

*This article reviews two books, Modernity and Progress: Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Orwell, by Ronald Berman, and George Orwell: Into the Twenty-First Century, edited by Thomas Cushman and John Rodden. Berman’s book focuses on the three authors’ presentation of progress and time and their relation to technological and social progress of the early twentieth century. Cushman and Rodden’s anthology looks back on Orwell from the 100th anniversary of his birth and includes essays that encompass all major aspects of his life and works.*

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In the early twentieth century, perceptions of the world were rapidly changing. Philosophers and physicists alike were developing new ideas and making new discoveries that redefined the nature of thought and the nature of time. In this swiftly evolving world, the works of many writers were dramatically affected by these new developments. Ronald Berman focuses on three in his book *Modernity and Progress: Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Orwell*. Berman explains in his introduction that the focus of his analysis is an attempt to answer the question: “In what ways did they advance thought? There are two essential parts of the equation . . . , not only ‘progress’ but ‘time’” (6). Most of the text deals with Fitzgerald and Hemingway in this regard. Orwell is included as well because of the intimate relationship of his work to the topics Berman examines. He claims it is impossible to “study the fate of progress over time and the devolution of ideas without including
Orwell” (10). As such, the work of Orwell plays a crucial role in analyzing the work of other writers of the era.

Two of Berman’s chapters deal specifically with F. Scott Fitzgerald. The first, “Fitzgerald and the Geography of Progress,” discusses the role of various geographic regions, both literally and symbolically, in Fitzgerald’s works, as well as the cultural implications that accompany geographic references. Berman explains that for Fitzgerald, the “map consists of familiar four quadrants: North, South, East, and West. [. . . . The] East and North, conventionally the same, are poised against the West—and especially against the South” (14). These distinctions are particularly important in relation to New York City, especially in The Great Gatsby. Fitzgerald’s New York mirrors the descriptions of H.L. Mencken, who wrote during the twenties that the city was more highly steeped in the culture of money and privilege than any other part of the country. The culture of the South plays an extremely different role in Fitzgerald’s writing. His stories rooted in Southern culture “point out the failure of unaided ‘tradition.’ The mention of that phrase in the twenties assumes the need to recall and even to embody the past” (17). Fitzgerald’s fiction, however, emphasizes the need for characters to move beyond the past. He thus provides highly critical views of cultural ideals in both regions.

Chapter three, “Fitzgerald: Time Continuity, Relativity,” examines Fitzgerald’s works in relation to progressive scientific and philosophical ideas that were espoused during his career. Many of these ideas, for Berman and for Fitzgerald, deal with “classifying things that resist measure” (39), such as Einstein’s relativity. Many of Fitzgerald’s works are infused with new non-linear notions of time, and ways of referring to the passing of time without simply measuring hours, days, and years. In Gatsby, for instance, “there is a railroad timetable of July 5, 1922, a SCHEDULE of September 12, 1906, [and] a clock that falls from Gatsby’s mantelpiece” (44). Berman concludes that these notions of time alter the way Fitzgerald and his characters view the present; it is not a static idea, but is continually changing.

Berman has three chapters dealing specifically with Hemingway, beginning with chapter two, “Hemingway and ‘the New America’.” This chapter evaluates Hemingway’s portrayal of American national identity, noting that frequently in his stories, a nationality is provided as a character’s only identifying characteristic; this occurs most often with Americans. Berman also points out that “Hemingway’s Americans have a certain style or absence of it” (31). Much of the chapter is dedicated to pointing out the ways in which this idea manifests itself in Hemingway’s fiction and the ways in which that style affects other characters’ perceptions of Americans within the texts.

Chapter four, “Hemingway and the Authority of Thought,” details Berman’s views on the relationship between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and Hemingway’s writing. He summarizes key components of Wittgenstein’s world view: “It is hard to know one’s self, harder to understand others, impossible to understand the relationship of all selves. In other words, the circumstances are ideal for reading Hemingway” (55). Wittgenstein’s inversion of the ancient Greek idea that the philosopher’s view of the world is superior to that of others also plays a significant
role. Berman points out that this theory indicates “Hemingway’s waiters, bullfight-
ers, soldiers, ambulance attendants, hotel-owners, hunters, and smugglers have a
certain authority” (57). Berman subsequently adapts these ideas to Hemingway’s
writing about war, concluding that war scenarios act as a lens through which human
actions and reactions may be observed and in which Hemingway sees traits that
apply to the way all humans respond to their surroundings.

The final Hemingway-specific section is chapter five, “Recurrence in Heming-
way and Cézanne.” Berman examines the influence of visual art on Hemingway’s
novels and stories; he focuses on the paintings of Cézanne because Hemingway
has remarked that Cézanne influenced him. The foundation of the chapter is Lil-
lian Ross’s 1949 interview with Hemingway at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
during which Hemingway comments that he tries to do with words what Cézanne
does with paint. Hemingway also claims during this interview to have learned
“something of immense importance” (70) from Cézanne, although the interview
does not indicate anything in particular. Berman claims that one important idea
Hemingway was referring to is the technique of repeatedly portraying a subject
from multiple perspectives, a virtually omnipresent concept in Hemingway’s fic-
tion during the 1920s. The use of such as technique implies “the discovery of an
identity more complex than any single given statement about it” (81), which is a
vital element of Hemingway’s characters and his scenes.

