Soc (2016) 53:581–596
DOI 10.1007/s12115-016-0070-0

SOCIETY INTERVIEW

The Strange Happy Life of a Scholar Gipsy

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Published online: 7 November 2016

Abstract Interview with freelance writer and independent scholar John Rodden, who discusses his literary work and personal outlook as an author. How does one live the life of the mind and write scholarly books full-time without institutional affiliations? Rodden jokes about his considerable invisible means of (non-finanical) support. Moving from the specific to the general, the topics range from reflections on the motives and background of an author's writings to the emotional, existential, and practical aspects of a "solitary walker's" intellectual journey.

Keywords George Orwell · 1984 · Animal farm · William Butler Yeats · The choice · George Eliot · Middlemarch · Matthew Arnold · Paul Celan · Arnold Toynbee · Arthur Koestler · Trivial vs. tragic planes of life · Lionel Trilling · Irving Howe · Edmund Wilson · Triple thinker · Leo Tolstoy

During the last three decades, John Rodden's work has been concerned with large issues of public concern, including modern intellectual history, society and education under communism versus capitalism, utopian thought, the crisis of the humanities in the American academy, and the vocation of the writer-critic. The latter concern is the main focus of his forthcoming cultural critique cum personal memoir, *The Intellectual Species: Evolution or Extinction*?

Rodden began his career, however, with *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell* (1989), a comprehensive, multifaceted study addressing the heritage of George Orwell. Both the book and several subsequent studies of Orwell's life and legacy have been praised both by Orwell's close friends (Julian Symons, George Woodcock) and by prominent critics and scholars of more recent generations (Sir Bernard Crick, Peter Stansky, Jeffrey Meyers, Christopher Hitchens, Peter Davison).

In the last quarter-century, as he explains in this wide-ranging interview conducted in 2015, his *oeuvre* of more than two dozen books has radiated in numerous, often unforeseen directions from the Orwell "hub," addressing topics of broad scope, including German history, Anglo-American cultural politics, Latin American fiction, comparative education, the vicissitudes of socialism, the psychology of literature, the art of the interview, and crimes against human rights.

Q1: Let's start with Orwell. Many comments could be quoted that cite you as the leading scholar of Orwell today. Certainly in the three decades since you first started writing about Orwell there has accumulated a significant and coherent body of work. So this seems like an opportune moment to look back and take stock. One question that intrigues me is how you assess your work on Orwell at this stage of your career. In other words, we know what the critics have been saying about Rodden and Orwell, but what I want to know is: How does John Rodden view "the Rodden Orwell opus" *anno* 2015?

A1: I began to write *The Politics of Literary Reputation* around the time that Bernard Crick published his pioneering first full-length biography of Orwell in 1980. It now occurs to me that the distance between 1980 and 2015 is 35 years, which is the same distance between 1949, when Orwell published *1984,* and the year 1984 itself. I mention the Crick biography specifically, because it answered most questions about Orwell's life, unlike the case with the two-volume biography by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams from the 1970s. They did not have the cooperation of his widow Sonia Orwell. So they were hobbled by his refusal to grant

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quotation rights from Orwell's published works, let alone any unpublished writings by him in the Orwell Archive.

By contrast, Bernard Crick did have the permission of the Orwell estate and Sonia Orwell. As a biographer, he covered most of the outstanding questions about Orwell's life, but he did not deal with the legacy. I took it as my task to address Orwell's burgeoning reputation, or "afterlife," especially his posthumous fame, which was already expanding enormously as the so-called countdown to 1984 approached in the early 1980s. Of course, his reputation has continued to radiate in new and unexpected directions—and to an extent unprecedented for any other author in English or even any foreign language. Although the rich complexity and manifold permutations of his reputation are overwhelming and preclude exhaustive treatment— given how intricately interwoven Orwell's afterlife is with political, social, cultural, and social history— this has also meant that documentary evidence of its range and scope are available. I was able to turn this fact to scholarly advantage., since the wealth of evidence about both Orwell's emerging reputation in his lifetime and wider fame since his death—increasingly not only in print form but also in the broadcast media and on the Web— *are there*. As a result, I could even move beyond the story of Orwell's reputation to posit the basic conditions of reputation-building as a social process, with George Orwell's reception serving as a well-documented case study of the rudimentary dynamics— and indeed as a case history of landmark events headlining the decades since the mid-twentieth century.

Q2: That book was your first study of his fascinating, ambiguous legacy.

A2: Needless to say, there can never be a definitive treatment of such matters—nor, I believe, of Orwell's legacy. *The Politics of Literary Reputation* simply offers itself as a series of portraits from a gallery that represent, as I titled a subsequent book on Orwell, *Scenes from an Afterlife.* The scenes have continued to alter, and new scenes have emerged even as old ones vanish or transform into other distinctive images. I just finished an essay on the Wikileaks and NSA scandals, featuring whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden. If you conduct a Google search with these keywords and "George Orwell," the hits number in the thousands. This is just one of the countless examples of the evergreen status of a uniquely ubiquitous author who continues to be a news topic of contemporary relevance. Unlike most authors who are just figures of the past, Orwell is still bracingly contemporary.

Here I distinguish between George Orwell, the author, and "George Orwell," the cultural icon. The latter is the political talisman with whom those on the Right and Left conjure. No other author has his name in the form of a proper adjective bandied about so frequently and in so many different contexts. My point is this: if you write as I have about the afterlife rather than the life, you never run out of things to discover. The reception history is kaleidoscopic, for an author "still alive" witnesses events and issues always fresh and new. So long as George Orwell and his work, in particular *Animal Farm* and *1984*, remain linked to emerging world-historical events such as digital terrorism or cyber warfare, the incessant citation of "Orwellian" and his famous catchwords from those two books will continue. They are mobile metaphors that can be applied in all kinds of circumstances and contexts, and they still continue to do so because of Orwell's intellectual and cultural pedigree.

That is to say, in numerous languages (not just English), Orwell and his work have become part of the world's cultural and political legacy, not only in a diachronic or historical sense, but also in a synchronic or spatial sense— that is, not merely in the receding past but also across numerous headline topics currently. So the commentary on Orwell seems endlessly open. Unlike most authors who are studied in English departments alone and whom readers chiefly encounter in universities, or who occasion literary criticism, Orwell's work has acquired relevance to disciplines including cultural criticism, political science, sociology, history, education, rhetoric, communication studies, and more — not to mention the topical discussions or allusions to him in newspapers and opinion periodicals. I myself have published on Orwell in those fields and in journals of anthropology, architecture, and human rights as well. His work raises much bigger questions than do the vast majority of canonical writers, who are merely the object of literary exegesis or textual criticism.

Let me put it another way. I had the fortuitous accident—the happy adventure—of meeting George Orwell at a crossroads where the essential questions about his life had been answered. The biographies that have come since then, which are excellent, have only added incrementally—just as they typically do in the case of other authors. Of course, no biography is ever "definitive." At most a masterful biography will settle the main issues and leave its successors with the smaller (yet valuable) task of filling out a picture that might shift our point of view. That's even the case, for example, with Richard Ellmann's monumental biography of Joyce and the more recent Joyce biography by Gordon Bowker, another outstanding *Life* that achieves the same standard of excellence as the one he did on Orwell.

I think both Crick and Ellmann's biographies were "definitive" in the sense of answering all the essential questions with scholarly integrity. Still, new discoveries get made and new details are added; and so biographies are periodically updated, allowing one to see how the life was lived in light of later events and new discoveries.

My focus on Orwell's legacy is radically different from all this, however, because any book about someone's afterlife rather than his life, as I've mentioned, becomes less about Orwell than about what people have said or done about and to George Orwell—or rather "George Orwell." It is far more a study in literary and intellectual history than an exegesis of an author's work or a narrative of his life.

The moment that I entered upon my own work on Orwell occurred at an historical crossroads for two reasons: the first was the biography of Crick, but the second was the approach of 1984, which occasioned dozens of international conferences and entire courses in the academy devoted to Orwell. Unlike the case in earlier decades, the huge gulf that had always existed between the literary-political intellectuals in London and New York (who valued Orwell) and the English professors (who often patronized him as a high school author) narrowed. In 1982, Orwell was not an "eligible" author to study for my Ph.D. exams; I was not allowed to propose him as a "major author" suitable for part of a doctoral examination. That was typical in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and even more so in earlier decades. Throughout my graduate student career—i.e., until a few years after 1984— most senior literature professors, who were still beholden to the aesthetic values of modernism and the textually oriented New Criticism, regarded Orwell as a high school author, because it seemed to them as if no exegesis or "close readings" were invited. Even *1984,* let alone *Animal Farm* and his other works, simply were not worth serious literary attention. That is, most literary scholars believed that his realist novels penned in the 1930s had little literary merit and that his documentaries and other works, including his essays, were not suitable for literary study, with the possible exception of a mere "skills" course in English composition or rhetoric, which would include an essay such as "Politics and the English Language."

Q3: As the "countdown to 1984" unfolded, then, you observed his reputation changing?

