clerks are French [!], and, like most French people, are in a bad temper until they have eaten their lunch”²¹. Here, estrangement simultaneously from relatively prosperous country of birth and relatively prosperous class of origin (a situation which later, in *Homage to Catalonia*, was to precipitate a new and revolutionary form of political action and writing) leads the narrator to take refuge, simultaneously, in anecdotalism and in ironic patronising chauvinism. It is an attitude present in the memory of the early-morning Métro ride, “nose to nose with some

¹⁵ *DOPL*, p. 113.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁷ Letter to Brenda Salkeld, 10 March 1933.

¹⁸ *DOPL*, p. 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁰ R. Hoggart, *Speaking to Each Other*, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973), II, p. 107.

²¹ *DOPL*, p. 28.

hideous French face, breathing sour wine and garlic” (though a bizarre operation of the repressed ensures here that the generation of the odours remains ambiguous!)²². Still more sinister is the brusque modulation from anecdotal absurdism to the scarcely-veiled articulation of popular anti-semitism in the story of a Jewish second-hand clothes dealer: “Once I saw him take a good overcoat from an old woman, put two white billiard balls into her hand, and then push her rapidly out of the shop before she could protest. It would have been a pleasure to flatten the Jew’s nose if only one could have afforded it”²³. (It is notable that in contrast, the narrator — on later being conned by a London clothes dealer whose ethnic origin is not specified — assumes an attitude of passivity²⁴).

Yet it would seem too simplistic to discuss the passage quoted as simply an instance of a more or less unthinking expression of anti-semitism — or even to see the narrator as, in this respect, the sounding board of his friend Boris (the extraordinary Czarist ex-officer whose anecdotes often focus on the supposed vices of the Jews, “etc. etc.”²⁵). Rather, a consideration of the internal economy of the third chapter, in which it occurs, as a whole leads to an awareness of the text working against itself towards a latent critique of the origins of fascism among, in effect, the petty-bourgeoisie. Thus, in the four pages preceding the anti-semitic expression, we are given an account in minute detail of the effects of life on 6 francs a day, just *above* the poverty line, with a strong sense (always Orwell’s *forte*) of the intermediate, the questionable social status, “as it were, the suburbs of poverty”²⁶. The narrative then fixes on the cameo of the Jew, before moving to its conclusion: “And there is another feeling that is a great consolation in poverty ... It is a feeling of relief, almost of pleasure, at knowing yourself at last genuinely down and out ... It takes off a lot of anxiety”²⁷. The whole problematic of the petty-bourgeoisie, caught between precarious self-identification and political aggression is caught implicitly in the vacillation towards and then away from the violent climax. (Though the experiences noted are those of the late 1920s, such a narrative instant drives them forward to 1933, the date of initial publication).

Similarly in the anecdotal eclecticism of the work as a whole, there emerges an implicitly self-commenting structure of narration. At one level, of course, the anecdotes embedded in the text seem just that and no more. Motifs are repeated without ostensible amplification — often they are signalled by the word “mysterious”:

The Arab navvies who lived in the cheapest hotels used to conduct *mysterious* feuds ...;

Boris was still sleeping, on some *mysterious* terms, at the house of the cobbler ...;

Football and socialism have some *mysterious* connexion on the continent ...²⁸

The syndrome conveys a distanced amusement, even a slight condescension, yet nonetheless an avowal of the strangeness, the random otherness of Paris which London cannot, of course, provide. At another level, however, the eclecticism which lies at the centre of the narrator’s social encounters (even in chapter one we are given a *gallery* of characters) is also at the very centre of the exploitation of wage labours in the Paris hotel kitchens. Not only is the confused speed of the work there presented with an almost Rabelaisian verbal facility; the presentation constitutes, moreover, an emblematic representation of capitalism as an inferno of structured chaos, *and* an agency for the mystification of the narrator and his subject like: “Marco was wonderful. The way he would stretch his great arms right across the cafeteria to fill a coffee-pot with one hand and boil an egg with the other, at the same time watching toast and

²² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 40, 44.

shouting directions to the Magyar and between whiles singing snatches from *Rigoletto*, was beyond all praise. The *patron* knew his value, and he was paid 1000 francs a month, instead of 500 francs like the rest of us”²⁹. The romance of industry, indeed.

Yet a few pages later such absorption in the process of wage-labour is supplanted by the comment (an alternative reading of the situation, perhaps, rather than a contradiction): “Marco, who was in charge of the cafeteria, had the typical drudge mentality”³⁰. And subsequently the note of radicalism is generalised in a chapter of “reflection” which, as is later to be the procedure in *Homage to Catalonia*, is set as a contrast to the chapter of “description”; and in which wage labour as a whole under capitalism is rebelliously questioned: “I believe that this instinct to perpetuate useless work is, at bottom, simply fear of the mob”³¹.