The book concludes with a chapter dedicated to Orwell. Berman claims that
Orwell’s work is indispensable when examining the literature of progress from the
early twentieth century. Referring specifically to Nineteen Eighty-Four, he asserts
that Orwell wrote not about the progress of technology, but rather the progress
of ideas: “The story resists technological futurism—there are no spaceships or
platinum suits with diagonal zippers. It is thoroughly conventional” (84). This fact
is significant for Berman because it suggests that although the story takes place in
the future, its ideas are rooted in the past. A large portion of this chapter is then
spent outlining the influence of various authors, including Wells, Freud, and Ari-
stotle, on Orwell’s texts, with Nineteen Eighty-Four again receiving the most atten-
tion. According to Berman, Orwell believed the future of Nineteen Eighty-Four
represents the logical continuation of past trends in political progress.

Modernity and Progress covers a wide range of subjects in its six chapters.
In many parts of the book, Berman chooses to mention numerous ideas quickly
rather than delve into individual topics in more detail. During the discussion of
those subjects that receive cursory attention, Berman provides a broad overview
of sources for further research. This text broaches many topics that are valuable in
understanding the three authors, but it frequently falls short of providing complete
views of these topics, and the book’s most helpful attribute may be the litany of
additional resources mentioned within each section.

The final chapter of Berman’s text touches upon a significant idea: George
Orwell is inseparable from the notion of progress. For a writer as intensely con-
cerned with the future as Orwell, the beginning of a new millennium provides a
natural time to re-evaluate his work and ideas and examine the potential for their
continued relevance in the world. This sentiment pervaded the George Orwell Centenary Conference at Wellesley College, held May 1 through 3, 2003, to commemorate the one hundredth year since Orwell’s birth. Thomas Cushman, the principal organizer of the conference, notes in his introduction to *George Orwell: Into the Twenty-First Century* that “the goal of our conference, and of the present volume, was not to foster a spirit of uncritical admiration of Orwell” (1), but rather to discuss and analyze the ways in which his writing and observations remain relevant over half a century after his death.

The anthology’s twenty-one essays are divided into five sections: “The Use and Abuse of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,” “Ideas, Ideologies, and Intellectuals,” “Of Biography and Autobiography,” “Literary and Stylistic Issues,” and “Orwell Abroad.” These groupings are intended to encompass what Cushman calls the three different Orwells: the biographical Orwell, the literary Orwell, and the sociological Orwell. The most prominent thread that runs through all five sections is the concept that co-editor John Rodden refers to as the “afterlife” of Orwell’s ideas. This concept fits in well with the theme of the Centenary Conference and the focus on Orwell’s continued relevance.

The first section contains three essays, beginning with Jonathan Rose’s “Abolishing the Orgasm: Orwell and the Politics of Sexual Persecution.” Rose discusses the lingering implications of concepts from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* regarding public scrutiny of private sexual activities, such as the Anti-Sex League and the notion of sexcrime. The bulk of this essay relates these ideas from Orwell’s novel to the role of homosexuality within society and potential discrimination against homosexuals. While noting that Orwell is famous for several notoriously anti-homosexual comments, Rose also points out that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, homosexuality shares the same state-sponsored condemnation as non-procreative heterosexual sex. In effect, Orwell’s work, in criticizing the Party’s repressive stance against recreational sexual activity, acts to some degree as a criticism of those people, both in Orwell’s time and in the twenty-first century, with repressive views of homosexuality (or any other purely private activity).

Ian Williams’s essay “In Defense of Comrade Psmith: The Orwellian Treatment of Orwell” is a largely biographical analysis of Orwell’s politics and his relationship to the society of extreme-left liberals during his lifetime. Williams’s primary point is that countless political and social movements have attempted to claim Orwell as a champion of their cause despite the fact that, for most of them, Orwell never said or wrote anything in support of their beliefs. In his conclusion, he extends this phenomenon to a post-9/11 world, claiming that “the case of the shifting excuses for the war on Iraq, the manipulation of facts to mold public opinion, the twenty-four-hour hate of the cable networks that has replaced *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s modest Two Minutes Hate all combine to ensure the continuing relevance of Orwell” (61).

The last essay in this section, Morris Dickstein’s “Hope Against Hope: Orwell’s Posthumous Novel,” focuses on three questions: “Should we remember Orwell as a great writer, or simply a timely one? Was his work genuinely prophetic or merely
an exaggeration of tendencies he lamented in his own time? What kind of book was *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that readers could connect to it at so many different levels" (63–64). He does not succinctly answer any of these questions, but rather examines the aspects of the novel that inspire them. His analysis emphasizes the intersection of the novel and the Cold War culture that existed as it was written and in the years that followed.

