Famished Souls Struggling for Food in George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*

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Abstract
Bread and margarine with wine, or "tea-and-two-slices", presents a choice that triggers vast contemplations on poverty versus wealth and meaningful versus meaningless life. This paper aims to highlight how George Orwell's Down and Out in Paris and London *tackles the centrality of food and the people striving to obtain it. The purpose of this reading is to raise contemporary readers' awareness of the inequality between the effort to procure food and the meagre outcomes, portrayed through a symphony of smells, a shocking juxtaposition of food abundance and scarcity, and a conflict of states needing interpretation. Orwell sets the two capitals in a mirroring progression where reflections magnify or diminish depending on people's involvement in solving the constant dilemma of survival. While Paris offers the poor a chance to look for work, London reduces the struggle to mere begging for food, which is officially banned. The layered perspective brings the reader to a stark realization: a heavenly meal in a Parisian restaurant may have been prepared in "the hell of" a kitchen. In London, reality unfolds on a horizontal plane, where charities providing food deprive the poor of the chance to work for it. The contexts differ, but the props remain the same: filth, famine and an abundance of feelings.*

Keywords: *food studies, postwar literature, poverty, tramp, George Orwell*

Down and Out in Paris and London is Orwell's "first work of social exploration", a literary genre "founded upon the ignorance of the prosperous concerning their impoverished fellow citizens" (Clarke 2007: 14-16). The book recounts the unnamed narrator's personal experiences, aiming to shed light on the causes, manifestations, and impacts of poverty at both individual and societal levels. Orwell's decision to leave the narrator unnamed, along with his use of second-person moralising, transforms the narrative into a powerful social document. This approach invites readers to confront the true face of reality and encourages a response of awareness, compassion and a call for change.

Described as a "memoir, reportage, autobiography, travel diary and autobiographical fiction" and rejected several times to the author's dismay (Quinn 2009: 133-134), the book was finally published in January 1933. The chronology of the events is the reversed picture of reality: the narrator's immersion into the state of poverty starts in London and then continues in Paris. The reason Orwell "set out to explore the lower depths of English society,

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the world of itinerant tramps" (133) was to become a credible voice defending the rights of these people: "Poverty is what I am writing about, and I had my first contact with poverty in this slum. The slum, with its dirt and its queer lives, was first an object-lesson in poverty and then the background of my own experiences." (Orwell 2008: 8) Orwell's book is grounded in the historical and social context of postwar Paris and London, yet it transcends these specific settings to issue warnings relevant to contemporary life, particularly in times of rising conflict. The postwar period mirrors current times, where tensions and instability persist. By moving from specific examples to broader societal themes, Orwell effectively builds credibility with his readers. His journalistic talent in presenting facts with clarity and confidence lends authenticity to the narrative. However, readers are encouraged to look beyond any potential bias shaped by the historical moment, engaging more critically with the underlying issues.

Critics have examined *Down and Out in Paris and London* from various angles, including political commentary, social exploration, poverty, injustice and religion. In his chapter from *Bloom's Modern Critical Reviews*, Roger Fowler highlights the role of food and the grim conditions of the kitchens described by Orwell. He briefly mentions the "pretentious but filthy and disorganised restaurant" where Orwell worked after his stint at Hotel X. Fowler ties these observations into his broader analysis of Orwell's use of naturalism, realism and even surrealism, noting how Orwell evokes vivid, hellish imagery using simple, everyday language: "Remarkably, this highly picturesque and impressionistic writing, with a strong literary heritage in images of hell, is achieved with a very ordinary vocabulary." (Fowler 2007: 38) This paper seeks to consolidate these observations on the struggle for food, encouraging deeper reflection on the inequalities and contradictions inherent in such a struggle.

The book begins by vividly depicting the atmosphere of rue du Coq d'Or: "a sort of French Impressionist slum" (Calls 2013: 33). Orwell immerses the reader in a sensory-laden experience, with food presented in a decayed state amidst the chaotic street life: "Quarrels, desolate cries of street hawkers, shouts of children chasing orange peel, and at night, loud singing and the sour reek of the refuse-carts." (Orwell 2008: 3-4) Orwel's use of capitalised words, such as BISTROs, imprints visual markers for readers. The narrator's stay at the Hotel des Trois Moineaux (Hotel of Three Sparrows) gains symbolic significance when viewed through the lens of biblical references to God's charity: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26), mirroring a distorted form of charity observed in the English tramps.