The question of whether such radicalisation is sustained throughout the work as a whole leads us to a comparison of the presentation of Paris (in the first half of the text) with that of London (in the second). Apart from the fact that the eclecticism which dominated the text at one level ensures the absence of any systematic comparison, Orwell’s one moment of sketchily aphoristic evocation (foreshadowing the first pages of *The Lion and The Unicorn*), tells us relatively little³². London is “much cleaner and quieter and drearier”, the people “milder” and lacking the “individuality and malice” of the French: “It was the land of the tea urn and the Labour Exchange, as Paris is the land of the *bistro* and the sweatshop”³³.

Further investigation of a series of unstressed analogies and contrasts can however lead us to a more adequate political reading of the text as a whole. Of paramount importance for such a reading is the extent to which each half of the text is presented in terms of a literary construct; each part being to a different extent “set up”, framed as fiction, as fabulation.

The evident initial difference between the two is that the element of fiction, indeed mythologisation, which introduces the London section is frankly acknowledged. The narrator (rendered patriotic as we have noted through thoughts of not being poor) romances absurdly to his unfortunate Romanian fellow-travellers on the beauties of England; and then the theme of fabulation is, just as arbitrarily abandoned in favour of the unacknowledged, creaky, indeed scarcely credible plot device of his friend B (hitherto unknown to the text) lending him money.

In Paris, the presentation of social experience from the outset as, literally, “fabulous”³⁴ is just as evident but uniformly unacknowledged. The prologue to Paris experience is evidently too good to be true, just as one expects Paris low life to be. Set out in the form of stage-directions and dramatic dialogue, the impression is of the scenario from a Zola film (where does the street name Rue du Coq d’Or come from if not from *L’Assommoir*?). The stress on artifice is strong: “I sketch this scene ... a ravine of tall leprous houses lurching towards one another in queer attributes, as though they had all been frozen in the act of collapse ...”³⁵.

Just so is the sense of impending cataclysmic drama simultaneously held and averted by the writing. A notable instance is provided in Chapter two (a kind of second prologue) by Charlie’s tale, a bizarre melodramatic narration which starts out from a stereotyped evocation of Parisian bohemian life, cheerily picturesque, tinted through the operetta-glasses of cliché:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³⁴ The impression can work both ways. “Il nous décrit si également la singulière vie des vagabonds, si peu anglaise, que l’impression d’étrangeté prend quelque chose de féérique”. Ramon Fernandez, “*La Vache enragée* de George Orwell”, *Marianne*, 14 August 1935.

³⁵ *DOPL*, p. 35.

“‘Ah l’amour! l’amour! Ah que la vie est belle’”³⁶. This modulates suddenly to an equally stereotyped melodramatic narration — a fantasy of sexual domination couched in the traditional terms of sadistic pornography: “With a bound, I was beside the bed ... If it were not for that accursed law that robs us of our freedom, I would have murdered her at that moment ...”³⁷.

The two “prologues” together furnish a paradigm for the presentation of French social life — or rather they determine that presentation in terms of dramatic myth, vital yet savage — just as the passages which announce the return to London (the rational deflation of fable and the improbable ‘B’) determine the vision of England as matter of fact, monotonous, undramatic and drab. The constitution of these two alternative series of myths by the narrator, moreover, determines the kind of myths people are seen as constituting about themselves out of their own poverty. In Paris (claustrophobic, frenetic, theatre of savage antagonisms and self-projection) people are shown as believing that they are what they are not (psychotic mythomania). Charlie sees himself as a reincarnation of the Marquis de Sade; Boris sees himself as a great military campaigner, the cook at the Auberge de Jehan Cottard as “very artistic”. In London (rambling, drifting, a backdrop of mild acceptance and, above all, of a lack of self-recognition) people are seen as not believing that they are what they are (psychotic dissociation): “I imagine that there are quite a lot of tramps who thank God they are not tramps. They are like the trippers who say such cutting things about trippers”³⁸. In a café, even a mild obscenity has been effaced from a graffito on the wall — “This was England”³⁹. Deference to established proprieties entails suppression of even verbal conflict where possible.

