

Fascism which ensures that its own intellectual leaders are sacrificed "in the death camps of Utopia." *Darkness at Noon*, the most notable of them, written first in German, tells the story of the Bolshevik Rubashov, who confesses to crimes he has not committed in Stalin's totalitarian state. In a world where victims collude with executors in the belief that "Everyone with a goal in front is forced to its baleful track," Rubashov no longer knows whether he is in an actual history or an eternal nightmare, and he is finally brought to the point, under questioning, where nightmare and reality actually merge and he becomes capable of Doublethink. This is a psychological as well as an ideological tale, but also a vividly precise, historically exact political story about the lies, slogans, betrayals, imprisonments, interrogations, tortures, psychological deceptions, false confessions and executions that had become the standard weapons of the totalitarian state, as well as about the "grammatical fiction" of modern ideology, which destroys the I in the We. Here we see the modern political novel acquiring a terrible new meaning, as the intellectual life corrupts itself, and revolutionary politics become not a matter of hope but of moral despair. George Orwell, in a notable essay on Koestler, indicated his importance: "One development of the last ten years has been the appearance of the 'political book,' a sort of enlarged pamphlet combining history with political criticism, as an important literary form," he said, adding that its most remarkable writers had been European "renegades from one or another extremist party, who have seen totalitarianism at close quarters and known the meaning of exile and persecution." And he noted the difference between Koestler and other Left-wing writers, who "have always wanted to be anti-Fascist without being anti-totalitarian."

There is no doubt that Koestler's work in turn influenced Orwell's late fiction, the two anti-Utopian political satires *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which are likewise stories of the harsh, recognizable realities of totalitarian states, and their horrifying promise of a post-humanist future in which the jackboot comes down on the human face forever.

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The link between the two writers was, personally and artistically, close, though Orwell was as patriotic as he was socialist, as deeply English as Koestler was European. But Orwell's writing and ideas were interwoven by a European and internationalist view of history and politics, to a degree surely unusual in British fiction. "What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art," he explained in 1946. "My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice." He wrote, he said, "because there are some lies I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention" – though he did add that the work must be "also an aesthetic experience." "So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useful information," he also observed: "The job is to reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essential public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us." The result of all this is a complicated balancing of a fictional tradition bred from the "Condition of England" novel and the work of the Naturalists – he admired Gissing and Kipling, Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy – with a fiction of political experience and intellect: a kind of novel which is often highly traditional, but which could, and would, leave realism behind and move toward moral and anti-Utopian satire. Orwell saw himself not as primarily a novelist but a political writer, a writer of engrained Englishness who has rebelled against Britain as "a family with the wrong members in control," and a social history he felt the moral need to change. Born Eric Blair in British India in 1903, the son of a colonial official, and so belonging, as he explained it with his familiar precision, to the "lower upper middle class," he was returned to England for his schooling. At prep school, then as a scholarship boy at Eton, he acquired, he said, much of the snobbery of his class, but also a sense of social displacement and loneliness that marked him after, politically, emotionally, stylistically. In 1921 he went to Burma as a colonial policeman, and was divided again, "stuck between my hatred of the Empire

I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little bastards who tried to make my job impossible." He came back in 1927 to a Britain in the aftermath of the general strike, and determined to fulfil his ambition to be a writer. A period of economic deprivation and vagrancy followed in which he worked in Paris hotels and tried to survive in the London of the Depression, all this recorded in the neo-documentary *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). With this he became no longer Eric Blair but "George Orwell," a name he took partly to spare his family, but also as a badge of escape and rebellion ("the only thing to do in the world of twentieth-century barbarism was to rebel").