Some of the lodgers living in the Parisian area are "fantastically poor" (Orwell 2008: 5) which gives the narrator the insight that, "Poverty frees them

from ordinary standards of behaviour, just as money frees people from work." (5-6) The concept of freedom experienced by the poor manifests in various forms: freedom from the burden of possessions, freedom of will and the limited freedom to choose from a narrow set of options. It includes the freedom from having to make complex choices about food, the liberty to act without responsibility and the ability to justify undesirable behaviour or poor hygiene due to the lack of adequate food and shelter. Ultimately, it extends to freedom in facing death, as the poor are unburdened by material possessions both in life and in death.

For someone accustomed to taking daily meals for granted, the narrator's description of the strategies involved in procuring food evokes a deep sense of gratitude for not enduring such hardship and embarrassment. From the desire to create the illusion that one goes out to eat to the hard decision of buying slightly more expensive bread made of rye just because it is smaller and easier to smuggle in one's pockets, the way the poor person has to calculate everything and see this as wasting, not as spending, is impressive:

> This wastes you a franc a day. Sometimes, to keep up appearances, you have to spend sixty centimes on a drink, and go correspondingly short of food. Your linen gets filthy, and you run out of soap and razor-blades. Your hair wants cutting, and you try to cut it yourself, with such fearful results that you have to go to the barber after all, and spend the equivalent of a day's food. All day you are telling lies, and expensive lies. (Orwell 2008: 18)

Edward Quinn describes the struggle to make ends meet as a form of "eccentricity", viewing it as "another outgrowth of poverty, as various people, pushed to extremes, resort to bizarre and complex coping strategies" (2009: 158). Disaster may strike when filth invites bugs into one's living space, threatening what little food is available:

> You have spent your last eighty centimes on half a litre of milk, and are boiling it over the spirit lamp. While it boils a bug runs down your forearm; you give the bug a flick with your nail, and it falls, plop! straight into the milk. There is nothing for it but to throw the milk away and go foodless. (Orwell 2008: 18)

The hungry narrator's decision to discard the milk may seem whimsical, but beyond the health risks, it reflects a desire to preserve dignity, even amid extreme poverty. To worsen the situation, a baker might cut a slightly larger piece of bread than the poor person can afford, deepening their despair and pushing them to avoid the bakery in the future.

With only bread and margarine to sustain them, the Parisian poor come to truly understand the agony of hunger as they pass by shop windows filled with lavish displays of food: "huge, wasteful piles; whole dead pigs, baskets of hot loaves, great yellow blocks of butter, strings of sausages, mountains of

potatoes, vast Gruyere cheeses like grindstones" (19). This sight triggers a double struggle—intense physical hunger combined with self-pity and dread over the temptation to steal food and the fear of getting caught. The scene vividly contrasts the abundance of food with the overwhelming surge of negative emotions stemming from deprivation.

The simple, meagre diet of bread and margarine serves as a grim bond between the poor of Paris and London, uniting them in their shared struggle for survival. This diet leaves a lasting, hopeless mark on the faces of the destitute in both cities: "A man who has gone even a week on bread and margarine is no longer a man, merely a belly with a few accessory organs." (19-20) While the aftermath of World War I shaped both cities differently, with Paris focusing on poverty and London on homelessness, the environments still echo similar post-war realities. In London, this shift may be justified by a remark of Phil Lyon (2020): "World War I had drawn men from the labour market for military service and provided opportunities for young women, in large numbers, to engage with employment in offices and factories rather than domestic service." (2020: 179) According to Quinn, the mirror reflection is distorted and inverted, though the background stays largely consistent, mirroring the post-war realities: "The difference between Paris and London is the difference between poverty and homelessness." (2009: 159) Moreover, this difference is evident in the use of language, the levels of hope and the limited employment opportunities—jobs that are basic and demeaning, yet offer the prospect of having enough to eat and earning a bit of money to be spent solely on survival necessities. In France, however, the PLONGEUR can at least take pride in purchasing their own bread, margarine and wine, provided these are not supplied as part of their job allowance.

