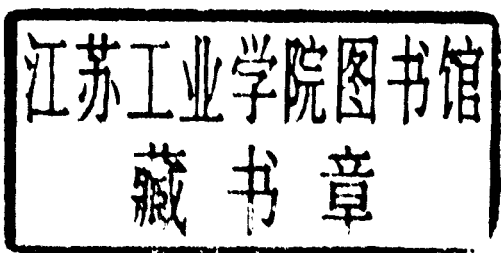
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THE
LANGUAGE
OF
GEORGE ORWELL

—
ROGER FOWLER

The Language of George Orwell

ROGER FOWLER



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Preface

When I was invited to write a study of the language of a writer of particular interest to me, I thought a lot about the choice of a possible subject, and George Orwell suddenly 'clicked'. He is a writer and a political thinker whom I have admired since my student days; he is a tremendously versatile stylist; he not only practises the arts of language, but the central theme in much of his work is language itself; and his interest in language centres on topics which have been my own preoccupations in linguistics: language as a political instrument, as an expression of or an inhibitor of thought, and as a practice which is central to all the workings of society: the media, the formation of history, literature, the ideas and the play of people.

Orwell's political and social analyses have had a profound influence on the way we think, largely thanks to the power and the memorable phrasing of his last two books, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But the language in which he expressed his vision has been largely neglected. While James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, for example, are recognised as having created distinctive and influential linguistic structures for the representation of consciousness, and D. H. Lawrence is seen as having forged a powerful modern romantic style, Orwell is not seen as a stylist, but as a source of political ideas, strikingly worded. In this book I have tried to show, through detailed analysis of his language, how he evolved the distinctive 'Orwellian voice' (which some critics have mentioned, but not analysed). Beyond the personal voice, there is in fact a great diversity of stylistic technique: precise description, striking figurative expression, pastoral, naturalism, surrealism, representation of thought, powerful evocations of violence, a keen eye for the grotesque and an ear for what I have called 'voices of the other', trenchant parody of political styles; finally, quite different from these heightened modes of writing, the purest simplicity of style in the satires of *Animal Farm* and the Newspeak Appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Although I have not consciously attempted to write a history of Orwell's stylistic development, this book follows roughly the sequence of his writing career. I was determined to take his early

fiction and non-fictional writings seriously, not least because the early books, particularly the novels, tend to get short shrift. Most of the techniques of style of his last writings are deployed in lively and effective ways early in his career. It could be argued – though I have not pressed this argument – that there is a fundamental unity to his lifetime's writings, despite their apparent diversity.

This study uses, broadly speaking, the theory and the analytic concepts of the method of 'linguistic criticism' as it has been developed over the past fifteen years or so. That is to say, I not only describe the patterns of language which form Orwell's various styles of writing, but also discuss their functions within the composition of the books and in relation to aspects of the historical context (space permits far less of this than I would have liked). Not only linguistic concepts are used, but also ideas drawn from French and Russian studies of literature and language: particularly in the areas of 'point of view' (focalisation) and 'voices of the other'. I have found the notion of 'heteroglossia', and a cluster of related ideas, originating in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly relevant to Orwell. Being conscious that 'jargon' can be off-putting to the student of literature, I have kept technical terminology to a minimum, and explained such terms as we do need as we go along.

ROGER FOWLER

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For quotations and references to Orwell's works, I have tried to use accessible editions, as follows:

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1 Orwell's Life and Career

The life of George Orwell was packed with activities and experiences. Because many of them are consciously used, and reflected, in his works, literary critics make much reference to his life and opinions. Yet his life history is very complex, even to contradiction, and often obscure: so if some of his writings are to some extent autobiographical, or if they seem to voice his own views on politics and on art, any criticism which relates his works to his life must proceed with care.

It is not the purpose of the present book to detail his life.¹ But in the case of Orwell, some sense of his personal history is relevant to an understanding of his language. From early adulthood, Orwell seems to have experienced his life primarily as the life of a professional writer, a life to be established and developed by the continuous production of texts, by daily practice of the crafts of language, taking precedence over family life and all else. In a sense his life was constructed of words. Through language Eric Blair became George Orwell.