The anthology’s second section is the longest of the collection, containing eight essays. Perhaps the most interesting of these essays is Christopher Hitchens’s “George Orwell and the Liberal Experience of Totalitarianism.” He, too, puts Orwell’s works into the context of a post-9/11 world, and he does so primarily by analyzing the function of language in politics and propaganda, and the ways in which Orwell both commented upon and prefigured this function.

Another valuable essay in this section is Jonathon B. Imber’s “Orwell in an Age of Celebrity,” which examines Orwell as a public figure rather than as an author. He explains Orwell’s opinions on what it means to be a public figure, focusing on his criticism of Salvador Dali’s autobiography. Orwell held a decidedly unfavorable view of the personal life Dali described, and the opinion extended to much of modern celebrity, which becomes problematic due to Orwell’s own renown. According to Imber, “Orwell realized that fame in itself was no sin” (183), but he disapproved of the deceptive posturing that frequently accompanies it.

Imber’s essay provides a logical transition into section three, “Of Biography and Autobiography.” The most intriguing of the essays in this section is “Third Thoughts about Orwell,” by Daphne Patai. Patai re-evaluates the scrutiny of Orwell’s life and works that she began in her 1984 book, *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology*. She explains that in the decades since *The Orwell Mystique* was published, increasingly radical feminism within the academy and feminists’ increased reliance on postmodernist language constructs has led her to question many of the views she espoused in that text, a process which reaffirmed her beliefs in some of those views while modifying others. Specifically, she still believes Orwell was a misogynist and that his views towards women are unacceptable in a person who has, in many other ways, proven himself to be quite intelligent. She acknowledges, however, that many of her assertions were colored by the particular feminist views she held while writing it. She emphasizes that the reasons behind her renewed analysis represent an example of “the apparently voluntary abdication of reason and freedom by many intellectuals on the left” (208), which Orwell would have (rightfully, she claims) argued against.

In the fourth section, Erika Gottlieb’s “Orwell’s Satirical Vision on the Screen: The Film Versions of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” stands out. She claims that of the two film versions of each of these works, none “are what one could call successful translations of Orwell’s most widely read works of political allegory into cinema” (252). Much of this failure lies in the increased temporal distance between audiences of those four films and the culture in which Orwell was writing; the result is that events that were well-known to Orwell and his contemporaries, such as the Soviet show trials of the 1930s orchestrated by Stalin
to discredit Trotsky, were no longer prominent in the social consciousness by the
time the first of these films was released in 1954. After discussing the films in detail
and explaining why the early film versions of each work are superior to their later
counterparts, Gottlieb concludes that cinema is not an ideal format for rendering
dystopian visions.

The final section, “Orwell Abroad,” contains three essays, beginning with
Vladimir Shlapentokh’s “George Orwell: Russia’s Tocqueville.” As Cushman notes
in his introduction, “Orwell’s relationship to the Soviet Union is central to under-
standing his entire oeuvre” (15), and Shlapentokh delves into this relationship. He
claims that, like Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations of the burgeoning United
States, Orwell’s observations regarding the Soviet Union demonstrated that he
held a better understanding of that society than those people who lived in it. This
understanding, achieved without ever having visited the USSR, bolstered Orwell’s
career as a novelist; it provides the fundamental underpinning of Animal Farm and
profoundly influenced Nineteen Eighty-Four as well.

The final two essays in the anthology, Miguel Berga’s “My Days in Barcelona:
Orwell, Langdon-Davies, and the Cultural Memory or War” and Gilbert Bonifas’s
“From Ingsoc to Capsoc: Perceptions of Orwell in France,” discuss, respectively,
Orwell’s reception in Spain, particularly in relation to the Spanish Civil War, and
his reception in France. Berga notes that Orwell, who participated in the Spanish
Civil War as a member of the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista militia,
played a much more significant role in the war as a writer than as a soldier. He did
little to affect the war’s outcome, but a great deal to affect the way it is remembered.
He notes especially that Orwell, in writing Homage to Catalonia, “understood how
important it was to mold documentary on the narrative strategies of prose fiction”
(286) in order to gain a sizeable and appreciative audience for his work. As a result,
Orwell’s chronicles and commentary on the war play a more significant part in
remembering that history than they otherwise should. Bonifas points out that
Orwell did not achieve popularity in France while he was alive, or for quite a while
after his death. It was not until the early 1980s that Nineteen Eighty-Four gained a
following, mostly for didactic purposes related to Cold War politics. He continues
to trace the reception of Orwell’s works in France into the twenty-first century.

The essays within George Orwell: Into the Twenty-First Century expand a great
deal upon Berman’s conception of Orwell. They examine his work and his life
from many perspectives and provide a comprehensive analysis of all the topics they
discuss. The book should prove a valuable resource for anyone researching Orwell.