INSIDE THE MYTH

Orwell: views from the left

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS (Editor)

Has too much homage and too little critical attention been paid to George Orwell? This collection of essays on Orwell's life and writing provides a compelling critique of the Orwell myth and argues for a more sceptical – if heretical – approach to the man and his work. A critical spotlight falls on his attitude to women in both fiction and documentary writing, his view of the state and his involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Orwell's sacred place in the school curriculum and media reaction in 1984 are also dissected. The literary antecedents to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are examined and his ambiguous place within British socialism assessed. A psychoanalytic examination of Orwell's writing and a lively, personalised look at his traumatised school-days round off a book which will not leave the Orwell industry undisturbed.

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Christopher Norris

Introduction

Few readers will need to be warned in advance that this book is no pious celebration of Orwell in the wake of his *annus mirabilis*. 'Orwell and the Left' is a violently disjunctive coupling, as many of these essays make clear. They focus on the ways in which Orwell has been kidnapped by the forces of reaction, taken over triumphantly by those who hold him up as *the* great example of a socialist who finally saw the light. No matter how ambivalent (or downright contradictory) his writings, Orwell is now firmly established as the voice and conscience of 'liberal' values against everything perceived as a threat to consensus democracy. The fact that such consensus is largely manufactured – and by methods which Orwell clearly foretold – is an irony which socialist readers will recognise but hardly relish. The prophecies lent themselves all too readily to the kind of right-wing recuperative reading which has turned Orwell into the patron saint of current Cold-War doublethink. One can imagine his misery and revulsion had Orwell lived to read some of the subtle and not-so-subtle propaganda put out in his name during 1984. The ghost must still be dancing on his grave in a fury of impotent scorn. But the fact that his writings are subject to such gross appropriation is evidence of their deeper complicity with those who would so use them.

Alan Brown shows this process very strikingly at work in the school examination system, where *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are among the perennial O and A Level texts, with students left in no doubt as to what kind of model answer the examiners are looking for. The simplest-seeming questions

exploitation of animals, this is *not* the point of departure of *Animal Farm*. Its point of departure, like its conclusion, is the proposition that human beings and beasts share characteristics of greed and ruthlessness towards their own kind.

Orwell concluded his preface:

> I do not wish to comment on the work; if it does not speak for itself, it is a failure.

He was of course right: but it is an interesting comment on the ideological argument of *Animal Farm* that its author was so unable to give an intelligible account of it.

Notes

1 Fredric Warburg, in a BBC interview in 1970, quoted in A. Coppard and B. Crick (eds.) *Orwell Remembered*, London, 1984, p.194.
2 *Animal Farm*, Harmondsworth, 1982, p.11.
3 S. Orwell and I. Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 3, Harmondsworth, 1970, p.458. The original English text is lost. The citations are from the unattributed retranslation from the edition distributed in 1947 by a Ukrainian displaced persons' organisation in Munich.

Lynette Hunter

Stories and Voices in Orwell's Early Narratives

George Orwell has always been a singular figure for speculation within literary criticism. A main thesis of Raymond Williams's influential book *Orwell* was to present the man as a paradox of conflicting attitudes to the duality of dominated and dominator in all situations social, historical and political. Of course this presentation also raises the parallel problems of authority in writing. But rather than look at any of the supposed tensions in an exemplary light, as attempts at stances for dealing with the conflict, much recent criticism has tended to concentrate on the negative aspects of the conflict itself. This odd emphasis on the content of Orwell's writing – one that occurs less often with other writers – may have to do with the continuing relevance of the topics he discussed; but it also appears to have derived from rather ungenerous readings, of the early fictional writing in particular.

Throughout those early works Orwell is learning. The fictions have aspects that he would later come to consider flawed, such as the 'purple passages' that he dismisses in 'Why I Write' (1946).[1] But these novels are by no means polished products of a mature artistry, and the writer is taken to task by critics time and again for poor plots, 'weak' characterisation, and especially for the relationships that exist between writer and character.[2]

Critics have perhaps been too ready to assume that Orwell was just not *aware* of what was going on in his writing, to regard the skills that his documentaries and later fiction

evidence almost as fortuitous, and even to devalue those skills by insisting on readings that carry the weaknesses of the early work into the later.[3] I would also suggest that when the early novels are read as product rather than origin, the paradoxes that have led to a widespread condemnation of Orwell become more open, so that their complexities engage rather than estrange.[4]

During the years 1932 to 1935 Orwell wrote four narrative works, all of which explored the possibilities of voice, of the stances of writer, narrator and character. Despite initial appearances, *Down and Out in Paris and London* is not a 'naïve' story, but a study of varied ways of telling and writing in the first person. The same experimentation with voice is found in *Burmese Days*, but within this attempt at a classical naturalistic novel the presentation of voice is far more subtle. *A Clergyman's Daughter*, written immediately after *Burmese Days*, is by comparison an obvious experiment with techniques that often lie outside the naturalistic novel, such as caricature, report and 'stream-of-consciousness'. Rather heavy-handedly, it tries to strip away expected elements and examine what results in terms of writer, narrator and character relationships. Written in 1935, the year before *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* shows a far more confident handling of voice, in which the writer is moving toward an interaction with the writing that will inform all his later works and provide much of their enduring appeal.