Stepping into the role of a PLONGEUR—the slave in the burgeoning modern world—the narrator poses a question that should resonate with many: "why this life goes on—what purpose it serves, and who wants it to continue, and why I am not taking the merely rebellious, FAINEANT attitude" (Orwell 2008: 138). The "dark labyrinthine passages" (63) leading to the kitchen of Hotel X, where the narrator and his Russian friend Boris eventually find work, may symbolise the life journey of the impoverished. In the boiling bowels of the kitchen, "the same heat and cramped space and warm reek of food, and a humming, whirring noise" (63-64) hurl the reader into the hidden mechanism that creates the luxurious dishes served in the luxury and tranquillity of the restaurant above. The image of "a boy with a great slab of veal on his shoulder, his cheek pressed into the damp, spongy flesh" and the cry of "'SAUVE-TOI, IDIOT!'" (64) create a naturalistic tableau that, according to Fowler (2007: 38), borders on hyperrealism. This contrast juxtaposes the stark reality of a kitchen where corpses are transformed into gourmet dishes with the echo of a desperate plea to escape from this inferno. "Roughly speaking, the more one

pays for food, the more sweat and spittle one is obliged to eat with it" (Orwell 2008: 93). Orwell's statement aims to alert diners to a startling reality. While he has been criticised for presenting an exaggeratedly negative view of Parisian hotels and restaurants, Ingle (2006: 50) sees in Orwell's work a "wider and more trenchant criticism of the nature of society". In this perspective, what is expensive is cheap and what is cheap is costly. Those who can afford it end up paying a premium for food that, in reality, is of lower quality.

Since food becomes the core of most conversations, the manner of speaking becomes lethargic. The hungry person finds solace in solitude and laziness. People may resort to reading in times of starvation as movement is impeded by the frailty of the body. The hungry person discovers life, culture and arts from a different angle, inaccessible to others:

> Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one had been turned into a jellyfish, or as though all one's blood had been pumped out and luke-wann water substituted. Complete inertia is my chief memory of hunger. (Orwell 2008: 42-43)

As hunger becomes overwhelming, the narrator falls into despair, a state noted by his friend Boris: "How easily you despair, MON AMI! Where is that English obstinacy I have read about? Courage! We'll manage it." (46). Boris attempts to lift his spirits and considers various strategies to devise a plan for salvation. The plan involves pawning their last possessions, requiring it to function effectively like a wartime tactic: "Boris was so pleased with this scheme (he called it UNE RUSE DE GUERRE) that he almost forgot being hungry" (45). However, Boris must come up with alternative solutions since they need papers to pawn their items and locate a new pawnshop. Fortune seems to intervene when he discovers a "five-sou piece" on the pavement, allowing them to buy a pound of potatoes which they "wolfed […] skins and all", feeling rejuvenated (47-48). Additionally, due to an error by the pawnshop clerk, they end up with a fifty-franc note, which provides them with "bread and wine, a piece of meat, and alcohol for the stove" (48-49). The narrator conveys such depth of relief from the anguish of hunger that the reader experiences the characters' joy with equal intensity. A significant term in this context is "gorge", which the author uses to describe their ravenous approach to food. This sense of relief infuses Boris with renewed optimism, prompting him to exclaim: "The fortune of war!" (49) This word choice is further illustrated in another episode, where the narrator reflects on how hunger alters the perception of food: "Have you noticed how bread tastes when you have been hungry for a long time? Cold, wet, doughy—like putty almost. But, Jesus Christ, how good it was! As for the wine, I sucked it all down in one draught, and it seemed to go straight into my veins and flow round my body like new

blood." Valenti, the Italian recounting this moment, "wolfed the whole two pounds of bread without stopping to take breath" (101).