A3: By the late 1980s, I noticed the first signs of a decisive upward shift that, perhaps inadvertently, coincided with the opening wave of scholarly attention first devoted to serious reflection about the historical construction of the "high" literary canon. Orwell had joined the higher tier of authors worthy for university study in what I called the "status-sphere" (i.e., the high canon). So my good fortune in choosing several years earlier to address Orwell's afterlife was *kairos*.

My dawning awareness of this historical crossroad where "Orwell" and Western culture were meeting had convinced me by 1981 that it would be far wiser to take into account the remarkable upsurge of interest as the "countdown to 1984" advanced during late 1983 to mid-1984. No other book in history, let alone a novel published thirty-five years earlier, ever topped the bestseller lists for several months as did *1984* during September 1983 to April 1984. As late as mid-1983, this was still not obvious unless you were monitoring it all closely. When I approached an agent and several publishers in the early 1980s to write a serious study of Orwell's reputation, they expressed no interest except in a popular biography that could be published in 1983 or early 1984. (The agency was Harold Ober & Associates in New York, Faulkner's longtime agent. We quickly dropped each other—by frustrated mutual agreement.) Instead I had firmly decided by 1982 to navigate around the coming floodtide of popular interest and step back, remain patient, and write a book that would trace the course of Orwell's reputation in rich historical context, because it could be a book about the emergence and unfolding of a writer's fame that had reached its unexpected climax three decades and more after his death.

That was a providential decision. It added years of work, but I have no regrets at all about that time spent. It launched me in a direction that was invaluable, not only for my lifelong reflections about Orwell, but also for the much larger issue of reputation: how it gets made and claimed. Accordingly, the subtitle of my first book investigates the "making and claiming" of "St. George" Orwell, an exploration of how a reputation arises and then can be used and abused for purposes that the author will never envision. To further develop my inductive, evidence-based "low theory" or "building blocks" approach to the formation of reputation— i.e., via carefully constructed case studies in literary reception as cultural history, I later wrote case histories of the reputations of several other intellectuals, writers, and philosophers, along with publishing several essays on the conceptual approach itself. The authors included Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, Isabel Allende, and Friedrich Nietzsche, among others.

My study of the formation and re-formation (and deformation or "de-facement")— or the "making and claiming" (and *dis*claiming by his enemies)— of Orwell's reputation also motivated me to use the skills I had already acquired as a journalist (and college newspaper editor). I decided to approach Orwell's personal friends and colleagues in Britain and New York and to interview them. All of them are long gone from the planet by now. Most English professors in 1980 never did anything like that. Literary historians and critics were basically armchair critics who dealt with textual matters. As my elder colleagues at Virginia told me: "Why would you want to do something like that? You're not one of his biographers. There's no need to do something like that!"

Why? Because I wanted to reach a much wider audience and write a book of much greater significance, as I saw it, than the typical literary monograph. So I approached Oxford University Press with my idea and submitted the first 200 pages of the manuscript. To my delight, I received a call from Sheldon Meyer, the senior acquisitions editor, who was taken with the idea and offered me a contract. Soon thereafter a decision was made at the University of Virginia that I should be hired full-time as a tenure-track junior professor. I was 25 years old— it was a heady moment.

This indeed was unprecedented. I hadn't even begun my dissertation officially. I had not formed a Ph.D. committee. I wasn't even ABD ("all but doctorate"). In those days, at least in the humanities, if you ever returned to your university to teach, you typically established your standing at another university, and then you might be invited back as a senior tenured faculty member many years later.

Moreover, a very strict, long-standing rule prevailed against nepotism. No elite university humanities department hired its newly minted "doctors" straight out of grad school into tenure-track positions, let alone someone still in the grad program (and still officially without his M.A. degree!) Exceptions to the rule such as Harvard and Yale were put on notice. It was made clear to you during the hiring process that your realistic odds of tenure were close to zero. Let me make this clear. I received this contract from Oxford before even taking my Ph.D. exams, just as I was completing my master's degree. Subsequently I formed my committee, to which I simply submitted my book manuscript and was awarded a Ph.D.

That was all unheard of. By the way, Virginia got around that so-called rule of not "hiring your own" (designed to thwart nepotism) with a technicality— by shifting me over to the rhetoric department. Later I left Virginia and went to the University of Texas. But I wasn't happy there. I soon concluded that I had received such royal treatment at Virginia that I didn't really need to go elsewhere, or to climb the ivory tower any higher. I wanted to become a writer— at least a nonfiction writer if not an imaginative and creative writer.

Q4: Your first major work on Orwell, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell*, was published in April 1989 to critical acclaim. At that point a very interesting development took place in your career. In 1989, and continuing in 1990 and 1991, you might have been expected to concentrate almost exclusively on Orwell and you did indeed write several new critical articles on his work and legacy. But you also developed a significant new research agenda centering on the great transformation that was taking place in eastern Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the GDR. A decade later your engagement with this subject resulted in a first monograph entitled *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse: A History of East German Education*, *1945–1995* (2002), and you then added three more volumes from 2006 to 2010, namely *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 of Human Rights Abuse in Eastern Germany* (2010), thus creating what may be called a "German quartet." The rationale for these studies is fully explained in the quartet, but could you summarize the argument and explain the road from Orwell/"Orwell" to Germany?

A4: It is all one vision. The gift that I received by working on these twin topics in my first book for so long, namely George Orwell and the politics of reputation, was that they launched me in new directions and opened up vistas that I never could have foreseen. In the case of Orwell, I got to meet numerous other distinguished living writers, whom I have called his "literary siblings," his "intellectual heirs." His siblings soon became my siblings; I became another, even younger, "junior colleague," so to speak. I got to know personally the families and colleagues of Irving Howe, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Dwight Macdonald, Alfred Kazin, as well as some of the other leading intellectuals who wrote for *Partisan Review*, the American magazine for which Orwell wrote his famous "London Letter" in the 1940s. Orwell received the first Partisan Review Award in 1949 on the publication of *1984*. All that occurred on the Anglo-American scene, first in New York and London, and later beyond.

The "beyond" soon branched out to Germany. As you observe, I have referred to Orwell as the intellectual "hub" of my vocation, the life of the mind. In the case of Germany, I had learned German and, like Orwell, been preoccupied with the history of socialism, the dream and nightmare of utopia, the agony and tragic fate of the Left in the twentieth century, and the evils of Nazism and Stalinism. I had taught Orwell's work and pondered deeply his reflections on these matters.

But like him, I wanted to see it all for myself. He had gone as a war reporter to occupied Germany in 1945, hoping to catch a last glimpse of the Nazi *Reich*. In my case, East Germany touted itself in the mid-1980s, when I first started travelling to Germany, as "really existing socialism," as the phrase had it: the communist experiment in action.

As an educator, I was eager to visit East German schools, interview the teachers and Ministry of Education officials, and meet the pupils and their families. During the dying days of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1990, I first visited and soon I began teaching in the schools. No textbooks in subjects such as history, civics, German literature, and ethics (which was the communist analogue to a religion class) were available, since those subjects had been ideologically indoctrinated. I was invited to teach these subjects "from a Western viewpoint." The students had endless questions. Were the history textbook narratives about the "Anti-Fascist Wall of Protection" true? Was the Berlin Wall— *die Schutzmauer* (Defense Wall)— really built to defend East Germans from an invasion of the Americans, West Germans, and other NATO powers? And so on.

My experiences led me to write a history of postwar East Germany from 1945 to 1995, and then to pen a sociology of GDR education, namely *Textbook Reds*. I later ventured far beyond education to the topic of my third book: The story of post-communist eastern Germany since 1989 and the *Mauer im Kopf* ("wall in their heads")— that is, the "Walls That Remain," between the East and West.

Ultimately I moved from those subjects to the searingly personal stories of East German victims of human rights crimes. My fourth book on Germany aspired to give voice to their pain and suffering, and it also included a few examples of men and women who— nightmares of all nightmare— suffered as victims of the crimes of both the Nazi and communist regimes, whether as concentration camps inmates or by other means.

Q5: You mean that this proceeded from, or was somehow related to, your preoccupations with Orwell's life, work, and legacy?

A5: I often ponder, "What has prompted me to identify with Orwell so deeply? What is the nature of our Anglo-American special relationship? Why has he exerted such a dramatic impact on my life?" I recall that a student asked me after a lecture that I had given about Orwell's essays, "Is it true George Orwell was your college roommate? I heard from several friends that he was." That still tickles me. When I started my work in 1980, I had no idea that he and I would develop this transatlantic "special relationship." By the time my first book was published in 1989, he had become the figure whom I always call my "intellectual big brother," that is, my beneficent "big brother" (I deliberately lower-case the phrase), not the fearsome bogeyman "Big Brother." You'll recall that in *1984* the citizens chant "B.B.! B.B.!" Of course, they are referring to a tyrannical, oppressive presence: Big Brother.

My "big brother," George Orwell, has blessed me with invaluable gifts, and I gladly pay "homage to Orwell" (adapting the title of his beautiful book about Spain, *Homage to Catalonia*). I mean that facetiously, of course, but I have always felt a compelling affinity with him, which is why I have devoted a substantial part of my mature energies to his life and work, and above all his heritage, the legacy of which I am a grateful beneficiary.