Paris is the focus of absurdist agitation, of conflict and drama. The narrator’s first descent into the hotel kitchen where he is to work — “It seemed a queer sort of place”⁴⁰ — bears an uncanny resemblance to Alice’s entry into the nether world; not only in its subject matter does Orwell’s text, moreover, demonstrate affinities with Céline and Beckett. The ludicrous chaos of the kitchen parodies, nonsensically, the attitudes of the proprietor of the Auberge de Jehan Cottard whose “sole joy ... was to stand in the bar smoking cigarettes and looking gentlemanly, and that he did to perfection”⁴¹.

In London, by contrast, absurdity is the product of monotony. One news vendor buys another’s clothes and goes off in them, leaving him nothing but the *Daily Mail* to wear⁴² — we are left with the impression that, like those of Beckett’s tramps, the transaction might be repeated, back and forth, sempiternally. (The encounter was to give the subject of one of Orwell’s — maybe fortunately — rare poems, a kind of parody of Yeats’s ‘The great day’)⁴³.

In Paris the locus of social life is the convivial, semi-public one of the *bistro*. Chapter eighteen moves from an account of the ferocious exploitation there of the drunken Furex, to the emergence as a spectacle from the drunken stupor, around 1:30 a.m., of a certain political awareness: “We perceived that we were not splendid inhabitants of a splendid world, but a crew of underpaid workmen grown squalidly and dismally drunk”⁴⁴.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴³ In *The Adelphi*, October 1933, and in Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, eds S. Orwell & I. Angus, 4 vols (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), I, pp. 123-5.

⁴⁴ *DOPL.*, p. 86.

The corresponding site of conviviality in London is the frowsty retreat of the lodging-house kitchen, where the inmates also confront each other but where, notably, conflicts ebb away. (““Oh, don’t get on the *argue!*””⁴⁵).

Most telling, in the contrast between Paris and London, is that evident in the presentation of people. Fictionality is regularly stressed in the introduction of the Parisian characters: Charlie as “one of the local *curiosities*”, “a curious specimen”⁴⁶; Boris “a curious character”⁴⁷. In more senses than one they both inhabit the world of fiction. The London street-artist Bozo, by contrast, has an aura of factuality about him: he is summed up, indeed, as “a very exceptional *man*”⁴⁸. Significantly, Bozo’s central interest is said to be in the sciences of nature (especially astronomy) and it is suggested that this has led him to a state, virtually, of cosmic indifference. Boris and Charlie, by contrast, are seen as characters operating through the imagination and seeing life as a struggle calling for a perpetual act of will. Paradoxically, both Charlie and Bozo seek to define their human freedom; Charlie projects his mind exploitatively outwards, seeing himself as “perfectly free to abuse the girl in the cellar”⁴⁹, whilst Bozo taps his head in a gesture of involution and withdrawal, asserting that “I’m a free man in here”⁵⁰.

It will be apparent from the foregoing that *DOPL* is not best viewed as a source of social-historical “information” in any unproblematical sense. As such it is probably no more reliable than Céline’s *Mort à Crédit* where, in strange symmetry, the terms of *DOPL* are reversed so that the Paris suburbs typify monotony, and the very ordinary, medium-sized Kent town of Rochester becomes the quasi-mythical setting for a cataclysmic bacchanalia. It is demonstrably more productive to view the text as a complex, developing and implicitly self-commenting process — a process which comes to constitute the arena for, and naturally contribute to, conflicting ideological instances. To return, in conclusion as it were, to the surface ideologies articulated in the work, it becomes evident that the constituted image of Paris as savage but vital, full of explosive potential dynamism, is also worked into the development of the narrator, who overcomes eclectic self-mystification and who (in Chapter twenty-two) works towards at least some radical questioning of society as a whole. The subsequent constituted image of London, however, as relatively low-key, gentle but inert, “factual” not “fictional” leads to what might be termed the swamping of the narrator’s consciousness. Whereas at the end of Part One there emerges an ideology of potentiality, in the sometimes vague but often sharp questioning of the modes of wage-labour under capitalism, at the end of Part Two the narrator has retreated into that eclecticism from which he had previously emerged — the last paragraph of the text carries a list of “one or two things I have definitely learned by being hard up”⁵¹. And the generalised correlative of that eclecticism is the expression of well-intentioned, but conventional and localised, reformism. This, for the questioning of society as a whole in France, substitutes a mere suggestion of the transformation of the ‘spikes’ in England into smallholdings so that the tramps “might even cease to be regarded as paupers and be able to marry and take a respectable place in society”⁵².

Orwell’s text tells us little about poverty in itself; it tells us more (though not a lot more) about its author and his perceptions of poverty; most of all it demonstrates to us the changing and problematic relations between them.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 184.