'George Orwell' was a pseudonym adopted with the publication of his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, in 1933. Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on 25 June 1903 at Motihari, Bengal. His father, Richard Walmsley Blair, was an official in the Indian Government's Opium Department; his mother was Ida Mabel Blair, *née* Limouzin. In 1904 Mrs Blair returned to England with Eric and his older sister, Marjorie.² A second sister, Avril, who cared for Orwell in his last years, was born in 1908. After attending a local school, Eric was sent to St Cyprian's preparatory boarding school near Eastbourne in 1911, then went to Eton as a scholar in May 1917 after a term at Wellington College; he left Eton in 1921. He seems to have done little work at Eton, but helped to organise, and wrote for, college magazines. He did not go to university, but served as an Assistant Superintendent of Police with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma (1922-7), resigning his position

2 LANGUAGE OF GEORGE ORWELL

while on leave. In 1940 he wrote 'I gave it up partly because the climate had ruined my health, partly because I already had vague ideas of writing books, but mainly because I could not go on any longer serving an imperialism which I had come to regard as a racket' (*CEJL*, II, 38). The exact state of Blair's health after Burma is unclear, but he was dogged all his life by serious chest conditions, from the pneumonia which hospitalised him in Paris in 1929, bronchitis and pleurisy, to the recurrent tuberculosis which finally killed him in 1950.

From the autumn of 1927 to the winter of 1929 Blair opened himself to ways of life which were not normally accessible to someone of middle-class colonial upbringing: he voluntarily tramped and lived rough, first in London and then in Paris. On his return to England he based himself at his parents' home in Southwold, Suffolk, and taught, tramped and went hop-picking. His low-life experiences are recorded in his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, published in January 1933 by Gollancz under the Orwell pseudonym. *Down and Out* initiates a form of writing which typifies much of Orwell's work, a mixture of documentary, fictionalised autobiography, and general comment. His essays carry this technique remarkably well, and some of the best of them had already been published in 1931. In the period 1931-3 he worked on his 'colonial' novel, *Burmese Days*. This book's evident hatred of colonialism, and its vitriolic portrayal of English and native characters whose originals in Blair's own Burmese days might have been identified, posed problems which were to become familiar: English publishers, nervous of causing political offence, and of libel, refused to take it. But the American publishers Harper published *Burmese Days* in October 1934.

Despite illness (pneumonia had hospitalised him and ended his teaching career in December, 1933), he had been working incredibly hard. By October 1934 he had finished a second novel, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (published in 1935); and in October, 1934, he moved from his parents' house in Southwold, where he had stayed after the episode of pneumonia, to London, working in a bookshop until January 1936, reviewing books and writing *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (published April, 1936). Orwell regarded *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* as his least successful books. The former is a poorly constructed and implausible novel containing such diverse undigested ingredients as a surrealist sequence parodied from

Joyce's *Ulysses* and a section of 'naturalistic' narrative modelled on his hop-picking experiences. *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* also was influenced by *Ulysses*, a copy of which Orwell had acquired in 1933. Bernard Crick helpfully comments that the brief *Ulysses* period shows an appreciation for 'the formal structure of *Ulysses*' (the formal structure of extended narrative was always a problem for Orwell) and 'his growing absorption in the mechanics and craft of fiction'.³ Furthermore, both these 'experimental' novels herald the development of the frustrated, alienated anti-hero, a type of character which had first appeared with John Flory in *Burmese Days* and was to be taken further in the character of George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air* and finally manifested in Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In January 1936 Gollancz commissioned Orwell (presumably on the strength of his earlier achievement in *Down and Out*) to write a book about conditions in the industrial North of England; from the end of January to the end of March he travelled in Wigan, Barnsley and Sheffield, living with families and observing working conditions; in Barnsley he made two trips down coal-mines, an acutely uncomfortable experience for someone so tall. From April 1936 to 1940 he lived at The Stores, Wallington, Hertfordshire, a primitive cottage and shop; on 9 June 1936 he married Eileen O'Shaughnessey. He wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*, based on his northern travels, in 1936 and it was published in March 1937. The first part of *The Road to Wigan Pier* is an excellent example of Orwell's concrete, socially realistic, presentation; the second part is an extended political and autobiographical essay which provoked the hostility of the Left. Orwell did not hesitate to mix genres in the same book.

Another adventure began in December 1936 when Orwell went to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and to observe and write on the war as a journalist; he enlisted in the POUM (United Marxist Workers' Party). Eileen joined him in Spain. Disillusioned with marxism, he transferred to the Independent Labour Party contingent, and in a second spell of active service, he was shot through the throat on 20 May 1937. After his convalescence the Blairs left Spain and returned to Wallington, arriving in early July. The remainder of 1937 was spent in writing his Spanish record, *Homage to Catalonia*, in journalism, and in conflict with the British Left. His publisher, Gollancz, refused *Homage to Catalonia*, but it was published by Warburg in April 1938.