As I say, thanks to Orwell I also had the chance to meet and interview numerous men and women of earlier generations who have felt a similar kinship. My debt to Orwell is not political or intellectual alone, therefore, but filial and thus intimately personal. He has introduced me to what Irving Howe, who was another strong admirer of Orwell, termed in the title of his best-selling book about *Yiddishkeit* and its disappearance, "the world of our fathers."

Orwell has been the intellectual Beatrice who accompanied me on an exciting and sometimes baffling and uncertain journey, my guide to what Henry James in his *Aspern Papers* called "the visible past." Yet let me stress here that I have eschewed naïve hero worship of George Orwell. I referred to him as "St. George" Orwell not because I myself was canonizing him, but because I was analyzing a cultural phenomenon whereby intellectuals and the literary public had already done that to him. *They* memorialized him as "St. George," the modern patriot saint of England. *They* dubbed him "St. George," celebrating him as a strong literary patriot, especially for books like *The Lion and the Unicorn* and for his quintessential Englishness; and also "St. George" because his friends and colleagues referred to him as "a kind of saint" (in V.S. Pritchett's words) because of his ascetic lifestyle and his insistence on truth-telling.

All that is part of the political and literary history of the twentieth century: it is not my fabrication. I have told the story of the making and the claiming; I myself never sought to claim, let alone disclaim, George Orwell, and I hope I've been candid about my own allegiances. Rather, I've aimed to describe the repeated practice of ideologically motivated intellectuals to shift his coffin left or right, to conduct intellectual grave-robbing, and to seize his mantle for their own purposes.

And yet, on reflection, have I sought to "claim" him in some weaker sense? I do indeed identify strongly with the work, values, limpid prose style, and literary persona of George Orwell, all of which is why I have nominated him the "prose laureate" of the English language and called him my "intellectual big brother." Much of my work addresses the posthumous reception of George Orwell. Again I am not inventing this reception history, but rather documenting it. Indeed other intellectuals' admiration for him has spawned a repeated question as almost every new major political event since 1950 has arisen: "If Orwell were alive today… what would he say or do?"

So my dual focus has been Orwell the man and "Orwell"—the literary figure, cultural symbol, political talisman, and intellectual icon. I shuttle between this pair, between who he was and the cultural object we have made and remade. But my major critical work is on "Orwell." This "Orwell" is a charged object for the intelligentsia, a secular saint and literary hero, someone whom they have exalted as an exemplar of intellectual integrity. Indeed they — or we— have lionized him as practically the only one from his generation who tried to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of fascism, Stalinism and imperialism— and still today the only one who can guide us beyond all the other "–isms" that have besieged us since then.

Years ago I proposed an amusing acronym for his unique status: "W.W.G.O.D." (What Would George Orwell Do?). Here again, I was rubricating a phenomenon that had been well under way by the 1980s. The recurrent headline, "If Orwell Were Alive Today," began not long after his death with McCarthyism and the Red Scare. It continued with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain in the mid-50s; the rise of the New Left and the counterculture and the Vietnam War in the 60s; corruption scandals, including Watergate, in the 70s; the nuclear freeze controversies in Europe during the mid-1980s; and numerous other issues prominent during and after the Cold War. Among them were the decline and fall of the Soviet Empire, the spread and virtual death of communism in the Third World, the ending of colonialism in Africa and Asia in the 1980s and 1990s— and other events until our own time.

"St. George" Orwell, the secular model for the intelligentsia, proved a very "catholic" figure, a left-wing patriot who could appeal across the ideological spectrum. He could also appeal to literary admirers as a pure stylist: St. George the "immaculate" writer of "pure" English prose. All of those adjectives— patriotic, immaculate, etc.—link him in some symbolic way to aspects of St. George, to Englishness, heroism, saintliness, and more.

Let me return for a moment to this theme of meeting the "extended family" and voyaging into the visible past. For my debt to Orwell is broader and more comprehensive than just receiving a front row visiting card to his own life and times. I also met through him his contemporaries and successors. An additional invaluable promissory note has to do with my own journey within. Because of the richness and amplitude of Orwell's *oeuvre* and legacy, I've been led to topics and issues and people that no one would ever associate with Orwell at all, among them Germany interviewing human rights, and more. Nonetheless, as I have occasionally hinted in some of my other books, Orwell has been the hub from which many of my forays into other histories, biographies, languages, and societies have proceeded, my intrepid guide to visitable pasts and new adventures that I otherwise never would've encountered.

The obvious so-called extensions have to do with meeting fellow readers of Orwell (of my day and earlier) ranging from friends and colleagues (such as Julian Symons and John Atkins at *Tribune)* to American intellectuals (such as Irving Howe, Diana Trilling, and more recently Christopher Hitchens) and dissident writers in East Germany and elsewhere in the former communist world. Those extensions led me to read little magazines and intellectual quarterlies (such as *Partisan Review* and *Horizon*) and to left-wing papers (such as *Tribune*) that otherwise I might never have read. As I have explored Orwell's legacy more deeply, I began, as it were, to extend the extensions, pursuing less and less obvious extensions and thereby following my own personal predilections and fortuitous opportunities wherever they led.

A dramatic further example would be that Orwell's commitment to socialism— and engagement with World War II— interacted with some other interests of mine, including German scholarship on literary reputation and post-war German history. Those interests drew me in turn to visit and study state socialism in East Germany, the so-called German Democratic Republic (GDR), whose forty-year lifetime between 1949 and 1990 coincided with the formative decades of Orwell's posthumous fame. In addition to the four books about modern Germany and socialism, I wrote numerous other essays indebted to Orwell (such as "Politics and the German Language," which dealt with political jargon and euphemisms introduced both in East and West Germany).

Of course, a more recent opportunity to which my intellectual big brother introduced me was my invitation in 2011 to keynote the "Orwell in Asia" symposium in Taiwan and to lecture elsewhere in Asia (such as Hong Kong and Singapore) on Orwell and other topics. These extensions and opportunities have altered my priorities and shifted the trajectory of my intellectual and existential journey in life.

Q6: That sounds very personal, not just intellectual or literary. Could you be more specific?

A6: The opportunity to meet Orwell's literary relatives— these intellectual siblings and spiritual cousins— has enriched me and also stretched me in ways I never could have anticipated. For example, in the case of the American intellectuals, I have written several books devoted to the writings and legacies of Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, and others. With the exception of Dwight Macdonald and a select few, almost all of these intellectuals are Jews. A deep relationship with Jewishness and *Yiddishkeit* has been another unexpected bequest. Here again, Orwell has been the hub of my "collection development," and as a private collector who has deliberately "adopted" him as my beneficent big brother, I thank him deeply for his fraternal counsel. I might even say that his example had an indirect effect on my vocational path in all of its craziness and hilarity.

I ask myself: "Did George Orwell at least partly inspire you to become a scholar gypsy? To give up an academic position and become a freelance author? To become an ascetic, independent scholar? All this was not so uncommon in his day when little magazines, intellectual quarterlies, and other publishing outlets allowed freelancers to remain independent and yet finance themselves. It's extremely rare these days. Yet however penurious the material existence, the spiritual and psychological remuneration has been nothing short of munificent, and here again I thank Orwell for having emboldened (or deluded!) me to undertake this quixotic pilgrimage.

Q7: I would like to look more closely at some of the personal choices that your commitment to this intellectual agenda involved. With the publication of *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, you had, so to speak, hit pay dirt from a career point of view and it would have been very normal if you had kept mining this rich Orwellian vein until such time when you had achieved tenure, promotion, financial security, membership on powerful committees, and so on. Believing instead in the presence of other valuable strata in the intellectual underground, you tunneled sideways and went in search of new intellectual El Dorados. The German quartet proved over time that you were right, but there must have been many challenges when you first started off in this direction.

I was amazed to discover, e.g., that all four titles were completed without official patronage of any kind from research boards, humanities councils, think tanks, government agencies, corporate sponsors, or even academic employment after 1993. This is rather astonishing; under similar circumstances, many academics who have a project, but fail to obtain funding, abandon their project and can sometimes be heard to say in later years: "It was a good topic, but I couldn't get the money." It is a modern academic version of the Catholic dictum "*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*," no salvation outside the Church, in this case the academy and its funding agencies. So I wonder how you reached the courageous decision to go your own way under these difficult circumstances and what resources did you draw upon to sustain the adventure and achieve such a significant body of work?

A7: Sheer obstinacy, obliviousness, and obtuseness! But seriously, as a Catholic myself, I recognize your Latin allusion. And in my own way I have adopted a certain kind of secular monastic vocation. Once my aim came to be a literary "loose fish," I felt that my bizarre course was set. You'll recall the line from chapter 89 of *Moby Dick,* which has always resonated with me. "What are the liberties of mankind but a loose fish?" One of my eccentricities, I suppose, is that without the oceanic joys of untethered, uncompromising liberty, I am a fish out of water. And as it advances well into the third decade, my wondrous gipsy adventure goes on and on! Often I muse about a claim of Matisse. It's a line I can apply to Orwell's afterlife, but as I reflect on your question it applies at least as much to my own life. "If my story were ever to be written down truthfully from start to finish it would amaze everyone."

