

George Orwell and
the Radical Eccentrics
INTERMODERNISM IN LITERARY LONDON



Justin Bluemel



GEORGE ORWELL AND THE RADICAL
ECCENTRICS: INTERMODERNISM IN
LITERARY LONDON



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Introduction

In the Space between Modernisms George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics

George Orwell enthusiasts remember 1949 as the year *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published. That year also marked the appearance of another book, Stevie Smith's *The Holiday*. Smith had tried for years to find a publisher for this novel, and the typescript shows how she turned what had been a "war novel" into a "post-war novel" by making some simple alterations. Like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Holiday* evokes the landscape of an exhausted, bombed-out London, but unlike Orwell's last, most famous book, Smith's last novel identifies this terrain with the 1940s and populates it with thinly disguised versions of her wartime friends and associates. Celia Phoze, the novel's narrating heroine and one of Smith's fictional alter egos, tells us that the present time of the novel is "a year or so after the war," a period that defies easy description because it functions as a space between the known sociopolitical realities of war and peace. Celia's uncertainty about how to describe the period in which she lives is akin to critics' uncertainty about how to place Smith's novel among the literary periods and categories typically used to describe writing of the prewar, war, and immediately postwar years. I call this kind of writing "intermodernism" and begin to describe its qualities, ambitions, and contexts in the following pages, using chapters on Orwell, Smith, Mulk Raj Anand, and Inez Holden—their work and records of their intertwining lives—as supporting case studies. This book begins with Celia's words in *The Holiday*, "It cannot be said that it is war, it cannot be said that it is peace, it can be said that it is post-war," because

they suggest a discomfort with the most common categories of national history and politics that is akin to the discomfort literary critics experience when working with Smith's and Orwell's writing (13). How to define, analyze, legitimize, and publicize the body of English literature to which *The Holiday* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contribute, of which "it cannot be said that it is modernism, cannot be said that it is postmodernism"? How to champion study of a kind of writing grounded in the experiences of England's working-class and "working middle-class" cultures that does not fit the familiar frameworks deployed by scholars of Bloomsbury experimentalism or Auden's generation, of revolutionary or reactionary prose, of Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, or Beckett?

Reading works by Orwell, Smith, Anand, and Holden should lead to these big questions about literary criticism and history, but will also inspire more modest inquiries. What critical language can explain the connections between Orwell's early works of the 1930s and the international triumphs of his later works of the 1940s?¹ What categories can illuminate the connections between Orwell's reputedly unique and solitary accomplishment and the writings of his friends and colleagues? And if such connections across decades and between writers can be documented, how to adapt an existing critical vocabulary so this undervalued body of writing will attract more critical attention?²

Intermodernism is my answer to these questions. Orwell (or rather "Orwell") appears at the forefront of this book's title and enterprise because his extraordinary reputation, still thriving outside the frameworks of modernism or postmodernism, is the most obvious challenge to existing literary-critical language.³ Love him or hate him (I do a bit of both), Orwell is a cultural figure of the greatest importance whose vigorous, polemical prose has always demanded attention. Orwell functions as this book's charismatic figurehead, symbolically organizing its argument about the possible advances and current limitations of scholarship on mid-twentieth-century English literature. But the real argument of the book is built out of analyses of the literature and interrelated personal and political histories of Smith, Anand, and Holden, all of whom Orwell befriended in the 1930s or early 1940s. Although few of Orwell's readers will recognize the names of Smith, Anand, and Holden, together the four writers make up a small group that I label the "radical eccentrics."⁴ Challenging the myth of Orwell's solitary genius, my study explores the implications for literary history of Orwell's alliances with two marginalized English women and one Marxist, anti-imperialist Indian man as they all tried to launch and sustain their literary careers in 1930s and 1940s London.⁵

I might just as well have labeled this group of radical eccentrics "dissenters and mavericks," the title of Margery Sabin's book on English-language

authors who wrote about India between 1765 and 2000. While Sabin's concerns might seem irrelevant to all but the second chapter of this study (on the intermodern English writings of Mulk Raj Anand), the introduction to her study provides a helpful primer on the difficulties of defending a literary project that values cultural and historical meanings as much as aesthetic ones.⁶ "Dissent," like "eccentric" and especially "radical," is a term that draws attention to those cultural-historical values, but then demands qualification because its meaning is so fluid. For Sabin, such fluidity means pointing out at the beginning of her book that,

[S]ince Indian independence, the distinction between orthodoxy and dissent has shifted from decade to decade, depending also on where one stands and on whether one is male or female. The trauma of Partition and the rise of religious fundamentalism, state authority, and feminist protest, together with the mixed loyalties of Indians and Pakistanis living in what is now being called the Indian Diaspora, make any single honor role of postcolonial dissenters impossible to devise. (3)