The dire circumstances faced by various ethnic groups in Paris enhance the author's skill in portraying diverse characters. Contemporary readers encounter descriptions that extend beyond the text itself. However, a deeper examination reveals that the Jewish pawnshop owner, criticised for not meeting the expectations of the impoverished, might actually be a benefactor to those who rely on pawning personal items to buy food. Similarly, the Russian friend is a complex figure in the struggle for sustenance. While he uplifts the author's spirits, maintains hope, brings food and devises financial rescue plans, he also challenges the author's moral inclinations. He proposes an opportunity to work for a secret society by writing articles on English politics for a Russian newspaper—a scheme that turns out to be a deception, an attempt by desperate individuals or swindlers, as the narrator calls them, to make quick money.

Orwell's direct observations, laced with ironic criticism, do not spare any particular nationality, underscoring the idea that the world comprises diverse people, all sharing similar virtues and vices. The placement of different nationalities in unexpected roles is disheartening: for example, an Englishman seeking a PLONGEUR position—a slave's slave position—in a Russian restaurant, despite the dubious moral standing of the prospective patron. Encountering the future restaurant owner and his French wife sparks food-related imagery in the narrator: "dead-white face and scarlet lips, reminding me of cold veal and tomatoes" (59). The prospect of the new restaurant opening in a fortnight further widens the gap in their ongoing struggle for stability and steady pay. The narrator and his Russian friend spend their last money on bread and garlic, using it to enhance the flavour of their meagre food and make it last longer. The state of hunger prompts one of the narrator's most extended reflections on food:

> …we wrote dinner menus on the backs of envelopes. We were too hungry even to try and think of anything except food. I remember the dinner Boris finally selected for himself. It was: a dozen oysters, borsch soup (the red, sweet, beetroot soup with cream on top), crayfishes, a young chicken en CASSEROLE, beef with stewed plums, new potatoes, a salad, suet pudding and Roquefort cheese, with a litre of Burgundy and some old brandy. Boris had international tastes in food. Later on, when we were prosperous, I occasionally saw him eat meals almost as large without difficulty. (61)

It is the optimistic Boris who first secures a job at Hotel X and subsequently brings a selection of French delicacies— "minced veal, a wedge of Camembert cheese, bread and an éclair, all jumbled together"—to his friend, who briefly subsists "entirely on stolen food" (62), before he himself gets hired as a

PLONGEUR at the same hotel. Working as a PLONGEUR and receiving payment elevates the narrator's perception to a new level: he says that "I had no sensation of poverty" and feels a "heavy contentment, the contentment a well-fed beast might feel, in a life which had become so simple" (106), as "being hungry had taught me the true value of food." (107)

When the narrator later describes his work in the Russian owner's restaurant, readers are presented with a stark and unsettling depiction of the backroom conditions: "The conditions behind the kitchen door were akin to a pigsty" (125) and "the floor was usually an inch deep in a mixture of trampled food" (126). The scene is marked by precariousness and filth: "Meat, vegetables, and other items lay on the bare earth, overrun by rats and cats" (127). The impression conveyed is that of a chaotic battlefield, with the cook continuously shouting orders laced with profanity. This rare female character makes a strong impression: she is a stout, loud individual who studied music in Vienna but now has to endure a "CRISE DE NERFS" (130), whenever there are customers to serve.

The similarities between the two capitals are evident in the pervasive poverty that engulfs and depletes and the strategies used to escape the relentless cycle of starvation. Filth emerges as a ravenous monster, taking on hyperbolic proportions: it permeates the clothing of the poor, their homes and the kitchens of the restaurants where they work, accumulating from discarded or improperly managed food waste. This filth grows like an organic mass, a kind of mulch that covers everything and promises a potential for life beneath it. Despite immersing the reader in an overwhelmingly unpleasant smell and sight, this filth sustains the fabric of society—it is the sacrificed lives of the poor that nourish the lives of the rich. In London, the stifling, stinking stench of poverty seems to go unnoticed by those who could bring about change and improvement, presenting itself as a kind of entrenched institutionalized filth. Thus, the emaciated bodies of PLONGEURs and tramps contribute to the broader backdrop of waste. Their physical deterioration reflects the severe lack of access to food. At the entrance of a workhouse in London, the tramps "in the mass, lounging" present a "disgusting sight; nothing villainous or dangerous, but a graceless, mangy crew, nearly all ragged and palpably underfed" (170). Here, they have a slim chance of receiving a bath, some food and work the next morning—specifically, "peeling potatoes for the pauper's dinner" (175). The tramps' conversations often focus on the "spikes" or "casual wards" in England (165), where they can be admitted for only one night, making them perpetual wanderers. After having a bath in the filth left by the others, they receive their supper: "Each man's ration is a half-pound wedge of bread smeared with margarine, and a pint of bitter sugarless cocoa in a tin billy. Sitting on the floor we wolfed this in five minutes…" (173). Breakfast is "identical to the previous night's supper" (175), leading to widespread