Like Orwell, who admitted that he would never write his own autobiography, I suspect I could never write my own. Not that any great demand exists for it! The fate of even the greatest critics and chroniclers is so very different from the poets, novelists, and dramatists—and a Gibbon or a Hazlitt represent merely an exception to the rule. Posterity's bar is set very high, and Orwell is one of the few to vault it. But I do not regret playing Horatio to his Hamlet— or rather, I should say, a nameless footman or valet to his Hamlet. The fact is that I did what I could with the talents I possessed and the opportunities I developed.

Yes, the choices have been unusual— but also very, very simple. To do what I did, however unconventional, doesn't require promotions, financial security, membership on powerful committees, and so on. It simply requires an intellectual and literary *daimon*— and perhaps the sensibility of a *luftmensch* I often meditate on Yeats's famous poem, "The Choice."

> The intellect of man is forced to choose
> perfection of the life, or of the work,
> And if it takes the second must refuse
> A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
> When all that story's finished, what's the news?
> In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
> That old perplexity an empty purse,
> Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.

Of course, Yeats is speaking of his own dilemma: a full life without artistic works? Or artistic works that demand one's full energies? If you perfect the life, then often you can't enjoy wealth, fame, and the other material rewards of life. Your purse stays empty. If you seek to perfect the work, you suffer once you acknowledge in your twilight years that such vain (glorious) feats are mere footprints in the sands of time. Remorse about your worldly choice is your lot.

Orwell tasted in his last few years the delicious manna of success and modest fame. Though he was never granted the opportunity to live long enough to experience many of the benefits, to a great extent he lived the life that he chose rather than make tradeoffs that he would regret.

By taking the road less travelled, I can say from downstage in the shadows something of the same. Certainly Orwell suffered enormous, bitter losses— early death, poor health, family tragedy— and I have had my own share of setbacks. Yet I have been very happy leading my odd-man-out odyssey. It has been an ascetic existence, a priesthood of the intellectual life that I have lived with a spiritual intensity. What haunted me once I began to realize as an undergraduate that I had this literary *daimon* is that I would just fritter it away in talk. I recall conversations with my favorite professors and they expressed remorse over dribbling books away in speechifying and culture chat. As I was rhapsodizing about a lecture they had just delivered, and asked if they had written anything that might elaborate on that topic, time and again I was told: "I never got those ideas down on paper, and now I feel it's too late for me to do it."

I can also say that there is not a single scrap that I ever wrote that was not my own choice. Did I exercise poor judgment? I toiled untold hours (or years!) on writings that earned me very little money or even recognition— and with no university sinecure or support. Who really needed, I was told, a book about literary interviews and the techniques of interviewing? "You are no Barbara Walters!! Who wants *your* opinions about interviewing? It's not even a topic that English professors care about— it's a sub-literary genre!"

That's just one example among many! Yes, crazy! Was that not crazy?!!!

Or was it crazy love— a crazy love of language, ideas, and freedom? It wasn't even "perfection" of the work, except in my own strange terms. But I've been blessed with the consolation that I've lived my own life as a time-travelling *luftmensch* somehow deposited into the wrong era who made the best of it. Plus I have lived between two worlds— the educated elite and the urban peasantry. And I "passed" in both! Wasn't that also a version of "Count" Tolstoy's dream?

Q8: Tolstoy never even came close to realizing that fantasy. The peasants never accepted him, his marriage was a war saga, some of his children became his enemies. What about you?

A8: I lived in a room with undergraduates one day and then flew out the next day to lecture at Stanford, Berkeley, or — more often— Timbuktu Community College or other places. There was no money in it— just enough to cover a plane flight. Often I'd pay for my own food and lodging— or stay with a friend or relative. That's how I'd try to combine the "work" with the "life"— I'd go to places typically located nearby family and close friends, usually for a few hundred dollars from the host to compensate for my expenses. It was a pleasure

addressing an audience. The pittance of the honorarium rarely stopped me, because I needed so little materially to make it work. Sometimes I'd ring an institution that I knew had assigned some of my books or essays in a class (because the teacher was in touch with me months or years earlier) and propose to come. I kept travel expenses down to a spartan level because the second or third flights (or better, train rides) cost so little. So basically a single plane trip covered me— and usually I could stay for a couple of nights in the dorms, if not with my host or a friend or family member. Frequently I've visited colleagues, stayed in regular touch, and we have become friends.

So I treated most of these trips as graced opportunities to emerge from my study, share my ideas, see friends and intellectual companions, and enjoy an intellectual as well as personal stimulation not possible in solitude. To an extent far greater than Orwell himself (in *Down and Out in Paris and London*), it was almost as if I myself were a down and out! That was my "secret" life. My "public" life brought me into contact with people whom a young writer, or in fact a professor (let alone a down and out!) would never get to know: not just Orwell's colleagues but intellectuals and writers ranging from Christopher Hitchens to Isabel Allende and their families. (Not to mention dozens of students in different locales. Or my unforgettable encounters in Europe with distinguished dissidents or people such as the brother of Adam von Trott, who (along with Claus von Stauffenberg) was the top conspirator in the failed July 1944 assassination attempt of Hitler, or Friedrich Nietzsche's niece, or the leading dissidents in Communist East Germany— let alone all the lesser-known people whom I interviewed and whose stories I never wrote.

None of these people either knew— or cared a penny— about my private life. So it's been an hilarious joyride in so many ways. Like a full-time Thoreau who still somehow befriends Emerson and all the other great Transcendentalists— but to a far wider degree than just a single group. It's a monastic vocation of sorts. Some of my friends affectionately call my home "the cell" and joke about "my very high four-figure income."

A dear comrade once joked that, when he was a college freshman, his dormitory room was better than mine! I lived in an apartment building (an erstwhile dormitory) and shared a common bathroom (with no kitchen, etc.). So although my material needs are minimal and my fixed costs are low, I am otherwise a ravenous glutton whose needs are astronomically high intellectually, spiritually, and existentially— and I pay lavishly for my profligate pleasures!

You ask about my resources. I have already discussed my neo-Walden life in a material sense. As to my intellectual and spiritual resources, let me be more specific. As I contemplated those comments by my professors ever more deeply, I was assisted in two directions; the first was chiefly professional. My move to Texas did not work out as I had imagined. By which I mean that, in contrast to my experience in Virginia, it was much less enjoyable and exciting. I loved the students, but my overall experience at the university during those four years was less fulfilling on an intellectual level than my years at Virginia. My incentive to remain in academia was dwindling.

I thought about the "leap" all the time. Finally I concluded that it wasn't just a matter of growing dissatisfaction with Texas, but that I was entering a new phase of life and seeking more freedom. I tried in all kinds of ways to work out an arrangement to keep teaching— believe me, I offered my services for peanuts!— but the higher-ups didn't want to ruffle feathers and set some unorthodox precedent. So eventually I just accepted— quite happily, really— a gratis arrangement whereby I would continue to work with my dozen doctoral candidates and receive a library card. The chair would sign the forms and I would join the dissertation committee. I kept a mailbox in the department office and came by occasionally to get any professional correspondence from outsiders who still assumed that, because I was publishing on academic topics and seen around campus, that nothing had changed at all. (After several years, a prevailing assumption was that I was a "distinguished" or "chaired" senior professor— I would even be asked by other universities to serve as the external evaluator of a candidate's tenure or promotion dossier.)

So I had— quite inadvertently— "negotiated" my full-time retirement three decades or more early! I still laugh at the sheer comical genius of Providence.

The fact is that I wanted to turn my life into a radical experiment; I wanted to see if what was inside me was of any value and whether it could emerge in a form that was worth sharing. Up until that point all I had to go on was the publication of one book and the confidence that I had some very rich deposits of intellectual ore inside me that I needed to mine, and that only solitude and uninterrupted blocks of time that accommodated my own rhythms and not the rhythms of the university semester or the usual demands of committee service and office appointments could allow.

All that flowed from the so-called professional direction: my intensifying awareness that even a highly enviable university appointment did not satisfy me.

Q9: And the other direction?

A9: From the other direction, it was the long-standing awareness that I had a strange gift for an ascetic lifestyle. My underutilized "resource!" I didn't need all the other resources that academia was offering me. Of course family, friends, and caring colleagues were all perplexed: "After all, you're the oldest son of an Irish immigrant family, and they and you have striven for years academically— are a professor at a top-notch university, first the University of Virginia and now the University of Texas! Now you throw all that away? Are you crazy?"

If I told you the agonies that this decision put my family through for decades, especially my poor father and mother, it would be too painful— and I still feel a degree of shame for letting them down so badly by my yearning to live my own life, not their dream for me.