For me, it means pointing out that "radical" is a weighted term that slides closer or further away from what are perceived as centrist or moderate political views depending on whether one is sympathetic or hostile to pacifists, suffragettes, workers, Communists, colonials, or Jews. Writers of 1930s and 1940s London, modernists and intermodernists, witnessed with everyone else in England the birth of the Peace Pledge Union, a female electorate, the hunger marches, the growth of the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Popular Front, the Gandhi movement, and Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. And in 1945 they could celebrate or bemoan the victory of Clement Attlee's Labour Party amid the ruins of London. These historical markers only begin to hint at the diversity of radical positionings and persons it would be possible to identify with the period.

The shifting criteria for identifying English dissenters or radicals during the years Orwell came to fame make it easier to describe what an eccentric radical is *not* (i.e., he or she is not a modernist, not a postmodernist) rather than describe exactly what a radical eccentric *is*. Sabin again provides a model. Confronting both the necessity and limitations of literary-critical labels, she first describes her project in negative terms: it is not "a role call of heroic dissenters in the history of British colonialism in India" nor is it "an inclusive survey of writings critical of the British-Indian relationship" (3). Conceding that her study has conspicuous omissions, Sabin invites others to "propose additional and better examples of dissenters and mavericks or to define the concept of dissent differently" (3). While *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics* is not a response to this invitation, the fact

that two of its primary figures, Orwell and Anand, could be central to such a survey, and that the two others, Smith and Holden, populate their fictional Englands with Indians, Jews, and other outsiders, tells us something about the potential importance of the radical eccentrics to diverse kinds of studies on twentieth-century English writing. One of the lessons Sabin's book offers is that Orwell can lead scholars of modernism, the Thirties, or the Forties to new projects that will challenge who or what matters to English twentieth-century literature. Smith, and to a greater extent Anand and Holden, are three of the many English dissenters and mavericks of the 1930s and 1940s who wait, just beyond Orwell, for discovery.⁷

This book claims that certain non-modernist texts of the 1930s and 1940s can be read to best advantage as cultural products of a single intermodernist impulse or movement rather than as products of distinct periods, neatly but arbitrarily separated by the beginning and ending years of two decades.⁸ Without the category of intermodernism it is almost impossible to convey the sense of non-modernist cultural activity that endured throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s to which Orwell, Smith, Anand, and Holden contributed. The critical discussions that have evolved around study of other twentieth-century literary movements, including those signaled by the phrases Bloomsbury, the Auden Generation, the Thirties, the Forties, interwar and war literature, are certainly still relevant for studies like this one, but the addition of intermodernism to these preexisting discussions promises to bring exciting new materials and approaches to scholarship on the period. As much as critics will bemoan introduction of yet another label into critical discourse, intermodernism points out a new way across the gap between discursive territories signified by familiar labels.⁹

We need look no further than George Orwell's literary career and critics' treatments of it to understand the advantages intermodernism offers scholars of twentieth-century English literature. A survey of criticism on Orwell shows that few scholars choose to describe his literary work in terms of the dominant cultural movements of his time. He is rarely "Orwell, of the Auden Generation" or "Orwell, the World War II writer." With a literary career extending roughly from 1933 to 1949, and with books and essays ranging from discussion of the Spanish Civil War to freedom of speech or anti-Semitism in wartime, Orwell is of course of the Thirties and equally of the Forties. But Orwell's critics seem to resist describing him in these terms because they encourage a view of the literary-historical Orwell as a divided man, "of" two separate decades, and such a view provides no solution to the problem of naming Orwell's place in English literary history.

Those scholars who are uncomfortable describing Orwell as part of the cultural movements signified by the labels the Thirties or the Forties often choose to understand his writings apart from any literary or cultural

movements. (This is not to say that critics have neglected questions about Orwell's political alliances and affiliations. Obviously, quite the opposite is true.) Orwell generally emerges from such studies as a uniquely autonomous writer, the common-man genius, working for the most part outside the society and communities that so concerned him. Ironically, the very figure who is recognized as the most astute analyst and satirist of English political discourse of the 1930s and 1940s appears in critical or biographical literature to be elevated above the people who produced that very discourse. He is "saint" George Orwell, the "wintry conscience of a generation." To habitually represent Orwell as a solitary figure working outside cultural communities or groups underestimates his deep engagement with his various jobs, his political activities, and the friendships, rivalries, and professional ambitions that informed his work. One of this book's goals is to place Orwell within one of his circles of acquaintance and show how the members of this circle, once read in terms of each other, challenge the perspectives of traditional Orwell criticism.