From the beginning Orwell is obviously fascinated by the tensions that arise between the dominated and the dominator. Not only does this fascination run through the themes of the early novels, but it also informs his handling of stance and therefore the way that the writing is structured. *Down and Out in Paris and London* is ostensibly the work of a narrator who has sat down to 'write what he sees', but learns that this is impossible. Although all the characters tell stories of one kind or another, within the first part of the book an index to the narrator's growing consciousness of the difficulty of writing is found in the character of Charlie, who recounts three very different tales. The first is a first-person, melodramatic account of one of Charlie's sexual forays. Its clichéd semi-pornographic patter, complete with dark alleyways, blood-red furnishings

and whimpering girls, is part of the stance of the narrator at the start of the book. He speaks in a patronising tone, counting on assumptions that both he and his magazine-educated readers will presumably find familiar. For example the book begins with a 'typical' French scene of street argument, using scattered French words to authenticate the telling, but it is an event that the narrator thinks needs little explanation and he concludes with a comment that 'It was quite a representative Paris slum.'[5] The narrator's confidence in the common ground he shares with his readers is further reflected in his preface to Charlie's story itself and the proprietory manner in which he promises to 'give' us Charlie as one of the 'local curiosities, talking'.

Charlie's second story is an anecdote that is recounted in a rather different manner. The narration is explanatory, interspersed with humorous comment and contains a great deal of reported speech. The anecdote provides a view of some of life's little ironies, and reveals much not only about Charlie's life but also about the narrator's changing attitude towards him as a written character. Although criticising the 'peasant girl' that he lives with, it is apparent that Charlie cares enough for her to think of a way for her to get food, asking at one point 'has not every woman something to sell?' Yet the implication of prostitution has been set up specifically so that it can be subverted to indicate character. In the event, what Charlie is referring to is his more innocuous plan to disguise the girl and send her to a kitchen that has been set up for pregnant women. But for Charlie the point of the story is that he can tell of his witty remark that saves the girl from discovery when she is met by someone from the kitchen a year later. Again the unspoken evaluations are clearly there in the rearranged expectations of the reader: Charlie is still with this girl a year later, and while there was no need to protect her he does so anyway. Charlie may be self-glorifying but because of the internal commentary it is now difficult to take his egoism too seriously.

For this second story the narrator moves from the direct speech of the first melodramatic tale to reported speech within direct speech. He is more distanced, no longer claiming to 'give' us Charlie and becoming aware of the impossibility of

exact description. Charlie's final story is narrated entirely in reported speech, with the narrator emphasising the second-hand nature of the story by saying 'Charlie told me' and 'Charlie said', and even commenting, 'I should very much like to have known him'. The story is prefaced with the remark: 'Very likely Charlie was lying as usual, but it was a good story'; and the entire tale may be seen as a formal and conventional parable beginning with the traditional 'One day ...'. The two men involved in the tale, Roucolle and an acquaintance, arrange to buy some cocaine and the police get wind of the matter. When the police raid their rooms, they pretend that the cocaine is face powder; but on examination in a laboratory, the police find that it is indeed face powder and the joke is turned the other way around. Yet at the end the humour is undercut. The narrator says, 'Three days later he [Roucolle] had some kind of stroke, and in a fortnight he was dead – of a broken heart, Charlie said.'

The parable concerns being taken in by something that appears to be the real thing but is not. In this the narrator makes it clear that in this first part of the book, not only has he learned about the dangers of observation, but also he is beginning to recognise the activity of convention and fiction in expression. The parable is placed immediately following a chapter of discussion in which the narrator has claimed that the middle class only hate and fear the working class because they do not understand them; they allow their prejudices and assumptions to govern their response rather than actively examining the situation. Just so: the parable provides, by analogy, a way of reading the book and involves the writer in examining his own writing. At the start there was the familiarisation through a bourgeois narrator, which was followed by naïve attempts at confrontation and alienation through Charlie's first story and other recounted events, and which then moved on to a re-familiarisation with the narrator on a different footing. The 'average' reader, the middle-class magazine consumer who was led to identify with the initial voice through vocabulary and received idioms, is here asked to become distanced and to examine the background of distorting assumptions. The juxtaposition of social discussion with fictive parable is being suggested as a more valuable

reading than cliché, melodrama and stereotyping.