Anyway, even as a graduate student, I began saving my pennies. Once I became an assistant professor and it dawned on me that I might have to take this exit route, I subsisted on even less. Meanwhile, I was also doing a lot of freelancing. I had a journalistic background, I had worked first for a regional paper in Pennsylvania and then for different major newspapers in Philadelphia and elsewhere. That also gave me a journalistic sensibility, not unlike Orwell, all of which led me quite naturally to scrape up enough to fly to London and interview Orwell's old friends; or to travel around the country and get to know others in New York or elsewhere for interviews; and then go to East Germany, and elsewhere in Europe, and write about victims of Nazi and Stalinist crimes against human rights.

I always believed that we overvalue money and underestimate or undervalue time. And so I would joke at least to myself that I had sufficient self-funding for my projects, because I knew very well the chair of the "Rodden Foundation." That foundation's fellowships didn't come with insurance, and they were far less than a graduate student's stipends today. But they would meet my needs, at least when supplemented by whatever I could do as a freelancer and whatever I might earn from lectures in various places.

So *was* I crazy? Well, it was my *daimon*. I really had no choice. I tried every which way to wriggle out of it, work out a deal I could abide (given my odd values), and nothing panned out.

And I've never regretted that step; in fact, sometimes I even ask myself: "Why did you wait so long?!" Then I often smile and repeat a line of Thoreau that I cherish: "What demon possessed me that I behave so well?" When I left the academy at the age of 35, people were shocked, including family members. But I did it— and I always knew deep down that I had to do it and that I would do it. As I say, I always viewed it as having awarded myself the gift of early retirement three decades in advance. Thanks to the "*daimon*" that cast out my "demon."

I was also driven by the strange— yet compelling for me— anxiety that the clock was ticking. If you wait until you achieve tenure, promotion, financial security, and membership on "powerful" committees, you are too late. By that time you will have become a different person. The *daimon* will be snuffed out. So as Whitman reminded me: "Postpone no more!"

Q10: So the lack of official support for much of your field work in Germany was in some ways a *felix culpa*? After all, without official academic sponsors to have connected you to a more established network of official experts and famous names, you had to work from the bottom up. You came to rely on the generous support of dozens of ordinary Germans who welcomed you into their homes, sat for interviews, provided books, shared newspaper clippings and photographs, etc.–and even in many cases extended you personal friendship. All this presented you with the opportunity to work with a far more diverse range of informants and witnesses, and to acquire a more complete understanding of the human dimension of the issues.

A10: That was indeed part of the trust walk. In hindsight, I believe that you are entirely right. Like much else about my leavetaking from the academy, the lack of official support for my field work in Germany represented are graced opportunity disguised as a gritty obstacle. Every step of my adventure in eastern Germany during the 1990s and 2000s was much harder than it would have been otherwise— and far more fulfilling. When you make these discoveries for yourself without any institutional affiliation mediating the relationship and lending it on an "official" dimension, the interaction possesses a surprising directness, transparency, and simplicity of human feeling.

Time and again, with nothing more than a scribbled introduction from a West German relative whom the East Germans hadn't seen in years (sometime since before the erection of the Berlin Wall), I would make out for a new town by bus or rail. No one had a phone. Stopping to inquire where a certain house was, I'd make my way by foot to whatever address I had, knock on the door and introduce myself. There I almost invariably encountered socialism as it was meant to be, having nothing to do with a government or theory, but rather with "from each according to his capacities to each according to his needs." Almost always the East Germans took me in for a meal and would introduce me to a schoolboy or girl in the house or next door. The next morning I would venture off with that child to school. Quite frequently, I was invited to stay overnight in their homes.

Once in the school, given that there were no new textbooks until 1991 or 1992, I would be invited to present the lesson for that day, especially in history, civics (the most ideologically compromised subject), and German literature (deeply politicized).

I told you earlier a little bit about how a lesson might unfold. I'd begin: "Today we address the erection of the Berlin Wall." Hands would go up. "We learned that it was the Anti-Fascist Wall of Protection. Is that so?" I'd start to answer: "No, it was built to keep you in, and in the West it was known as the "Wall of Shame."

More hands up. "We learned that it was erected to protect us because you were planning World War III and might invade at any moment."

I'd reply, "No, it was erected because East Germany was bleeding to death. A population of 18 million was down to 13 million by August 1961. Nikita Khrushchev finally acceded to the pleas of the East German Communist Party to erect a wall in order to stop the country from bleeding to death. Above all, to stop all the talented young people, who had been educated as doctors and engineers, from fleeing through East Berlin to West Berlin and into West Germany or beyond."

Dramatic confrontations between students and faculty occurred. In one memorable event, a student stood up screaming at a frightened German teacher that she had "lied lied lied" for years not only to her class, but to all the classes which had preceded her.

Very often students in the neighborhood would visit me in town before I ventured away. They had no idea who I was; I was simply introduced as a Western visitor. Never before had any of them, with very few exceptions, spoken to an American. No Americans had been allowed to venture freely inside East Germany; visitors' movements were monitored or restricted to the showcase areas of East Berlin. During a trip in 1990, when I was still on the faculty at the University of Texas, a letter that I had been carrying was on my chair as a young boy of 13 walked into my room. We had arranged that he would give me a grand tour of the neighborhood, and that we would talk more about the class of the previous day. He saw the letter that was addressed to "Professor" John Rodden, and he quietly asked (since we were on a first-name basis, as I was with all the kids),

"John, is that letter for you?"
"Well, yes it is!"
"You are a Herr Professor, are you?"
"Well, yes, in fact I am."

As a half-frown of confusion and disappointment flashed across his face, a wan little voice remonstrated,

"You can't be a professor! You're John!"

All I could do was laugh and smile back. Moments like those are forever dear to me.

Q11: A wonderful sentence occurs near the end of George Eliot's great novel *Middlemarch*. Eliot says that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number of people who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs." Just before that, she also described her heroine, whom she ranks among those who lived a "hidden life," as someone whose effect on those around her was "incalculably diffusive." Although some of the people you interviewed or discuss were prominent intellectuals or dissidents who fought the communist one-party state in a very public manner and attracted the attention of the international press, many others were such unheralded people as Eliot talks about. Would you agree with this analysis and, if yes, how did you tackle the challenge of representing fully and accurately their "incalculably diffusive" presence?

A11: I "tackled" it by listening. Often that's all that my interviewees were seeking: someone who could serve as a sympathetic listener—an outsider who might confirm that their experiences mattered. In fact, one of my interviewees appeared on the cover of *Der Spiegel*, the leading newsmagazine of Germany. He had served as a background figure for the Oscar-winning foreign film, *The Lives of Others*. I interviewed all these people, including him, years before that movie appeared in 2008. As I look back, I had somehow learned to listen to their conversations by learning to listen better to my own voice within. That is, I learned to listen to the outer conversations by listening to the inner one.

Yes, some of the people whom I interviewed were prominent intellectuals or dissidents, but most were unknown and remain unknown to this day. Do you know the line of Paul Celan, "No one witnesses for the witness"? I took it upon myself to offer my services as a witness to witnesses. Everyone needs sensitive listeners, and everyone needs affirmation. Thankfully, most of us have not been victims of human rights abuse and certainly not state-sanctioned crimes against human rights. Nonetheless, we've a responsibility to acknowledge that such abuses have occurred and lend support in the form of witness to the victims.

That was my special calling, first in West Germany in the late 1980s with elderly victims of Nazi crimes, and then in East Germany in the 90s with victims of the communist regime. My exchange with Nazi and Stalinist victims were, however, very different in numerous ways. For example, because in Germany the Nazi era receives far greater attention than does the Stalinist era, the crimes against Nazi victims receive far more attention and sympathy than do those against the victims of communism. In the former case, it was largely a matter of me asking to have the privilege of meeting a Nazi victim, whereas in the latter a Stalinist victim was usually thanking *me* for listening. He was moved that an outsider would want to hear his story.

When I say that all of us have some responsibility to acknowledge that these state-sponsored abuses have occurred and to pay witness, I am heeding Arthur Koestler's call that life needs to be lived not only on the "trivial" plane but also on the "tragic" plane. By the trivial plane— which he did not denigrate—Koestler meant the ordinary, domestic plane of our lives that absorbs so much of our energy, the daily round of activities with family, friends, and the job. Is there any energy remaining to be concerned with victims of the Stasi? Victims of the Nazis? We might say: "Seldom."

Nonetheless, Koestler summons us— a challenge that the literary and political intellectuals whom I have sought to honor in *The Intellectual Species* responded to in a way that I find inspiring and exemplary— to ask ourselves: Can we safeguard some measure of time and energy to live beyond our circles of immediate influence or interest as civic beings? Can we reach out and live life on the tragic plane, as well as the trivial? Can we do this while keeping mindful that, as we marshal the forces to do so, we must also respect the boundaries that people have developed in order to protect themselves? To remain cognizant of the latter means that we must withhold commentary unless invited. That's why witnessing for the witnesses is a form of gift, gratitude, and even recompense.