I do not claim that all critical projects on Orwell and the radical eccentrics or all projects on 1930s and 1940s writers should be read within the framework of intermodernism. I do believe that seeking an intermodernist Orwell points us toward potentially innovative approaches to his work and the work of others who do not fit into existing categories. In contrast to modernist writers, for example, intermodern writers tend to have their origins in or maintain contacts with working- or lower-middle-class cultures. As young people, they do not fit into the Oxbridge networks or values that shaped the dominant English literary culture of their time because they have the "wrong" sex, class, or colonial status. As adults they remain on the margins of celebrated literary groups. Intermodern writers tend to hold down regular jobs (soldier, secretary, journalist, factory worker, teacher) to supplement their income from writing. Perhaps as a result, they often write about work. When intermodernists experiment with style or form (as Smith does in *Over the Frontier* or *The Holiday*), their narratives are still within a recognizably realist tradition. They do not often demonstrate that archetypal modernist impulse toward mystic epiphany (Lawrence) or mythic allusion (Joyce or Eliot). This realist bias may be a symptom of the journalist skills many intermodernists developed while writing their more memorable novels, stories, or radio dramas. The intermodernists' social marginalization, financial dependence on jobs and freelance journalism, and debts to realism often resulted in writing that attends to politics, especially politics that may improve working conditions. Salvation or redemption in intermodern texts tends to be pursued through narrative strategies or symbolic influences that are intellectually and culturally available to ordinary, non-elite, working English men and women.

Intermodernism contributes to what F. R. Leavis famously called England's minority culture, but it also cheerfully partakes of and contributes to the mass culture Leavis distrusted.

Intermodernism, like modernism and postmodernism, is best thought of as a kind of writing, discourse, or orientation rather than a period that competes with others for particular years or texts or personalities. I offer intermodernism as a literary-critical compass, an analytical tool or useful guidepost, an attractive neologism that can help scholars design new maps for the uncharted spaces between and within modernisms.¹⁰ Encouraging critics to think in terms of threes—"inter" always forging a connection or bridge between at least two other territories—intermodernism permits a more complex, sensitive understanding of many writers' relations to literary London and mid-twentieth-century English history.

My claim of much of the literature of the 1930s and 1940s for intermodernism is guided by three kinds of thinking. It is on the one hand a strategy of pragmatic, ends-based logic: criticism of modernism, no matter how revised, expanded, and renovated, has always had trouble accounting for the literature of writers associated with the 1930s and 1940s, even "highbrow" writers like Auden, Beckett, or Henry Green. While the "Auden Generation" has gained institutional credit for its distinct contribution to the Thirties, it is typical to find in general accounts of twentieth-century literature the admission that "Modernism and Thirties writing existed in uneasy coalition right through the decade" (Bradbury 211).¹¹ These same studies dutifully acknowledge the writing by men who worked outside of the networks of Oxbridge-educated writers of the 1930s, but then tend to dismiss that writing because it is not dominant. The writing of women of the 1930s—whether by university graduates, workers, or housewives, residents of London or provincial towns, single, married, or widowed, lesbian or straight, radical or conservative, gentile or Jewish—has, until recently, remained entirely extraneous to critical thought. And no one seems to worry at all about the ways in which the separation of the 1940s from "Modernism and Thirties writing" has exacerbated these problems of exclusion.

Instead of discounting nondominant 1930s and 1940s literature or striving to interpret it in ways that accommodate modernist or wartime criteria, this book urges scholars and teachers to value intermodernism in addition to, and at times, above, separate categories of modernism, the Thirties, the Forties, interwar, war, and postwar literature.¹² It seeks to legitimize the nearly invisible but delightfully various forms of interconnected 1930s and 1940s writings—the writing that is not associated with a "particular cadre" of men and institutionalized by a particular cadre of critics (Bradbury 208).

The second kind of thinking that motivates my construction of a category of intermodernism is respect for the theoretical advances of other revisionary critical movements and desire to extend the lessons of those advances to new materials. For decades, feminist and other dissident critics have questioned the traditional lineages of literary history and shapes of university curricula. The impetus to examine the “low” and the “high” (or in my case, what is between the two), to think in terms of text instead of masterpiece, of culture as well as poem, play, and fiction, to question the logic of period by taking “other” genres and sources into consideration—all of these scholarly movements have made research for and publication of this study possible, if not probable.¹³ It is still an awkward kind of project to promote, occupying as it does the spaces in literary criticism and history on the borders of familiar categories and markets (the modernism, postmodernism, Joyce, Woolf, or even Orwell consumer base). But it is precisely the creation of awkwardness, the invitation of a prickly, irritated response, that can generate attention in otherwise preoccupied readers and perhaps inspire them to change their reading habits and critical assumptions.