Throughout the second part of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, an index to the narrator's awareness of writing is provided in the two types of tramps that he meets: Bozo and Paddy. Here the consciousness of the effect of 'story' is stronger and clearer: there is specific reference to language and literature and the writer is moving the topic directly into the crisis of authorial writing which raises the issues of dominator and dominated. Bozo is articulate, intelligent and interesting. He is one of the few tramps the narrator meets who are neither ashamed nor self-pitying, and the narrator associates this with Bozo's 'gift for phrases. He had managed to keep his brain intact and alert ... he was, as he said, free in his own mind'. Soon after this description comes the narrator's chapter on slang, swearing and insulting. The discussion indicates a curious two-way process in effect, for words sometimes define their users and yet are sometimes defined by them, 'being what public opinion chooses to make them'. Yet in both these cases there is a sense of fixity that Bozo's activity and alertness has little to do with. Where they are seen in action is in the stories that the rest of the tramps, including Paddy, tell to each other on the road.

The tramps have stories about each particular 'spike', about the managers and about individual characters on the road, all of which establish points of reference and contact, put them at their ease and allow them to cope with the various situations they are faced with: the consoling value of their stories is underlined explicitly when the narrator comments, 'The tramps liked the story, of course, but the interesting thing was to see that they had got it all wrong ... The story had been amended, no doubt deliberately ... giving them happy endings which are quite imaginary'. Although they define their stories in this way, every action they perform has a story attached to it as if these fictions are needed to keep them alive, to define them. But it is not the stories themselves that are criticised, it is the way that the tramps use them to maintain their self-pity and shame by accepting their prejudices and assuming that there can be no change in the status quo, in contrast to Bozo's humorous and often deflating stories about himself.

The activity of defining and being defined by raises directly

the topic of dominator and dominated. The tramps' stories have a self-deceptive narration like that of the initial narrator of the book, one that creates a circular tautological world. But the narrator develops for himself a stance that moves away from his initial unspoken control by means of a particular class idiom, to the point of consciously situating himself within a class structure through telling the story about his 'educated' accent. He also changes his mode of narration into one that inquires, compares and assesses. He suggests in the latter part of the book that we can learn to evaluate through close attention to language, and he does so by presenting himself as learning to differentiate between ways of narrating and developing new skills to activate responses.

However, the penultimate chapter shows him trying not to dominate by *reporting* rather than *recounting* his experience. He moves to discussion of the issues in terms of statistics and pragmatics without realising that these techniques are unwittingly manipulative. Just because they are no longer 'subjective' or 'abstract', as was the discussion following part one, it certainly doesn't follow that their grounds and assumptions are somehow 'true'. The final chapter indicates the unreliability of this stance by underscoring the second-hand nature of the experience and the narrator's essentially trivial understanding of the issues. The writing suggests that the content of what is said is of less importance than the process of the narrator's understanding.

Down and Out in Paris and London is an uneven fiction, but one that illustrates the movement of all Orwell's writing towards greater interaction between reader and writer. The narrative is uneven particularly because the second half concludes far more ambivalently than the first: as if the first half reveals his conventions and prejudices, and so in the second he attempts his famous 'plain style' for the first time. Yet he concludes by being obviously dissatisfied with the limitations of that same 'plain style', limitations which derive from a lack of explicit stance.

The concerns of *Down and Out in Paris and London* with language and literature as ways of establishing stance, either of interaction or of the isolated tautology of dominator and dominated, are further developed in *Burmese Days* not only as a theme, but also as an aspect of the narrator-and-character relationship.[6] This relationship is presented within a conventional, authorial structure that the writer foregrounds through pointing his ironic comments. From the start the narrator is shown observing and typifying, fixing characters into a prejudice. In the opening scene a Burmese official, U Po Kyin, is presented by an authoritative, ironic voice as a man who sees spiritual life in terms of success, and is surrounded with ludicrous images of food such as 'satin praline' clothes and more ominously, a shape 'swollen with the bodies of his enemies'.[7] Yet the reader is alerted to the difference between narrator and character, because the former thinks in words and the latter in'pictures'. All these details are a translation. The reader reacts more directly to the official's reported speech yet this too is a translation from the Burmese: when he shifts into English he develops 'the base jargon of the Government offices ...' The contrast in communication – within the character and between the character and the narrator – indicates the concern with the elusiveness of language that the writing will pursue.

The authoritative irony that the narrator initially uses asks the reader to make judgments according to unspoken but understood assumptions. Just because the narrator does not have to make these clear, his presentation may appear balanced, and it is all too easy for the reader to forget those underlying assumptions and fall into the trap of accepting the proffered prejudices. The first person that the main character, Flory, meets is Westfield the District Superintendent of Police. Westfield is described with 'his hands in the pockets of his shorts', speaking with a catalogue of boys' magazine epithets: the archetypal sahib, made ludicrous with 'abnormally' thin calves and eyes too far apart. And there is the casual observation that 'Nearly everything he said was intended for a joke', where the word 'intended' indicates the continual failure of his sense of humour. All of this typifies him, makes him into a comic character that many readers would recognise: but in order to recognise that comedy, one has to enter into the conventions on which it is based. One is led to criticise the man (albeit gently), but to do so within the terms of the world he represents.