Listening may be the single service we can provide those victims, a modest yet significant one. Listening can heal emotional wounds if we know our stories will be honored. Time and

again when I would visit the homes of victims of Stasi abuse, the family members would be incredulous. They would say, "Well, do you think any Americans are actually interested in what happened to us generations ago?" Yes, I said. They bowed their heads. They even came to tears. To have their experiences affirmed and validated was sometimes nothing less than life-transforming for them. As we grew to know each other better, I often reassured them about others' concerns for their suffering. I tried to express — often just by how I listened, rather than explicitly in words — what they were giving *me*.

> *Yes, I care. Your story is worth telling. Not only because it will heal you, but because it may also heal us. It will remind us that it can happen to us. It will remind us: Now we know. We know because it happened to you. We know it can happen. Let us take steps to publicize the injustice so that it never happens again.* Nie wieder!! *Let the vicious circle halt with your suffering. Let the lessons you are providing me resonate so deeply that they contribute to ending the cycles of vengeance and abuse. As a writer and teacher, I will take your story home and spread the message.*

Q12: You've spoken in several of your books about the critical importance for the historian, whenever possible, to share *erlebte Geschichte* (lived history).

A12: I became an eyewitness to history. I discovered that I had an eye for witnessing history, that is, a heightened perceptual antenna for the drama of history and a recognition for perceiving the fragility of what Henry James calls "the visitable past." So I recognized that the growing ferment in eastern Europe, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany was a world-historical window of opportunity.

The East German window opened with the fall of the Berlin Wall and lasted for about three years. From the period of late 1989 to early 1993, East Germany was in a stage of utter upheaval. The *ancien regime* had fallen, but the process of reunification was moving slowly. The new order had not yet arisen. Much GDR life still remained, but it would soon disappear forever down what Orwell called the "memory hole" of history. The journalist-historian was therefore vouchsafed no more than a three- to four-year window of opportunity to glimpse the death throes.

If such a world-historical window opens and you possess the requisite set of finely tuned antennae, then your appetite to enter through that window will not let you rest. You will want to be a witness on site. You'll feel hunger pangs to go there, and you'll get there any way you can. The absence of research leaves, institutional affiliations, travel grants, lavish fellowships, book contracts, publishing house advances, and the other trappings of academic comfort or literary prestige will not deter or delay you. You'll get there fast and begin your "field work" by trial and error. If you wait around for luxuries, then the window slams shut.

All my professional colleagues were flabbergasted by my so-called research method. They'd ask me, "So you would just arrive at a train station, walk into town, find your way to someone's home, knock on the door, and hand over this letter of introduction from some distant West German relative or acquaintance?"

"Yep."

My next step was to ask if there was a child in the house or nearby who attended the school. I'd walk in with that student the next day and present myself to the principal and tell him or her that I was there to observe a class. Or to teach a class. I'd share a few articles I'd written if the letter of introduction were insufficient.

Although virtually all the schoolchildren and their families had harbored a skeptical or "enemy" image of "official" Americans (remember this was the transition from the Reagan to the Bush eras), most East Germans responded positively to me as fellow human being. A few American friends kidded me that I'd shown them "capitalism with a human face"; in turn, I discovered how much they hated their own government that had walled them in. I experienced socialism in action. That was how "really existing socialism" was meant to be. My inadvertent hosts welcomed their odd pilgrim. They took me into their homes, they took me into their lives.

Q13: And the gift you gave them in return was the act of listening to them.

A13: Yes! However modest our offering may initially seem, all of us can offer one priceless form of assistance, the gift of listening. Many victims of the Stasi, who saw the Holocaust exhibits everywhere and read the headlines about roundups and investigations of elderly Nazis, would wail, "Who knows and cares about us? Who is listening to us?" They would also point to evidence of nostalgia for the GDR that felt like an implicit white washing of the past, a trivialization of their suffering: "Do you realize, Herr Rodden, that there is a well-attended nightclub in East Berlin called the 'KGB?' What do you think might happen if Berlin featured a 'Gestapo' nightclub?"

Violations of human rights occur every day, all around us, even if people seldom undergo tortures to compare with those of Nazi and Stasi victims. Ordinary examples are found in the ways in which we show callous indifference to the suffering of others and how we fail to practice charity and compassion.

So let us begin at home, and let us begin with ourselves. Let us trust that, by beginning with ourselves, pools of understanding and feeling will ripple outward in ever-widening concentric circles. We may never become witnesses to crimes of historical proportion, such as under Stalinism or Nazism. Yet we can all become better listeners— not with the aim of conducting interviews, let alone compiling oral histories— but rather by just being present to the Other. Just listen!

Listening is not just a skill or a talent, but also an advanced art and a learned science. It requires an approach that is extraordinary sensitive, flexible, and rigorous. Its careful practice cannot be codified into a technique or method. But it's also not just impressionistic or ad hoc. Instead it demands the cultivation of a certain awareness derived from a texture of experience that comes with months and years of sitting quietly with victims, reading their letters and journals, visiting their places of trauma, holding hands, nodding heads, studying faces, and befriending families. It is not the activity of a therapist, unless perhaps a self-trained one. There are no schools or so-called modalities for this kind of interaction. You're unsure about what will happen when you enter victims' homes or visit the places where they have been tortured.

Anyone can master the art and science of listening. It is simple yet not easy, for it is the softest of the sciences and the hardest of the arts. The act of listening strikes most of us as a natural and self-evident matter. Yet common knowledge may not be common practice. For it is painful to listen to stories of suffering. Any therapist can tell you so. In the cases of the victims of human rights abuse I came to know, the suffering had been extreme. It is a privilege to walk with men and women who extend such trust. That privilege has compensated me for everything. It is such an honor to have been brought into their lives. The depth of connection is so authentic that sometimes the pain has felt like a pain of joy. Almost any mother can tell you that the greatest joy can arise from the deepest pain. That's the paradox. It's the realization that relieving someone's pain is a joyful act. Joy comes with the gratitude of being trusted. I rejoiced time and time again as I listened to the lives of others. *Contra* Sartre, I knew: Heaven is the Other.

Q14: In looking at the larger sweep of your career as a scholar from the late 1980's until today, it appears to me that there are two distinct periods with a turning point shortly before the millennium. As I noted earlier, your first book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, was published in 1989 and, rather than publishing a few more books on Orwell or questions of literary reputation during the next five to ten years, you devoted yourself to painstaking, nitty-gritty research in libraries all over the US and overseas in Germany, the UK, and Ireland. Then in 1999, after a ten-year hiatus, you published three carefully edited collections (*Lionel Trilling and the Critics*, *Conversations with Isabel Allende* and *Understanding* Animal Farm*: A Student Casebook*), and two years later came *Repainting the Little Red Schoolhouse*, the masterful 500-page treatise about education and cultural identity in eastern Germany that we have been discussing, and *Performing the Literary Interview: How Writers Craft Their Public Images*, a study of the literary interview. The latter work has also proved to be very influential during the following decade, given that you were invited to serve as the keynote speaker at a conference on the literary interview held at the University of Louvain in Belgium in the fall of 2011. Following these two studies in 2002, you published fourteen or fifteen books in a twelve-year period, along with dozens of articles on varied topics. This includes the next three volumes in the German quartet, as well as books on the Latin American fiction of Isabel Allende, on depth psychology and the British novel, and about public intellectuals in the US and elsewhere.

What is astounding to me is that, guided by internal fortitude and intellectual passion, you were willing to set aside short-term success and make research commitments that were open-ended and took ten or more years to come to maturity. Added to other books scheduled to appear, it represents a remarkable achievement. I would like to know: What is the key to this formidable work since 1999? Obviously, the formative years during the 90s when you were doing all the vital legwork must have been very important, but I doubt that they were sufficient. I surmise that there was more to it. Certain strategic choices in terms of historical vision, theoretical and methodological flexibility, a devotion—perhaps Orwell-like devotion–to language, style, and so forth must have been instrumental. No one worked harder in Eliot's *Middlemarch* than Mr. Casaubon on his *magnum opus*, "the key to all mythologies," but all to no avail. He never published anything except a couple of pamphlets. So what is your methodology? How did you publish two dozen substantial books in roughly fifteen years?

A14: In addition to my "resources" of obstinacy, obliviousness, and obtuseness? Sheer obsessiveness! That is to say, I have no methodology; in fact, the author of "Politics and the English Language" has tutored me to abhor the word. Like him, I also have a respect for the intuitive and the empirical and an aversion to the god of System. Unlike Mr. Causabon, I don't believe there is any single "key to all mythologies." What has really been decisive—which you inadvertently touched on earlier when you observed the long delay between the publication of my first book in 1989 and the appearance of other, quite different books a decade later—is that I too, like Mr. Causabon, pondered large topics.

Unlike him, I refreshed myself by stepping away and shifting my interests to other projects.

Instead, rather self-consciously, I had begun to model my own life rhythms on the historiography of Matthew Arnold, who broached the idea of epochs of "expansion" and "concentration" in his wonderful essay, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." The epochs of concentration are characterized by what you term formidable productivity, whereas epochs of expansion are characterized by what Arnold calls the "free play of ideas." Arnold's view is that alternating between the two rhythms gestates work that is a "disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best which is known and thought in the world."