In order to inspire change, awkwardness or irritation must lead to something pleasurable, and my concern with the pleasures (and displeasures) of reading is the third kind of thinking that has determined the shape of *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics*. Focused on writings by three “ambiguously nonhegemonic” Londoners, this study bets that readers will come to appreciate the special pleasures—the humor, the history, the ambition, or simply the colorful difference of Smith’s, Anand’s, and Holden’s lives and works—once an intermodern lens brings them into focus. It also wagers that Orwell’s extraordinary reputation will make readers more accepting of the underlying premises of this book: that Smith, Anand, and Holden matter for literary history, just as they mattered to Orwell, and that acclimatizing to a vocabulary of intermodernism can help teachers of English literature understand the achievement of the many writers active in 1930s and 1940s literary circles just as it helps them make sense of Orwell’s career. This book shamelessly uses Orwell’s reputation to attract readers, but then contradicts the standard biographical-critical picture by shifting the emphasis to consideration of Smith, Anand, and Holden, immodestly treating them as Orwell’s peers, not his mere satellites.

I have chosen to focus on Smith, Anand, and Holden because their eccentric social positionings enrich our understanding of the history and possibilities of radical English literature in ways that the group’s most powerful and famous radical, Orwell, cannot. I argue that their lives and writings are importantly eccentric and radical not because they are consistently socialist or Communist (they are not), but because they consistently resist inhibiting, often oppressive assumptions about art and ideology—about

standard relations between literary form and sex, gender, race, class, and empire—that dominate English culture at every point of the political spectrum. The common meanings of radical as “socialist or revolutionary” and eccentric as “odd and unconventional” are certainly latent in the phrase “radical eccentrics,” but these meanings are simultaneously too limited and too vague for my purposes. By describing the group as radical eccentrics (and inviting the inverted label of eccentric radicals), I want to bring to mind the spatial and dynamic meanings of each term, the sense of each writer’s peripheral or eccentric position on the borders of multiple literary circles and cultural institutions and the possibility such positioning provides for various unpopular, uncompromising, resistant or radical literary commitments, styles, and movements. The label of radical eccentrics is intended to give these writers the kind of heightened visibility that emerges whenever people form groups and, by emphasizing the fascinating and often admirable differences of this group from the more popular personalities of literary London, help its members gain the kind of attention critics generally reserve for writers whose works more easily accommodate established aesthetic ideals.¹⁴

Such radical eccentricity (and eccentric radicalism) raises compelling questions: How can a non-activist suburbanite like Stevie Smith, conventionally portrayed as a childlike, self-involved poet more interested in tending to her beloved Aunt than involving herself in public activism, provide an alternative model of literary radicalism? Similarly, how can Inez Holden, adventuress and bohemian beauty turned socialist, enlarge our vision of non-Orwellian, anti-Fascist writing? And finally, how does our vision of the crisis-ridden decades of the 1930s and 1940s expand once we analyze these women’s relationships with Anand, who in contrast to Smith and Holden, had always placed his Marxist, nationalist radicalism at the fore of his recognizably political fiction?

Orwell is famously radical in both his liberalism and conservatism, his prominence as a revolutionary English Socialist in the late 1930s to early 1940s and perhaps greater prominence as an anti-Communist voice for Cold Warriors in the late 1940s. Smith, Anand, and Holden, like Orwell at his best, affirm the more utopic impulses of the humanist project of Western democracies, but unlike Orwell their radicalism never leads them to expressions of defeatism, paranoia, or near-total despair. They stay “outside the whale,” resisting as loudly as they can in their very different ways the gross injustices and horrors of their age. No one could reflect on their writings of 1940 and conclude, as Salman Rushdie does of Orwell, that the events of history or health had broken their intellects and spirits or that they had been reduced to constructing and justifying a literary escape-route from the pain of history and consciousness (“Outside” 96). Their careers

show political and aesthetic shifts of emphasis or in Holden's case, a dramatic change of artistic mission, but study of their writings does not suggest, as Rushdie's study of Orwell might, that writers of a radically eccentric literature can only influence English culture if they ultimately endorse the dominant values of that culture.¹⁵