The analogical point being made is that this is Flory's central dilemma, and awareness of the authoritative irony of the narrator makes it possible for the reader to experience it at first hand. But the narrator also attempts other voices. During an incident where Flory goes off into the jungle to work out his confusions, we discover that he cannot do so effectively in language but only through the direct action of casting off his corrupt life and swimming in a pool. He literally loses his way, and when he returns he has regained his perspective. At the same time the narrator takes on the burden of expression for him in an observing voice. During the experience the narration gradually detaches itself from Flory's frustration and moves into distanced observation of colour, shape and sound. As it does so the reader follows Flory's own gradual detachment, yet the expression of it is strictly the narrator's. When Flory does overtly verbalise he says 'Alone, alone, the bitterness of being alone!'; the melodrama clashing sentimentally with the restraint of the observation. Later the narrator takes on a voice of commentary that re-phrases Flory's melodramatic sigh into a different mode: one that could possibly look at and assess the basic issues and assumptions. He says:

> Since then each year had been lonelier and more bitter than the last. What was at the centre of all his thoughts now, and what poisoned everything was the ever bitterer hatred of the atmosphere of imperialism in which he lived. For as his brain developed – you cannot stop your brain developing, and it is one of the tragedies of the half-educated that they develop late, when they are already committed to some wrong way of life – he had grasped the truth about the English and their Empire.

Because this commenting voice of the narrator can find expression for Flory's predicament the narrator can go on to examine it, to discuss the social and political dimensions, the enclosed worlds of individual and public despotism that are both generated by and yet also maintain the imperial rule in Burma.

While Flory is unable to express himself, he is aware of the need to do so, to discuss and interact in the way that the commenting voice makes possible. His relationship with

Elizabeth Lackersteen is a desperate attempt at communication, but their private worlds can only touch through the mingling of a superficial vocabulary which restricts itself to speaking of the 'beastly' weather. On the occasions that he does break through to her, she rejects his individual world. In doing so she not only undermines the bases for his escape into this world, which have been constructed in isolation and which cannot stand criticism, but also points to its corruption. Flory has always been able to pretend that he lived cleanly and differently in his secret world, away from the compromises of the public sphere. However, it is impossible to exist without some contact with the public, and Elizabeth's presence highlights those moments of conflicting contact, focusing on them as the source of Flory's ambiguity and confusion. But Flory is not completely enclosed. He comes to recognise the corrupting nature of his escape, yet can see no alternative except to conform to the escapes offered by the public.

The split between the melodramatic and the detailed approach that distinguishes Flory from the narrator is similar to that between the initial narrator and the second narrator who is learning, in the earlier work. Turning back one or two years to the short story 'The Spike' one finds an interesting development in narrative technique. The narrator of 'The Spike' over-reacts using melodramatic vocabulary and sentimental description. The governor of a spike is referred to in *Down and Out* as being 'renowned as a tyrant', but in the short story he is 'a devil ... a tartar, a tyrant, a bawling, blasphemous, uncharitable dog'.[8] In the latter story, the tramps 'shuffled in' to the house, which is itself 'gloomy and chilly' as if part of a gothic horror tale. The narrator distinguishes himself from the tramps as a 'gentleman', but in contrast with the same distinction in the longer fiction he does not make it clear that no one usually notices his difference. This gives rise to the generally patronising and condescending air of the short story writer.

Underlining the lack of sympathy or connection between the earlier narrator and the tramps is a clear difference in vocabulary. The language is literary, using similes such as 'looking like the corpse of Lazarus' or the comment that his 'spirit soared far away, in the pure aether of the middle

classes.' This narrator is longwinded and officiously explanatory, using large numbers of adjectives and excessively complicated constructions. In contrast, the narrator of *Down and Out* is more concise, straightforward and colloquial. And whereas the tramps are allowed to tell their stories in the later version, pointing up their world of self-enclosure, these anecdotes in the earlier version are merely dismissed as outrageous.

While 'The Spike' does evidence clear reporting of dialogue and occasional succinct phrasing, it is written overwhelmingly as if to ingratiate the writer with his magazine audience. It is a game, an adventure story, closely paralleling the approach to the French slum of the initial narrator of the novel. That it has so much in common with the style of the initial narrator, and that it also contains scenes identical with those in the second section of the novel, indicates that the narratorial change in the latter part of *Down and Out* is purposeful and necessary. But it also suggests that Flory's similar vocabulary and observation is unreliable. 'Why I Write' noted that *Burmese Days* probably came the closest to the early 'purple passage' aims of the writer, yet it may also be read as self-criticism of those aims. It conveys the message that melodrama, cliché and the language of the public are only effective modes of expression in the short-term. They leave you enclosed, with no way of relating to what lies outside.