undernourishment. Although they are given meal tickets for coffee-shops along the route, the irony is that tramps are often cheated out of even this minimal amount of food. For example, the: "serving-maid, seeing our tickets and recognizing us as tramps, placed two 'large teas' and four slices of bread with dripping on the table—equivalent to eightpence worth of food. It turned out that the shop regularly cheated tramps out of twopence or so on each ticket." (177)

Paddy, the tramp whom the narrator befriends in London, has "lank cheeks with a greyish, grimy appearance" (178). This young man, who served two years in the war and lost his job, is "horribly ashamed of being a tramp, but he had picked up all a tramp's ways" (178-179). Despite his emaciated state, his moral character shines through in his reaction to the opportunity to steal a bottle of milk from a doorstep. His sickly, drooping face reveals his inner struggle: "'Best leave it. It don't do a man no good to steal. T'ank God, I ain't never stolen nothin' yet.'" The narrator offers a paradoxical explanation for Paddy's stance: "It was funk, bred of hunger, that kept him virtuous. With only two or three sound meals in his belly, he would have found courage to steal the milk." (179) Paddy's hunger extends beyond mere food, shaping him into the "regular character of a tramp—abject, envious, a jackal's character" (181), who resents those who work and blames unemployment on foreigners. Nevertheless, the narrator balances the negative view by highlighting Paddy's positive traits: "he was a good fellow, generous by nature and capable of sharing his last crust with a friend" (182). His prospects for employment were hindered by "two years of bread and margarine", as he "had lived on this filthy imitation of food till his own mind and body were compounded of inferior stuff. It was malnutrition and not any native vice that had destroyed his manhood" (182). For Paddy, even one decent meal a day was considered "a wild extravagance", while food "had come to mean simply bread and margarine—the eternal tea-and-two-slices, which will cheat hunger for an hour or two" (213). Thus, the reader understands that a tramp's only real pleasure is "the occasional tea-and-two-slices" (214).

What is surprising is that all these stark realities sharply contrast with the hopes the narrator harbors as he travels to London. At the start of Chapter XXIV, he is en route to his homeland, reflecting confidently: "There are, indeed, many things in England that make you glad to get home; bathrooms, armchairs, mint sauce, new potatoes properly cooked, brown bread, marmalade, beer made with veritable hops—they are all splendid, if you can pay for them." (150). And then he adds: "It was, at any rate, notoriously impossible to starve in London, so there was nothing to be anxious about." (152) However, the crude reality soon brings him to a sobering realization: the streets of London are filled with poor tramps in alarming numbers, perpetually

searching for a place to stay, as the spikes (or casual wards) can only provide accommodation for one night.

In London, where begging was illegal, church charities provided tea and two slices of bread to the needy. What is striking in the book is that these charities offer the same type of food but in larger quantities. However, Brennan's in-depth critique highlights a critical view: Nonetheless, in his in-depth analysis of the critical aspects of the book, Brennan notes: "Church missionary work supporting the poor of London becomes in *Down and Out* a Babel of competing, meaningless tongues, with bland words of salvation dispensed as the obligatory cost of paltry food and warmth" (2017: 36). The narrator's portrayal of the tramps' reaction to charity food reveals their contempt for these offerings, which they even find humiliating. Gratitude appears as a shattered concept, nearly nonexistent among the tramps who have been denied any opportunity for a dignified life.