Among the radical eccentrics, Smith is the one who is most likely to be identified with the politics of a dominant culture because she loved her conservative, lower-middle-class suburb of Palmers Green and wrote so admiringly of her "Lion Aunt," a staunch Tory.¹⁶ Yet her fiction challenges some of that dominant culture's most cherished notions about family and gender roles, and is, in many ways, as unsettling and unaccommodating—as radical—as anything written by the others in the group. Smith's radicalism is different from Orwell's, Anand's, or even Holden's because its sources are the intimate details of Londoners' personal relations and domestic lives rather than their public debates about wealth, class, work, war, or empire. Signs of Smith's radical eccentricity can be found in her fictions' daring, nearly libelous representations of her conversations with and impressions of her friends. In *The Holiday*, for example, Smith records a personal history of intermodern Englishness through fictionalized descriptions of Orwell, Anand, Holden, and herself. Given the lack of archival records about two of these figures, Anand and Holden, Smith's novel provides invaluable, contemporary portraits of the writers who lie at the center of the chapters in this book.

Smith's attempt to define the curious reality of the "postwar" in the first chapters of *The Holiday* depends as much on the characters based on Inez Holden and Mulk Raj Anand as it does on the two characters who she based upon the (then) more famous George Orwell. Lopez, an Inez Holden figure, emerges first as the hostess of a wonderfully successful party that nurtures a "quick love-feeling" among its guests despite its regrettable offerings of "spam, ham, tongue, liver-sausage, salad-cream, cherries, strawberries (out of tins), whiskey and beer" (13). Lopez is the necessary antidote to the postwar. She is the healing, comic force that allows the other characters to survive their dreary lives in government bureaucracies, "working in Ministries in Relief, in Relations, on Committees, on Commissions, clearing up, sorting, settling" and "also writing and broadcasting" (13). In decided contrast to the secret sexual and spiritual renewal provided Winston Smith by Orwell's Julia (based some claim on Orwell's second wife Sonia Brownell), Lopez creates a social haven that allows her friends to "take hold of our happiness to make something of it for the moment" (13). The laughter she fosters is both part of and opposed to the sociopolitical reality of the postwar, which in Celia's words "works upon us, we are exasperated, we feel that we are doing nothing, we work long hours, but what is it, eh? so we feel guilty too" (13).

One of the laughing, guilty guests at Lopez's party is Raji, the character based on Mulk Raj Anand, who Celia describes as "the most intelligent Indian in London" (13). To his enduring credit, "Raji makes us laugh" (13). This laughter, like much of the laughter in *The Holiday*, is inspired by the absurdities of contemporary history, the stories generated by responses of marginal, eccentric characters to the powerful political currents that accompany the dismantling of empire. Whether or not Smith's invention of Celia and Lopez's postwar party conversation with Raji is based on real events, the following anecdote conveniently foregrounds this study's concern with the interweaving of laughter and the politics of nation, race, and empire as they were interpreted and acted upon by people living in the bombed-out, imperial center of London:

[Raji] says he was with an English friend and two Indians in a restaurant. The Indians said: "Oh yes, we do not mind white people, of course, but every now and then there is beginning to run this feeling that we do not so much like them. Oh yes, now we are beginning to have to combat this disgusting and so un-free colour sense, but for the fastidious Indian there is for instance the smell of the white person. Yes, heigh-ho, that is how we are now getting."
So we laugh too. (13-14)

So early in the novel, it is not at all clear who or what is comical to Raji or whether he and Celia and Lopez are laughing at the same things. Do they laugh together at the expense of the Indians in the restaurant, at the expense of Raji, or at the expense of people like Celia and Lopez who must finally hear from the Indians haunted by an "un-free colour sense" the unattractive truth about the whiteness of the master race? The hidden content and ambiguous aim of this political laughter guarantee its dissolution, as conversation at the party turns eagerly to gossip about lesbian loves in convent schools. In Celia's words, "The other talk, the history, the politics talk, is fine, too, but so often it falls down, because we are doing nothing, and so we wring our hands, the talk falls down, we are *activistes manqués*, it is Edwin and Morcar the Earls of the North" (14).

Basil Tate, a self-absorbed and gloomy friend who is at Lopez's party, does not suffer Celia's political and ontological doubts lightly. Always looking over or through Celia, he is interested in her male friends and relatives and the political tales they tell. He, along with Celia's mad and murderous cousin, Tom Fox, who broadcasts for the China Section, make up Smith's uncomplimentary fictionalized portrait of George Orwell. As Smith explained to Ian Angus in a 1967 letter, she thought Orwell believed that

girls were a shade anarchic and did not know or care about rules at all, with the undertone, I fancy, that they did not "play the game" . . . [A]ll this comes