The main technique in *Burmese Days* is a study of language: of how far the vocabulary and constructions of each character measure up to or deviate from the officialese, the slang and the stereotyped expression. Apart from Flory, the only characters who have specific problems in saying what they mean are Mrs Lackersteen, Elizabeth's aunt, and Verrall, who for a time becomes Elizabeth's boyfriend. Mrs Lackersteen's problem arises from her complete restriction to public language; her communication becomes a standard that other characters adapt to their own mode of officialese, but which isolates her within its barriers. Verrall on the other hand is anarchic; he uses virtually no public language at all. But whereas Flory's anarchism simply drives him to suicide because he cannot realise his individual world within the public, Verrall is a member of the ruling class. Unlike ordinary members of

society he can live out his fantasies in actual life for he has physical and social power. Here, change can only occur through force from the ruler or from within the system itself. This despotism, this tautology of dominator and dominating, and the democracy from which it derives, maintains itself by denying the possibility of an alternative, by discounting the possibility for discussion and commentary outside the conventional forms of expression. What Flory fails to recognise is that although he appears to be trapped within a language that offers no alternatives, he could still engage in the self-examination of his individual world that the narrator's commentary implies is needed.

These enclosed worlds are very much a part of the authority and autonomy of the novel. While the writer is directly criticising the social and political, he is also commenting on writing that imposes upon its reader. On a thematic level *Burmese Days* offers no solutions, but its structure explicitly indicates commentary and active discussion as alternatives. And within the relationship of reader and writer there lies the implicit commentary of the writing which suggests not just that authorial novels have no right to impose, but that readers have choice of activity. Flory's suicide is often condemned because it is seen as an indication of the negativity of thematic aspects in the book, yet it has a far more valuable side to it.[9] Instead it may be read as the culmination of a passive, victimised and dominated reading of his political situation. If you condemn Flory's suicide in this way, you also condemn all passive readings of the book. Here there is the beginning of a shift of emphasis away from the extraordinary power of the duality of *defining* or *being defined* by, of dominating and dominated, to a recognition of possible alternatives. Hence the difference between the controlling ironies of the initial narrator and the open, more extensively constructed and varied narration of commentary. But it is not yet explicit, and it is a drawback in the writing not to have moved far enough out of the authorial stance that it criticises.

These tentative criticisms of the autonomy of the naturalistic novel are more fully explored in *A Clergyman's Daughter* where the writing is disastrous in terms of the generic expectations of the reader. Nor is the writer particularly generous to the

reader: the experimentation is far too controlled. However, at the same time, what is being attempted is a variety of narrator and character relationships that provide analogies not only for the interaction between individual and public but also for that between writer and reader.

At the start of the book the reader finds Dorothy, the clergyman's daughter of the title, imprisoned in a series of social, sexual and religious stereotypes. The process of the book through its five distinct parts is to present her education in the recognition of the delusive assumptions she lives by. She speaks in a mixture of colloquialism and cliché, stirring herself into action with hearty girls'-school exhortations.[10] The narrator's voice is, by contrast, more observing, less hectic and makes use of far wider vocabulary. As the narratorial voice emerges it becomes apparent that it has many authorial features. If the narrator is not making judgments he is usually reinforcing prejudices with the presentation of accepted stereotypes or the use of unquestioning irony. Nearly every character but Dorothy herself is caricatured through a generalised commentary that leaves nothing to counteract the narrator's opinion, so that he simply voices the conclusions that his presentation has already made obvious. The relationship between narrator and character in Part One is strictly authorial and reflects the closed world of authority presented in the fiction.

Under extreme pressure from her work and situation, Dorothy breaks down. She suddenly loses her memory and 'comes to' on a street corner somewhere in a large city. What the writer has provided is a situation in which the character has no previous assumptions; she must reconstruct herself, her language and her history. At the same time, the narrator is not allowed to interfere with the process. He tries to speak as Dorothy sees, as far as possible without bias. He moves into the past historical tense, a reported past which clearly represents his function. There is far more use of dialogue and less of the dominating, generalised voice that controlled and spelt out the reader's reactions. This stance dwells on precision of detail, qualification of description and explanation, rather than judgment, and is similar to the narrative voice in the second half of *Down and Out in Paris and London*: the 'plain prose style'

of 'factual' documentary is again being attempted.