Orwell was now writing and publishing one book per year; this schedule seems to have become a target; if he did not fulfil it, he was anxious. But in 1938 his work was seriously set back by tuberculosis. From March to September he was at a sanatorium in Kent, forbidden to write; then a gift enabled him and Eileen to spend some months in the drier, warmer climate of Morocco, where, working with his customary speed, he drafted *Coming Up for Air*. They returned to England at the end of March 1939, and were at Wallington the next month. *Coming Up for Air* was published in June, and Orwell was working on a book of essays that were to be published in March 1940 as *Inside the Whale*. Orwell had published little else in 1938–9. His two masterpieces were still to come, and they have overshadowed *Coming Up for Air*, in which the Joyce influence was more successfully assimilated than it had been in *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Orwell's hero's thoughts, cast in a stylistically consistent and impressive first-person monologue, convey a politically complex statement about the relationship of the present to the past, highly relevant to Orwell's last and more famous book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The Second World War broke out on 3 September 1939. The patriot Orwell made several attempts to enlist but was medically unfit. He and Eileen moved to London in May 1940. A few essays and reviews appeared in 1940 and 1941, as well as his book *The Lion and the Unicorn*. Orwell had little income, but Eileen worked for the Censorship Department, and later, the Ministry of Food. From August 1941 to November 1943 Orwell had a salaried post as a talks producer in the Indian section of the Eastern service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (an experience which provided seeds for the treatment of propaganda in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). Essays and reviewing continued, for an increasing range of periodicals. Orwell also found a way to play a part in the war effort, working enthusiastically in the Home Guard until his poor health forced him to give it up in late 1943. Also in November 1943, Orwell left the BBC and became literary editor of the magazine *Tribune*, a post he held until February, 1945. His weekly column 'As I Please' for *Tribune* provided an ideal medium for short essays on diverse topics. From 1943 he also reviewed regularly for *The Observer* and for the *Manchester Evening News*. He was now firmly established as a literary journalist and political and social essayist.

In the winter of 1943–44 he wrote his most accomplished book

yet, which was to establish his reputation and, with vast sales, secure his finances at last: the allegorical political satire, *Animal Farm*. English publishers – Gollancz, Cape and Faber – found its attack on Soviet Russia and Stalinism too hot to handle in the context of the war. Not until October, 1944 did Orwell find a publisher, Secker & Warburg. *Animal Farm* was finally published on 17 August 1945: a first impression of 4500 copies was rapidly sold, followed by a second printing of 10 000 copies, in November.⁴ Orwell became instantly famous. The book was applauded by reviewers and reviled by the Left. In August 1946 it was published in the USA and, as the choice of the American Book of the Month Club, sold over half a million copies.

Meanwhile, Orwell's domestic circumstances changed, at first happily and then tragically. In June 1944 Orwell and Eileen adopted a baby boy, Richard. Eileen gave up work to look after Richard. They remained in London, and Orwell continued with writing and journalism. In February 1945 Orwell was sent to France by *The Observer*. Eileen took Richard to her sister-in-law's house in Stockton-on-Tees in March. She had been ill for several years, and entered hospital in Newcastle for surgery, apparently for a hysterectomy necessitated by fibroids, but there is speculation that she had cancer; she died as she was going under anaesthetic on 29 March 1945, aged 39.

Orwell returned to Europe for about six weeks after the funeral. *Animal Farm* was, as we have seen, published in August 1945. In September he visited Jura, in the Hebrides. On 23 May 1946, he moved to Barnhill, a remote farmhouse on Jura where he was joined by his sister Avril, and by Richard with Orwell's housekeeper, Susan Watson, who had been looking after the boy. Orwell moved between Barnhill and his flat in Canonbury Square in London in 1946 and 1947. In the second half of 1946, as well as writing reviews and essays, he was working on his last novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for which a plan exists dating from late 1943. The first draft was completed by October 1947, but Orwell was increasingly unwell; just before Christmas 1947 he was admitted to hospital near Glasgow with tuberculosis of the left lung. He was in hospital for seven months, but managed to do some writing in the first half of 1948, including redrafting *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, after initially successful treatment with streptomycin. He left hospital in late July 1948, and returned to Barnhill. In the autumn of 1948 he completed his revision

of the novel and, though very weak, retyped it in the second half of November. He realised he was very unwell and was seeking a sanatorium: on 6 January, 1949, he was admitted to a sanatorium at Cranham, in the Cotswold Hills in Gloucestershire.