His first novel *Burmese Days* (1934) returned to his experience in Burma, and his anti-hero Flory is significantly scarred with an ugly birthmark, signifying his own anxious curse of birth and class and his "outcast" state. He published three more novels over the decade, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *Coming up for Air* (1939) – novels of considerable but not the highest quality, in part because their purpose is sometimes too plainly instrumental. But with them are interwoven two crucial non-fiction books: *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a journey into the working-class Condition of England which is also a work of intense self-analysis, and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), his remarkable account of his experiences in Spain with the POUM forces during the Civil War (in which he was almost fatally wounded) and from which he returned in disillusion both with Communist tactics and the attitude of the British left-wing intellectuals – the "orthodoxy-sniffers" – who had supported them. It was as much from such works, and his critical and political essays, as from fiction that there came the rigorous, spiky, critical, collective identity that was Orwell. He had been down and out in Paris and London, followed the road to Wigan Pier, fought in Spain, made his political homage to Catalonia. He had modulated the old Etonian Eric Blair into the plainer George Orwell, and made himself a central and deeply immersed recorder of the economic, social, political and historical problems of the age. Half in resistance to aestheticized writing, he had perfected his famous

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plain style, the no-nonsense manner that united the British common sense and decency with the revolutionary propagandist so easily that his voice sounded as if it were the truth frankly declaring itself. He had known poverty and pain, challenged imperialism and capitalism, tried several forms of social identification, and come to speak not only for the unemployed and deprived of Depression Britain but for the new half-life of Thirties British suburbia, with all its respectable constraints and limitations. He had come to a radical, vivid, often deeply idiosyncratic yet loving reading of his culture in its contradiction and variety, while seeing that culture in a world-historical frame as part of an ongoing and universal crisis. Out of this he had come to devise both a form of writing and a form of politics, a sometimes strange, frequently volatile mixture of radical socialism and intimate identification with lasting British decencies, a liking and loathing. His realistic writing is experienced and plain ("good prose is like a window pane") and he believed in the task of telling the historical truth against the orthodoxy-makers. His pursuit of a critical social representation – he saw a "death of society," a Britain ruined by class, poverty, sterility and unemployment, where what had collapsed was not just an economic but a cultural structure – never lost sight of the dense experience of British life, of which he was a compelling reporter. Glimpses of that life at its best are to be seen: in rural life, in the traditional working-class home, in comic seaside postcards, in the "Great Peace" of Edwardian society, all now subject to inexorable erosion and decay. Present realities are judged from a double perspective: one that of the historical past, which sees current reality in the light of historical continuity or discontinuity, the other that of the political future, which turns the real into instant history, a quickly passing and apocalyptic world.

Orwell's Thirties novels are works of rebellion, against class limitation, money-centred capitalism, and the sterile erosion of British culture itself, portraits of a dying society, a failing nation, in which social detail and milieu, rather than the fortunes of the protagonist, finally dominate. *Keep the Aspidistra*

Flying is a story of a would-be rebel, Gordon Comstock, a character who prefigures some of the angry rebels of fiction twenty years later. He has ambitions to be a poet, but above all is in revolt against society, advertising, and that flag of British lower-class respectability, the aspidistra in the window, as well as against "the futility, the bloodiness, the deathliness of modern life." He takes a downward path ("He wanted to go down, deep down, into some world where decency no longer mattered; to cut the strings of his self-respect; to submerge himself, to sink") which is also a willing self-degradation. "The sense of disintegration, of decay, that is endemic in our time, was strong on him," and he reads in his fellow human beings "The great death-wish of the modern world. Suicide pacts. Heads stuck in gas-ovens in lonely maisonettes. French letters and Amen Pills. And the reverberations of future wars." The rebellion is incomplete, and like many of his successors in fiction he becomes a creator of the advertising slogans he has despised ("It was what, in his secret heart, he had desired"). In *Coming Up for Air* (1939), told in the first person in a grainy and even comic vernacular, the horrors underlying the social surface have come even closer, the angry disgust and violence are yet plainer: "Everything's streamlined these days, even the bullet Hitler's keeping for you." Orwell warningly wrote it when he knew war was coming, and the book mingles this apocalyptic knowledge with images from an idyllic Edwardian Thames Valley childhood which cannot be recreated, and a few glimpses of hope in the common decencies of ordinary people. It was written close to the essay "Inside the Whale," where he was already developing his "totalitarian hypothesis" that the two oligarchies of Communism and Fascism would come together, and that the writer was being returned to a grim passivity, trying to write amid the ruins. Nonetheless just after war started he began to incubate a large English family saga, to be called either *The Lion and the Unicorn* or *The Quick and the Dead* - which, like so many books of the time, was never written.