However, Dorothy's resumption of history, language and self in this part of the book belies the possibility of any such 'neutral' presentation. Her first realisation is that language exists outside her; more strictly, that an ideology of language surrounds and defines her. Once she recognises this she becomes 'aware of *herself* ... discovered her separate and unique existence'. The use of words represents a set of assumed rules, an ideology that is basic to man's concept of everything else he views. Awakening to that use re-establishes a past in all the assumptions it carries, and choosing to use words in this way places one irretrievably within the bounds of the history that that use signifies. Just so, the narrator's voice, for all its limited self-questioning, carries the weight of an ideology with it. But it is very easy to take these assumptions for granted, and that is exactly what, under the weight of physical exhaustion, Dorothy does. She 'accepted everything' and was 'far too tired to think', and so becomes again one of the unconsciously dominated. When her memory returns fully, she tries to return to her old life, but because she is not actively taken back, she becomes locked into the passive structure of her new life, reduced to the escape of reading magazines that become 'strangely, absorbingly interesting'.

The third part of the book consists of a scene of down-and-outs keeping company in Trafalgar Square for the night. These people, and Dorothy with them, are at the bottom of the pile. Completely passive and of no use to society because they are not even aware of their domination by it, they have stepped outside the tautological world of individual and public fantasy, into an entirely private, anarchic world of their own. Almost by corollary, the narrator is detached and external, at first presenting only the dialogue of the beggars; but as Dorothy becomes part of their world, finds out its conventions and sinks passively into them, the narration resumes some of its observing familiarity and its air of report.

Dorothy has moved from the unwitting compromise of her early life, to the compromises induced first by physical and then by mental exhaustion. While compromise of some kind is shown to be necessary and although it is made clear that exhaustion 'stuns' one, confuses the real with the unreal and

makes it almost impossible to act in any way at all, in each case Dorothy is in part responsible for her situation because she has entered that compromise. In Part Four a *deus ex machina* in the form of a rich uncle is provided to get her out of the situation; she returns to civilisation, to the public world of recognised authority and goes to work in a school. For the first time in her life she has both the awareness and the energy not merely to compromise but to participate actively in the life around her, and she does so. The girls' magazine vocabulary slips away, she observes and learns, creating an active identity.

At the same time the narrator becomes far more involved with the character. Many of the techniques of the narrator in Part One are taken up once more but with far greater openness about the inbuilt limitations they carry. For example, caricature again abounds, but this time it is a very obvious use of stereotype. The names are almost epithets: the alcoholic Miss Strong, earnest Miss Beaver and incompetent Miss Allcock. Mrs Creevy, the hypocritical and grasping headmistress, is presented as an out-and-out caricature of all that is wrong with the private school system. But the important thing is that the central character is shown to be aware of the caricatured nature of these people. It alerts her to deficiencies within the school system and she is able to assess the situation and develop an active role in how she thinks it should work.

However her new approach to teaching, which is based on '*making* something instead of merely learning', is stopped by the head mistress who tells her that she must educate by memorisation and rote-learning, thus preserving the social status quo. And Dorothy capitulates: she prostitutes herself to fulfil someone else's fantasy of education. Creevy even tells her how to worship, and it is in the comparison between religious authority and Creevy's educational despotism that Dorothy begins to understand the nature of her dilemma. The dangers of complete personal freedom have been underlined, not only by the negative anarchy of the beggars in Trafalgar Square, but also by the vulnerability of that freedom, by its potential for control in the freedom of Creevy to dominate her in the name of an anonymous public. Dorothy comes to think that it is 'better to follow in the ancient ways, than to drift in rootless freedom'.

In the fifth and final part of the book she returns to her father and resumes her duties, but this time with an awareness of the domination involved. The conflation throughout much of this part between the narrator's and character's voice reinforces this awareness as the reader watches the commentary taking place in Dorothy's mind rather than being expressed for her, and the final pages of the book present her assessing mind reaching its compromise. Yet while we have learned the need for compromise we have also learned the need for continual reassessment. At the end, the narrator tells us that Dorothy's final compromise is not yet 'consciously' formulated, and the result is a highly unsatisfactory ending. If it had not been for the careful and extensive education that the reader is put through in this novel, one could simply take Dorothy's compromise as it stands. But the entire movement of learning by both character and reader contradicts her express conclusions. The problem may lie in the fact that, though the writer has withdrawn the comforts and escapes of permanent compromise from the reader, the alternatives are ambiguous and diffuse because the narrator is cut out of consideration. Despite the blatantly different voices that the narrator takes on, and which do involve the reader in evaluating the issues, the final conflation of narrator with character leaves one with no way to assess the basis for his commentary. As Orwell was later to say, the one thing wrong with a first person novel was that it made commentary impossible; the reader could never adequately evaluate the stance of the writing.

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* the narrator and character are carefully separated from the start. The narrator reveals his prejudices by relating the novel closely to the topics of literature, literary clichés, and the way one goes about writing. And here the narrative ethos is directly related to the literary ethos of the writer and more explicitly to the facades through which the individual relates to the public. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* makes explicit the process of a mind that escapes by giving the prose over to the main character, Gordon Comstock, at the beginning. The character starts with a voice that types, generalises, uses conventions and pretences, and which rationalises from incorrect grounds. By contrast, the narrator is more observing, he generalises only after going into

detail, concentrating on concrete particulars; he also undercuts, qualifies and places his own statements in an ironic perspective that yields even-handed judgements. Yet the interaction between the two very different voices, the one being escapist and enclosed and the other more open and active, is often very close.