Orwell was unable to do much more writing, but he corrected the proofs of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in March, and had plans for a new novel. He was highly anxious about the loss of writing time (see *CEJL*, IV, p. 573). His last article, a review of Winston Churchill's *Their Finest Hour*, was published on 14 May 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in June 1949. Orwell became very seriously ill that summer, and was transferred to University College Hospital, London, on 3 September. On 13 October he married Sonia Brownell, whom he had known since 1945. Orwell died on 21 January 1950, aged 46.

2 Preliminaries

THE STYLES OF GEORGE ORWELL

The language of George Orwell makes an intensely distinctive contribution to the character of modern writing in English. Having said that, his reputation perhaps has him in the shadow of some slightly earlier, more obviously 'experimental' modernist writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, who are all known for specific stylistic techniques which have helped to shape modern literature. Joyce and Woolf, for example, developed styles for representing the thoughts and preoccupations of their characters; Joyce is known for inventive word-play and for juxtaposing different styles and even scraps of foreign languages in a linguistic collage, a feature also of some of Eliot's poetry. Lawrence developed a very recognisable, syntactically and metaphorically elaborate language for exploring and commenting on his characters' psyches. In the 1930s, Orwell made his experiments with *avant-garde* techniques, and was not comfortable with them (see Chapters 6 and 8). His goal was truth rather than stylistic impact, and to attain his artistic ambitions he used a variety of ways of writing. But his best work is as individually recognisable and as original in style as that of any of the modernists.

What are the qualities of Orwell's language? We must generalise from a voluminous output in a literary career of only about twenty years, roughly from 1930 until his early death in 1950. Orwell is known popularly for two works of fiction published late in his short life: *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); these are very different from one another stylistically. Previously he had published seven books, from *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) to *Coming up for Air* (1939): some of them fiction, some documentary, and some a mixture of novel, reportage and essay. There are also reviews, essays, journalistic pieces and letters totalling 2200 pages in the collected (but not complete) edition. The four-volume *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* contains many pieces of accomplished and justly popular writing spanning his career, from

'A Hanging' (1931) to 'Politics and the English Language' (1946). As might be expected, we find a range of styles in such a diverse body of writings, but there is one major quality which we experience throughout: the voice of a person, and an unmistakable voice:

The *Ami du Peuple* is a Paris newspaper . . . sold at ten centimes . . . Nothing is abnormal about it except its price.

Nor is there any need to be surprised at this last phenomenon, because the proprietors of the *Ami du Peuple* have just explained all about it, in a huge manifesto which is pasted on the walls of Paris wherever bill-sticking is not *défendu*. On reading this manifesto one learns with pleased surprise that the *Ami du Peuple* is not like other newspapers; it was the purest public spirit, uncontaminated by any base thoughts of gain, which brought it to birth. The proprietors, who hide their blushes in anonymity, are emptying their pockets for the mere pleasure of doing good by stealth. Their objects, we learn, are to make war on the great trusts, to fight for a lower cost of living, and above all to combat the powerful newspapers which are strangling free speech in France. In spite of the sinister attempts of these other newspapers to put the *Ami du Peuple* out of action, it will fight on to the last. In short, it is all that its name implies. ('A Farthing Newspaper', Orwell's first published essay in English, 1928: *CEJL* I, 34-5)

Because of the general revulsion against Allied war propaganda, there has been – indeed there was, even before the war was over – a tendency to claim that [Ezra] Pound was 'not really' a Fascist and an antisemite, that he opposed the war on pacifist grounds, and that in any case his activities only belonged to the war years. Some time ago I saw it stated in an American periodical that Pound only broadcast on the Rome radio when 'the balance of his mind was upset', and later (I think in the same periodical) that the Italian Government had blackmailed him into broadcasting by threats to relatives. All this is plain falsehood. Pound was an ardent follower of Mussolini as far back as the nineteen-twenties, and now concealed it. He was a contributor to Mosley's review, the *British Union Quarterly*, and accepted a professorship from the Rome Government before the war started. . . . His broadcasts were disgusting . . .