Throughout the 1980s I lived in an epoch of concentration. I gathered together my energies for work that I hoped might contribute not only to the study of modern intellectual life in

the case of George Orwell and his legacy, but also to the big question of how reputation as a social process could best be conceived and conceptualized. It had until then always been approached in an impressionistic fashion. My "cosmology" of "star" reputations—which "radiate" into diverse "scenes" of reception according to how their features (size, brightness, etc.) vary—represented an opening gambit to conceive a more rigorous approach that would nevertheless be empirically grounded, flexible yet systematic, and richly metaphorical. A few conceptual essays and case histories were followed by my first book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*.

In the 1990s, the foundation was laid (via Arnold's "free play of ideas") for the other two legs of my intellectual triad proceeding from the "hub" of my work on George Orwell, namely German politics and American cultural history (Lionel Trilling and the New York intellectuals, etc.).

I say all this in hindsight. This was not a deliberately pursued "strategy." Rather, it unfolded. Eras of concentration gave way to those of expansion. Without their interplay you cannot avoid a fate possibly worse than Mr. Causabon: You produce and produce— trivia! I deplore how the academy provides structured incentives that reward the overspecialized scholar. Any topic such as "Orwell" will inevitably lead you in provocative directions far afield from the man and writer. "Orwell" has merely been my entry point for addressing empirically level ("from the ground up") a galaxy of issues in contemporary history.

After publishing *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, therefore, I gave myself a decade of seedtime. My thought was virtually aloof from practical considerations and enjoyed free play on whatever issues and topics it touched. Matthew Arnold believed that criticism which serves practical interests before inviting the free play of the mind becomes ever more insignificant and futile, as the fate of Mr. Causabon reflected. Of course, at some point the "disinterested mind" meets and is informed by the "interested mind." The writer as *homo ludens* then begins to ask, "Which of these many ideas might I one day hope to see fertilized and reared to become a brainchild? In what form? Is it simply a short essay or something much bigger? A full-length book?"

If Mr. Causabon had started contentedly by publishing a couple of pamphlets, and then sought to write a few short essays and to ponder whether those essays might somehow inspire a larger project, he could have been a happy man. He was a scholar who was wondrously blessed with a helpmate eager to assist him. It could have been a marriage of two minds, two spirits and souls, as well as two bodies. Instead it is a story of tragedy for Causabon and Dorothea.

Q15: So you began to alternate productive and fallow periods, essentially applying Arnold's view of literary history to your own life.

A15: Or to draw on a different influence: Arnold Toynbee, who discusses in his monumental *A Study of History* the dialectical movement of withdrawal and return. "Withdrawal" is characterized by a period of solitude, which is followed by a return to the world of action. Withdrawal is a movement inward, a time of preparation and study. It entails sacrifice and penitence, yet above all self-examination and deep reflection. By contrast, "return" is a movement of bringing forth what was nurtured in the fruit of one's mental womb—the painful act of birthing objects, ideas, and institutions.

The tragedy of our postmodern Western world is our bias toward externalized activity. Endless engagement with the world eventually exhausts itself and curdles into the alienation plaguing modern and postmodern society.

Withdrawal is always conscious and deliberate, and not subjectively experienced as a matter of loneliness or isolation. Withdrawal is an enriching solitude that breaks from the world and returns in an attempt to create another. Deliberately chosen solitude may manifest itself in some form of creative work. As examples of withdrawal and return, Toynbee cites the myth of Plato's cave, as well as the lives of the Buddha, St. Paul, Machiavelli, and Dante.

Only with great reluctance, at least the first time, does one break away from the tribe, especially in the modern world of the group-mind in which only "product" is valued. It was an incredible gift to myself when I left the university and went for a total of four years to a tiny town of 5000 people in Germany where I knew no one. That stop renewed me after *The Politics of Literary Reputation*. Periodically, I returned to my residence and kept much of my intellectual community without the institutional dimension. Even since, with the completion of any large project, I've retreated to the wilderness — a remote village of 653 residents in the Black Forest— for several weeks or months and returned a rejuvenated and fortified man.

I came to understand my departure from the academy, however reluctantly embraced, as a great blessing. It did not at first feel like a choice. Yet even in the beginning, it felt like an awakening.

Admittedly, it was also a self-willed professional catastrophe. Yet somehow I perceived that it was also an act of intellectual and spiritual salvation. I bowed to it as a challenge to make the most of it by embracing an unexpected new stage on my life's journey.

That journey wouldn't be any path strewn with roses. But it might be something far better: an odyssey of adventure. Taking my cue from William James's *The Will to Believe*, I decided to reframe it all as a premature midlife crisis endowed with opportunity. All this was an act of faith in 1993, as I ventured my first step on the trust walk. Without it, however, probably I would have done something along the lines of what you implied: I would have become an Orwell specialist. Instead, my fallow epochs reoriented me in completely new, unanticipated directions.

The first fruit was my book on Lionel Trilling, which emerged from my reveries about my own possible future as an intellectual of *my* generation. *In* the academy like Trilling? Or *out* like Orwell? Fortunately, I had chosen the so-called leader of the group, and by trying to make sense of his life and legacy I gained a keen understanding of the entire group, indeed of the American intelligentsia and how it differed from the European.

Likewise the book on Isabel Allende in 1999 assisted me on all the subsequent work on reputation and, more specifically, on interviewing. It was my first attempt to reflect carefully on the dynamics and kinetics of the interviewer-interviewee relationship.

My third book that year, the textbook on *Animal Farm*, represented a tentative initial move in the direction of pedagogy, which sharpened my awareness about many issues in education, including the history of education in modern Germany. They were followed by my first book on Germany in 2002 which took me a dozen years to research and write, and it was one reason why I usually chose Germany rather than anywhere else to withdraw. Mostly I communed in solitude. The windfall of inspirations and ideas during these annual sojourns encompassed human rights, pedagogy, historiography, cultural politics, contemporary debates about socialism and communism, and more— blessings for a lifetime.

As far as "methodology" is concerned, the only thing I would add is that keeping all this fresh also involved a different form of interplay: concept and example, idea and instance, theory and application. For instance, *The Politics of Literary Reputation* wasn't just about George Orwell, it was also about reputation and how Orwell was a case study of the social dynamics of modern fame. The title and subtitle of my first book, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell,* reflected the interplay. Thickly describing Orwell's reception history, I saw how it radiated outward from that hub in all directions and illuminated post-World War II cultural history. The bridge between the "particular" and "universal" kept things fresh throughout, which also occurred with my book on Germany. The large-scale history of modern Europe since 1945 and the in-depth portraits of different facets of that history in the lives of my interviewees kept it alive both for the reader and for myself.

One of the courses I taught in Taiwan a few years ago incorporated this Arnoldian notion of epochs of concentration and expansion, or Toynbee's withdrawal and return. I told the students to keep a personal journal during the semester, and I sometimes quoted from my own. From its rich ore, a person may one day might extract precious gold. I have kept such journals faithfully over the years, even before my goodbye to the academy long ago. Now I am on # 158. All the journals contain pages and pages that have nothing to do with any intellectual project, but rather only with the condition of my own inner life.

We know so much about the outer world! Most of us can sleepwalk from our homes to our offices. In my journals I have discovered how to shine huge streetlights on the inner alleyways, which otherwise remain in utter darkness. By reviewing the journals down through the years, I also come to a keener awareness of where the road falls dark as the lights go off— the deep patterns, often ruts, into which I fall.

Q16: You once published a long essay on "triple thinking." Is your "triad" related to that idea?

A16: I once referred to Irving Howe as a "triple thinker" because of his diverse yet related interests in literature, socialism, and Yiddish culture. This kind of polydextrous thinker is what I aspired to be in my work that emerged from the 1990s: I had three, or even four or more, mutually enriching arenas of interest: Orwell and reputation; Trilling and the New York intellectuals; and Germany and comparative education. The cross-fertilizations among them led me beyond to pedagogy, human rights, interviewing, and Latin America.

Q17: I would also like to look ahead and ask you about two forthcoming books, both of which have been completed, namely the aforementioned *The Intellectual Species: Evolution or Extinction?*, and the study about U.S. government surveillance of writers, *Of Eggheads and G-Men: The New York Intellectuals, the FBI, and Cold War Politics*. What do they argue and in what ways do they connect to your earlier work?

A17: The first book consists of literary and personal essays across more than two decades, some of which are original and some of which are republished with significant revisions. In a larger sense, *The Intellectual Species* is veiled autobiography *à la* Oscar Wilde's quip that all criticism is veiled autobiography. My subtitle alludes to the recurrent question as to whether this creature of print, the literary intellectual— and in particular the independent unaffiliated intellectual— is not just an endangered species, but rather a near-extinct one.

They were once called *philosophes*, men of letters, or social and cultural critics. Today it is revealing that this species has come to be discussed in ever narrowing subdivisions: academic, policy, organic, and other kinds of intellectuals. Such nomenclature reflects a fundamental change, and I repeatedly ask: Does this transformation represent evolution or extinction?