Throughout the first chapter Gordon's mind ranges over a series of issues as he muses on a few lines of his own pessimistic verse: books, advertisements, the state of civilisation and money. He condemns 'the extinct monsters of the Victorian age,'[11] and although he is at first aware that his condemnation arises because 'the mere sight of them brought home to him his own sterility,' he passes this off with yet more sweeping generalisations that reduce all such questions to money. Later classifications of literature as 'dead stars' and 'damp squibs', with only the occasional writer like Lawrence or Joyce rising above the abysmal level, are revealed as devices to provide further justification for his own book 'Mice' having been remaindered after the sale of one hundred and fifty-three copies.

Initially in contrast with the pessimism of his attitude to literature is the 'goofy optimism' of the advertisements across the street from the bookshop where Gordon works. The slogans are established by a series of repetitions on Gordon's part as he looks at them 'mechanically'; yet even these 'pink vacuous faces' become distorted through Gordon's mind. The movement is associational, beginning with the 'rat-faced' man in the Bovex advertisement who is turned into 'Modern man as his masters want him to be. A docile little porker, sitting in the money-sty ...', and culminating at the end of the chapter in the 'humming of aeroplanes and the crash of the bombs' that Gordon hopes will destroy the civilisation that he sees.

To Gordon money makes possible both literature and advertisements. Given life ruled by a money ethic, they both reflect back a meaninglessness that leaves his modern world empty and ripe for destruction. Yet the process by which he arrives at these conclusions is superficial. They are generated by a mind flitting unthinkingly from associated image to associated image. Gordon's mind works the way the advertisements do; both create types, present clichés and

invent desirable fictions. They and he manipulate logic to invent a world in which people can evade responsibility. Gordon, like Flory, is trapped in a personal world of escape that can only wait passively for the destruction of what lies outside it, rather than envisage anything positive.

In direct contrast the narrator's mind is more detached and prosaic, slightly ironic, and while generalising does so without caricature. The balance is made possible by the history the narrator provides for each character or event, and the history he provides for Gordon's life that establishes the distanced backdrop for Gordon's private attempts to escape. The narrator is not given to clichés, and he tries fully to explain situations, pointing wherever possible to the faults in the reasoning that lies behind them. The narrator knows his account cannot be absolute; it must be 'as the biographers say', fictionalised history. Throughout the chapter on Gordon's history the narrator indicates his stance in relation to Gordon, as someone who understands why the character has created his personal escapist world, and because of that can provide a perspective on it. While Gordon ignores the fact that his attempt to evade compromise is in itself a compromise, the narrator's voice is that of someone aware of the compromise.

And it is to the question of compromise that the external issues of money, civilisation, literature and advertising are relevant. Money is the ultimate compromise of Gordon's life. He wants to escape it, yet he can only escape it fully through having it. The history he is provided with hints at Gordon's background in Victorian materialism and the possible reasons for his obsession; but whatever the cause he wants to escape the money-world, reject the belief that 'Money is what God used to be. Good and evil have no meaning any longer except failure and success.'

The economic compromise is directly parallel to that between poetry and advertising. Gordon, while working highly successfully on advertisements, was able to produce a book of poetry. The poetry was made possible by that compromise. But having written it he leaves the firm. The key point is that he does not especially want to write, but thinks that it will get him 'out of the money-world'. Literary 'taste' may also simply be personal habit, and Gordon watches this in action in the

bookshop where he goes to work. He suggests that the woman who prefers Galsworthy to Ethel M. Dell is neither better nor worse than her friend who prefers the opposite. Taste is often socially condoned selection, satisfied by similarly self-enclosed worlds. He and Rosemary, his girlfriend, discuss the weakness of 'Burne-Jones maidens', 'Dickens heroines', 'Rackham illustrations' and James Barrie's fantasies. These artists are as able to stupefy the mind, prettify and make acceptable the world they present, as the romances and adventures that satisfy the library-goers.

Later, just like Dorothy, Gordon tries to find solace in the magazines, comics and twopenny newspapers of the sordid little library he is reduced to managing after he leaves the bookshop. They are ' "escape literature" ... Nothing has ever been devised that puts less strain on the intelligence.' The narrator notes that in this state Gordon thinks he is in the 'safe soft womb of the earth', 'failure and success have no meaning', and he lies beyond responsibility. Tied up in the ambiguities is the importance not of compromise but of one's attitude toward it. In the same way advertisements, which are initially held up against literature, are later directly compared with the effect of Burne-Jones maidens. Each has its skilful and involving aspect, something that Gordon only understands at the end of his attempted escape into low-life, and which makes possible his return to advertising.