Attempts to provide the tramps with sustenance for a few hours evoke no visible gratitude: "Evidently the tramps were not grateful for their tea. And yet it was excellent tea […] and we were all glad of it. I am sure too that it was given in a good spirit, without any intention of humiliating us; so in fairness we ought to have been grateful—still, we were not." (Orwell 2008: 169) A similar incident later in the book depicts the tramps receiving "a one-pound jam-jar of tea each, with six slices of bread and margarine", and then they "the tramps began to misbehave in the most outrageous way", leading the narrator to remark: "One would not have thought such scenes possible in a church." (217) The intellectual and physical nourishment provided by the church services and the food offered by church charities are strikingly similar to the generally inadequate food available to the tramps—lacking in nutrients and substance. Unsurprisingly, the expected gratitude manifests instead as indecent, even childish mockery. Orwell concludes with a surprising observation: "A man receiving charity practically always hates his benefactor—it is a fixed characteristic of human nature…" (219). This underscores the idea that charity fails to elicit gratitude because people should be allowed to earn their food and thus feel a sense of responsibility.

The only genuine gratitude the tramp displays is towards a "nice, chubby, youngish" clergyman who, "shy and embarrassed", hands out food tickets without "waiting to be thanked" (220). Unlike most people in religious contexts, who exhibit a patronising attitude, this clergyman exemplifies what a true Christian should be. This brief episode seems intended to highlight qualities that Christians might reflect on and emulate. Similarly, Orwell subtly critiques Christian practices through Paddy the tramp's view of the book *Of the Imitation of Christ* as "blasphemy" (180), using this as a sharp commentary on the disparity between Christian teachings and their actual application. This

reversal prompts readers to ponder how Christian principles should materialise in reality.

Outside of London, other locations in England offer similarly bleak prospects. According to Billy the Tramp, Kent is another area where many people resort to mooching, with bakers more likely to throw away their bread than give it to beggars. Oxford is also noted as a prime spot for begging, where he recounts: "I mooched bread, and I mooched bacon, and I mooched beef, and every night I mooched tanners for my kip off of the students." (223)

The mirror held up by the author reveals global issues: poverty, the right to a decent job and diet, and society's responsibility to create an environment where people can find work rather than rely on charity and suffer from despondency and humiliation. As Peter Brian Barry notes in *George Orwell: The Ethics of Equality*: "The food and diet of the poor is also a source of shame" (2023: 181). This shame leads Boris, the narrator's friend, to comment that "It is fatal to look hungry. […] It makes people want to kick you." (Orwell 2008: 58) The denial of the poor's dignity, both in securing adequate food and in caring for their bodies, traps them in a multi-layered prison: one imposed by society, another by their physical condition and yet another by the despair within their minds.

The overwhelming number of tramps underscores the failure of society to address employment gaps, revealing a deep scar left by the war. Amidst the booming industrialisation, the image of countless hopeless individuals needing food and care is profoundly disheartening. George Orwell concludes his exploration of poverty by proposing solutions for a struggling postwar society, acutely aware of the ills caused by a lack of food and hope. The narrator suggests that workhouses could evolve into partially self-supporting institutions, where tramps, by settling and contributing according to need, would no longer be tramps. They would engage in meaningful work, receive decent food and live a stable life (246). By the end of the book, the narrator expresses a commitment to avoid harsh judgments of individuals while considering the broader context that has led to such circumstances.

Adopting an inside perspective has allowed the author to delve deeply into poverty and the desperate struggle for food. Given that the text represents Orwell's personal view, which includes elements of bias, readers should examine the issues from multiple perspectives to better understand the conditions leading to poverty, the moral dilemmas faced in trying to make ends meet and the resulting consequences. Orwell's frequent references to bread, margarine and tea, within a world where waste becomes filth and people are seen through the lens of food, prompt readers to develop a deep sense of gratitude for their own abundance. In times of conflict or scarcity, the quest for food becomes central to survival and Orwell's text serves as a powerful wake-up call for those who cannot imagine such a life-and-death struggle. Further

studies on how the theme of striving for food as a reflection of the ongoing struggle for justice is addressed by authors from various ethnic backgrounds will help determine whether Orwell's insights remain relevant for future generations.

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