For me the most worrisome adjective is "public," a modifier that was unnecessary even as recently as the 1970s and 1980s. The use of that adjective signals that the intellectual as lettered liberal humanist may be a vanishing life form. Reports of his or her death are not at all greatly exaggerated. "Public" has much more to do with our media-saturated, postmodern age and how a wordsmith or idea merchant can become a pundit. Invariably, of course, these talking heads are Burkhardt's populist-vulgarist nightmare of the "Great Simplifiers."

Whereas *The Intellectual Species* is an intellectual summing up, a memoir of my personal struggles and a tribute to my intellectual forbears, *Of Eggheads and G-Men* is a work of cultural history and political criticism. It is based on original archival documents from the FBI and other American intelligence agencies that I have secured across the last two decades. It is a collective shadow biography of the senior generation of New York intellectuals, including men such as Lionel Trilling, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, and Alfred Kazin— all of whose FBI files I have obtained. But it observes them from an utterly different point of view than do their biographers— that is, the government's attitude toward them from the 1930s through the 1970s. All four of those men, along with several other New York intellectuals, were either former Trotskyists or vocal critics of American foreign and domestic policy during these decades. Hence they accumulated FBI files and drew the attention of other intelligence agencies as well.

My aspiration was to analyze their treatment by the national security or "intelligence" services before and during the Cold War, and to draw analogies, where appropriate, to the situation in twenty-first century America and internationally. The book broaches large questions: What is the proper balance between freedom and security? To what degree should a government conduct clandestine surveillance of its own citizens? What should be the criteria that pose a national security risk? How invasive should investigation of peripheral figures such as these four men be? How open should public access be to the activities of the intelligence agencies, especially in such tangible cases? When is a threat no longer a threat?

Of G-Men and Eggheads builds on my earlier studies of the New York intellectuals, the only group of American men and women in the twentieth century that exemplified a version of the literary, political, and intellectual life as it had come to exist in Europe. By the way, one of my amusing discoveries in the FBI files was that Soviet propagandists (like their Western counterparts) acted rather imaginatively, claiming George Orwell for their own purposes. Hoover was apoplectic in 1959 when he learned that a Soviet-backed East German newspaper was satirizing the "big-brotherish" activities of the "Orwellian" FBI in the US! FBI bugging and wiretapping, according to this polemic, "made a reality of Orwell's vision of American citizens' private lives being monitored by secret telescreens." Needless to say, we can see how far such practices have advanced in the last five decades in virtually every developed country of the world.

Q18: My final question looks further into the future and speculates what we may expect from John Rodden in the years to come. I wonder whether you have ever thought about writing a comprehensive intellectual history of the twentieth century, focusing especially on the Left-liberal heritage? Reading your work on Germany, I noticed that the image of the locomotive of history comes back a couple of times, and that reminded me of Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History*. Much has happened since his book's publication in 1940, of course, but Wilson's interest in the writing and acting of history is still valid and you have done so much of the micro work on key participants in the drama of the twentieth century. Those participants include Orwell, who was a socialist, but was never tempted to get on the locomotive to the Finland Station; the believers in "scientific socialism" in the GDR and elsewhere who were frequent travelers on that line; a whole range of Jewish, Catholic and other twentieth-century intellectuals, some of whom never boarded the train and some of whom commenced the journey, but got off halfway; and also the "G-men" who kept an eye on all these intellectuals.

Could this be a book that you might be interested in writing one day? Or do you see any other topic that would enable you to draw together on a macro level the many lines of inquiry–literary, historical, political, philosophical, etc.–which you have worked on?

A18: *Ars longa, vita brevis*! Your suggestion is a wonderful idea, and it is indeed a book that I would like to read. As you know, any serious writer has so many ideas that he dreams of composing and sharing with the world. The challenge is always to assess judiciously which of those embryonic projects should be fertilized, and how much time and effort to devote to a potential brainchild so that she might live.

Like you, I certainly admire that magisterial study by Edmund Wilson. Equally compelling to me for its literary insight is Wilson's book *The Triple Thinkers,* which draws on a line of Flaubert. Like Wilson, as I've indicated, I've sought to be a "triple thinker" myself. I've cultivated a deep relationship with the three worlds of the literary, political, and cultural.

Neither Wilson nor Flaubert much explain what they mean by that term. So let me formulate it in contemporary terms. Whereas the single thinker cultivates only his private garden, and the (non-Orwellian) "double" or second-order thinker becomes an ideologue or a naive do-gooder, the "triple thinker" embraces fully the tensions between the inner and the outer realms. These tensions stimulate intellectual leaps, or imaginative "triple jumps." For Wilson and Flaubert, the Olympian "triple jumper" of the mind soars dialectically to the triple thought, which is beyond the (single) thought of aestheticism and its antithesis, the double thought. The latter arises with the acknowledgment that beauty does not exist as a transcendent, eternal abstraction, but rather arises from social circumstances. All that is valid to a point, but if hugged too tightly, it leads to other "isms" associated with crude ideology. The triple thought is the recognition that art encompasses both the ideas of single and double thought. It is the belief that art can enlarge our awareness, ennoble our inner lives, and enrich the human condition.

My ultimate aspiration is for art and literature to serve as an existential guide to life. I believe Wilson adopted this same view as well. Wilson's merely tacit observation, which draws

on what Flaubert implies yet never explicitly states, is that if one could fulfill the aspiration of a fertile, life-affirming relationship to the three powerful domains of thought (the literary, political, and cultural), then one will possess a fruitful connection between the ideal and real on all planes of existence. By the time that Wilson wrote the essays collected in *The Triple Thinker* and neared completion of *To the Finland Station*, he seems to have imagined the "triple thinker" as a model of the writer's ideal relationship to the world. The phrase moved him dialectically beyond his long-standing antagonism toward aestheticism and his more recent disillusionment with Marxism as a way of reforming society. The "triple thinker" represented the person who lives an impassioned life of the mind and shares that life with others.

I mention Wilson's "triple thinker" because my own deepest yearning is now to share the intellectual and the spiritual wealth I have acquired and to honor the values of literature and art. Like Thoreau, I have many more lives to live and I cannot spare much more for the scholarly one. The years 2001 through 2015 were a long epoch of Arnoldian concentration for me. What I hope will follow is a period of fallowness and openness to and for life, an epoch of expansion, yes, not in the sense of withdrawal and solitude, but rather of full engagement with others. Following Yeats's poem, I will rest content with the imperfection of the work in order to aspire to greater fulfillment (if scarcely the perfection!) of the life. More concretely, this means a return to pedagogy, teaching, and society.

Q19: Let me finish with one last question. We discussed how Orwell's relevance to and popularity in Germany led you to take a special interest in modern German history and society. I am curious to know, however, whether your turn towards the subject of Germany was not also motivated by another deeply rooted and perhaps even older interest, namely education and the role of teachers. You taught secondary school as a young man before beginning your career as a college professor. Education is not only a major theme in your two books on education and the making of "textbook Reds" in Germany, but also in articles and book chapters—on Orwell, on the intellectual as a social educator, on the crisis of the humanities in the American academy, and on the role of teachers in your own life. So is education another great "macro-level" subject that ties together the diverse strands of your work?

A19: Yes, everything I have shared here supports that viewpoint. I turned toward Germany—specifically the German educational system—as an attempt to tell the story of fellow educators and students as a way of gaining insight into my own anxieties and aspirations. By doing so, I hoped to illuminate my intellectual loves, my relationship to the American academy, and my appreciation of those who have guided me in my own journey—both in to and out of the educational system.

I would only add that I mean education as *Bildung*, the German word that refers (above all) to the cultivation of the human being in order to become his or her best self. If the life of the mind is not pursued with that aim, and thereby to enrich the lives of others, then it is "intellectual" without being "intelligent." Lionel Trilling's undergraduate teacher at Columbia, John Erskine, wrote a book called *The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent*. It is in this sense that I am distinguishing "intellectual" and "intelligent." My own ideal is that the true intellectual is always intelligent and never settles for being a single thinker or a double thinker.

I once wrote a little essay called "The Teacher as Hero," and my own aspiration has always been to reject the old bromide that those who can, *do*; those who can't, *teach*. My view is that those who do, *teach*; and they will always teach, above all, by example. I suppose another way of expressing this and even conceptualizing my view of the triple thinker in the digital age is to formulate it this way: the single thought is the information highway; the double thought is the acquisition of knowledge; and the triple thought is lived knowledge in the pursuit of wisdom. All the true intellectuals about whom I've written in *The Intellectual Species* seek to grow beyond both the single and double thought, and I believe that they would endorse the "intelligent" remark of Paul Valéry: "I have no System. The System is me."

Insofar as I consider the true intellectual an edifying presence in a culture, the terms "intellectual" and "educator" are synonymous for me. The "true" intellectual educates the human soul; likewise the great educator exhibits a radiant intelligence, the mark of a true intellectual. The heroic teacher is invariably an intellectual hero. He or she is an intelligent, aware human being who is fully in the world yet not of the world— but rather *for* the world.

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