The compromise in literary terms is not between good and bad taste, but between an involving or a mindlessly accepting attitude to writing. The writer may see some need for compromise at some time, in some areas, but if he goes ahead and produces an active participatory writing this is of little practical importance. Similarly, there is a responsibility on the reader not to read as if all assumptions were being reinforced, but actively to assess and reassess them. Gordon comes to read the trashy novelettes with the ironic emphasis of '*ro*mances', rather than as mindless escape. Irony indicates discrepancies, and the narrator's early irony points to the character's evasiveness and denial of discrepancy. When Gordon takes up the ironic voice at the end of the book, the irony lies in the reading of irony itself for here its conscious use by the character indicates not Gordon's evasiveness but his awareness

of compromise. Immediately one has an indication of his change of attitude. He has to discard his enclosed, womb-like world before he can break the vicious circle that unconscious compromise imposes on people. Unconscious compromise is utterly selfish. It is entirely private and makes impossible public communication, genuine interaction with an external world. But having reached this conclusion, there are no guarantees for the reader. Gordon may give way to the escape into domesticity, and the irony become negative. Again, it is not the compromise that matters but one's attitude toward it. The mutually exclusive voices of narrator and character have to continue to engage the reader. Orwell is not providing specific answers, but a stance toward activity.

A major topic of these early works is indeed the complexity of the interdependence of dominated and dominator. But Orwell is fully aware of the complexity. He portrays the self-perpetuating, often vicious circle at work in social, religious and sexual spheres, and makes explicit analogies with the linguistic and the literary. But the complexities of these topics are not overtly resolved. To do so would be to perpetuate the problem by moving into an authorial stance that imposed upon the reader. Instead, through the direct analogies with writing, Orwell tries to suggest in the changing structure of his narrator-character relationships the value of establishing a clear stance for the narrator. This goes hand in hand with the more fundamental need to provide a practical text in which reader and writer meet and engage, for by clarifying the stance of the narrator the reader has a basis from which evaluation and assessment may proceed.

Notes

1 S. Orwell and I. Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 1, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 23. Referred to hereafter as '*CEJL*'.

2 See for example Tom Hopkinson, *George Orwell*, London, 1954, p. 7; L. Brander, *George Orwell*, London, 1954, pp. 210-2; or A. Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left*, New Haven and London, 1974, p. 147.

3 For example F. Gloversmith, 'Changing Things: Orwell and Auden', in *Class, Culture and Social Change*, Brighton, 1980, in which he says that

Orwell was unable to cope with presenting the working classes. Hence he 'types' characters in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as in his early novels. But this observation is used to denigrate the later work, and misses the point that types are used specifically so that readers should recognise the injustice of their limitations.

4 See the introductory chapter of L. Hunter, *George Orwell: The Search for a Voice*, Milton Keynes, 1984, for a detailed account of this background.

5 George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 6.

6 See for example R. Lee, *Orwell's Fiction*, Notre Dame, 1969, which proposes that *Burmese Days* is primarily about the study of communication.

7 George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, Harmondsworth, 1982, p. 14.

8 *CEJL*, Vol. 1, p. 58.

9 See for example T. Eagleton, 'Orwell and the Lower Middle-Class Novel' in R. Williams (ed.), *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, 1974, where he comments on Flory's 'passive compromise'. He recognises Orwell's complexity but leaves little place for the reader's interaction with the text.

10 George Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 5.

11 George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Harmondsworth, 1980, p. 12.

Andy Croft

Worlds Without End Foisted Upon The Future – Some Antecedents Of Nineteen Eighty-Four

1. 'The Ultimate Family Gift Book of the Year'

Not another essay on *Nineteen Eighty-Four?* Readers may be forgiven if their enthusiasm for the novel has faded of late. 1984 began with a six-part TV biography of Orwell, a televised dramatisation of life on Jura, and countless TV discussion programmes, profiles and chat-shows, all acutely conscious that this was *the* year. At the time of writing there is a film of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* currently in production, starring John Hurt; the National Theatre has just presented its controversial version of *Animal Farm*; and the RSC have bought the rights to *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Earlier in the year the Barbican ran a 'Thought Crimes' exhibition, and Orwell now sits at his typewriter in Madame Tussauds – while something from *Star Wars* looks over his shoulder. There is a rock album by Rick Wakeman in the shops, a top-ten single ('Somebody's Watching Me'), an as-yet unperformed musical and two operas. You can buy T-shirts announcing, according to taste, either 'Big Brother is Watching You' or 'Doublethink About It'. Wigan Pier and the down-and-outs in Paris and London have all recently been revisited in print. There can be few national weekly and monthly magazines, daily and local papers, that didn't carry articles about the novel and its author this year. From *Marxism Today* to *Encounter* and the *Barclaycard Magazine*, from the *Morning Star* to the *Daily Telegraph* and the