What was written instead during wartime was *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*, though it did not appear until 1945. He had

conceived the original idea in 1937 in Spain, and he wrote it over a period of three months in late 1943 and early 1944, at a time when the Russians were beginning to throw off the German advance, when Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met in Teheran to plan the Nazi overthrow, and Stalin stood high in British popular esteem. The book is a plain allegory of the betrayal of the Russian Revolution by Stalin and his cohorts, of the treacherous treatment of Trotsky, the purges and Show Trials, and the exploitation of the populace for party survival and advantage. Publishers whether left or right were unwilling to publish; T. S. Eliot at Faber acknowledged the book's Swiftian power, but said that the house did not believe that "this is the right point of view from which to criticize the political situation at the present time." These infuriating delays and obstructions in fact favoured the book, which appeared as the war closed, so that instead of dramatizing the recriminations of the Thirties it captured the atmosphere of liberal crisis and the new fear of continued totalitarianism that outlasted the conflict. "*Animal Farm* is the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole," Orwell said; and now a work that in wartime might have been read solely as political polemic could be seen as something more. It carried forward, as few political works from the Thirties did, the moral as well as political energy that could be salvaged from the Thirties; it also attacked some of its darker illusions. It united satirical and political rage with the vivid near-timelessness of mythic writing, helped in this by the old satiric form of the animal fable. It expressed itself less as political venom than moral vitality. It took the official versions and authorized texts of modern ideology and subjected them to ultimate scepticism; oppressive fictions become the fictions they are, set against "human" (here animal) decency. Orwell held on to his socialist hope in a revolution that could truly transform society; but the book was essentially a liberal text, about the need to raise people over systems, ordinariness against power, decency against historical inevitability, scepticism against authority, prose against propaganda. And the publication of

Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) reinforced the point that Orwell's later fiction was not simply a warning against Stalin, but about the corruptions of power, the weaponry of propaganda, the structure of terror, the nature of authoritarianism, the use of scapegoats and victims, and the defeat of language itself. These books may have been the last novels of the Thirties; but they also became in effect the first British post-war novels, a fundamental line of continuity between the fiction of the Thirties and the writing of a post-Holocaust future.

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Even so, it was as well for the fortunes of modern British fiction that not every writer set out to accept bourgeois guilt, see history through the eyes of the workers, or provide Upward's "true picture of the world." One of the most notable writers of the age was Evelyn Waugh, a writer never considered distinguished for his political virtue, finally a lasting goad to the Left. Waugh, to my view, was a major modern writer, though in a quite different way from Joyce, with his intricate new discourse, or Woolf, with her complex vision of consciousness. His power lay in a pure vision of comedy so complete that it became a compelling modern style, a style that seemed to spring fully-grown from the early fiction and served him well until the 1960s. Comedy is more than a mode of amusement; it is a vision of life in both its romantic possibility and its darkness and grim absurdity. It is a high self-consciousness of style, of the play of form and language, and Waugh constructed it in its mode of modern satire, through which the compulsive claim of history itself can be challenged through a mixture of anarchistic delight in ephemeral follies and sheer indifference to externally imposed fictional and ideological orders. In later life he chose to dramatize this by inhabiting the mask of testy colonel which he analyses (and mocks) so well in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957). Pinfold is the man who presents himself to others as infuriated by all that has happened in his own lifetime ("His