Two Irascible Englishmen: Mr. Waugh and Mr. Orwell

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2003 marked the centenary of two of the most influential English authors of the middle years of the twentieth century: Eric Arthur Blair, better known as George Orwell (1903-1950), and Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966). Although the themes and topics they treated now seem dated (the fast, but dim social set of the late 1920s and early 1930s for Waugh; the travails of the working classes during the great slump for Orwell), both authors continue to be widely read today. Orwell remains popular for *Animal Farm* (1945), *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), and to a lesser extent for his essays; Waugh is acclaimed for *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and his World War II trilogy, *Sword of Honor* (1965).

What made these two different individuals so influential when so many of their contemporaries have been forgotten? Who, for instance, other than academics, reads J.P. Priestley, Cyril Connolly, Stephen Spender, or C. Day Lewis today? Waugh and Orwell continue to be popular because they were brilliant imaginative writers who enriched English literature, either with unforgettable characters (Waugh) or with the most frightening dystopia in English letters (Orwell).

Waugh and Orwell came from the same background, the educated upper middle class. Orwell, who took a deep interest in such matters, was more precise: his family, he said, was lower upper middle class. In their lifetimes both men played class roles: Waugh the quintessential country gentleman, Orwell the angry proletarian. In reality, neither lost their middle-class roots.

Waugh’s father was a publisher and part-time author; Orwell’s was a member of the Indian Civil Service in Burma. Both writers received excellent educations which they largely wasted—Waugh at Lancing and Oxford, Orwell at St. Cyprian’s and Eton. Bookish and determined to be writers, each went through a difficult apprenticeship.

Waugh tried his hand at journalism and teaching, both with disastrous results, and he seriously thought of producing woodcuts for a living before turning to writing full time. His first book, a biography of the Pre-Raphaelite author, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1928), was politely received but he did not find his métier until he turned to social satire in the 1930s. Interestingly Orwell thought highly of the Rossetti book, singling it out among Waugh’s early work as “quite good.” Waugh’s first two comic novels, *Decline and Fall* (1928) and especially *Vile Bodies* two years later secured his reputation as a popular and critical success, the voice of that slightly batty, brittle generation
known as the “‘Bright Young Things.’”

Orwell, after a ghastly experience at his prep school St. Cyprian’s (which he wrote about with devastating effect in his essay, “Such, Such Were the Joys”), left Eton without a scholarship and thus could not afford Oxford or Cambridge. Instead, like his father he opted for the Indian Civil Service in Burma, where he spent five years as a policeman. He returned to England disgusted with his role as an Imperial bureaucrat oppressing the Burmese in their quest for independence. He was determined to write but had to endure a long period of part-time jobs—teacher, bookstore manager, small town shopkeeper—before he achieved literary success.

His first publication, the semi-autobiographical memoir, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, appeared in 1933, a couple of years after Waugh’s great breakthrough with *Vile Bodies*. *Down and Out* was moderately successful and remains in print today, remembered largely for Orwell’s unforgettable portrait of the chaos in a kitchen in one of Paris’ leading hotels.

Orwell published a book a year, including four novels, for the next six years. He gradually became convinced that he lacked the imagination for traditional fiction, and in particular for creating well-rounded characters and convincing dialogue. His female characters, especially, tended to be mere caricatures and reflected a certain misogyny on his part. Orwell’s own relationships with women were difficult. He married relatively late at age 33, and after his wife’s death he proposed to a number of women he hardly knew. One such proposal to a young woman he hardly knew says much about his diffidence about romantic matters: “What I am really asking you is whether you would like to be the widow of a literary man...[T]here is a certain amount of fun in this, as you would probably get royalties coming in and you might find it interesting to edit unpublished stuff etc. Of course, there is no knowing how long I shall live, but I am supposed to be a ‘bad life.’” Not surprisingly she passed up his offer. Orwell’s eventual second marriage occurred in hospital a few months before his death and to a woman who did not love him.

Waugh, on the other hand, was at ease and often at his best with women. He carried on an extensive correspondence with a number of women friends including Lady Diana Cooper and a novelist, Nancy Mitford. His correspondence with Mitford has been successfully dramatized. His female characters are never one-dimensional and are among the best in his novels.

In general, Orwell’s characters were designed to represent political forces, ideas, or symbols, rather than fully developed human beings until he hit upon something fresh with his fable *Animal Farm*. Waugh, on the other hand, not only created unforgettable characters but also was a master at using dialogue to move his story along.

Orwell’s self-criticisms as a novelist may be over-drawn, a typical failing when he analyzed his own writing. While he had won acclaim in the late 1930s for his essays and his sociological journalism—in particular for his study of the poor in the midst of the depression, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937)—fiction was, in the words of his friend Anthony Powell, Orwell’s “true love.” In the context of the rise of fascism, communism, and the threat of terrible war, however, Orwell felt fiction was “tainted with the odour of escape.”

For Waugh, on the other hand, what to do with his life was never a problem. He had to write—it gave meaning to his existence. Literature was his escape from self-loathing and from a longing for extinction.

Contrary to Orwell’s low estimate of his novels, two of them, *Burmese Days* (1934) and *Coming Up For Air* (1939), remain both readable and important. *Burmese Days* portrays the corrupting evils of
imperialism, and *Coming Up For Air* insightfully analyzes the English middle-class mind on the eve of World War II.

The war was a turning point for both men. Waugh volunteered and served with the Commandos during the military disaster at Crete and in Yugoslavia as a liaison with the Partisans. Both experiences provided him with literary material. *Put Out More Flags* appeared in 1942 in the aftermath of Crete and remains the classic portrait of England in “that cozy interlude between peace and war, when there was leave every weekend and plenty to eat and drink and plenty to smoke, when France stood firm on the Maginot Line and the Finns stood firm in Finland.” *Sword of Honor*, Waugh’s military trilogy written during the decade of the 1950s, is arguably the best fictional treatment of the war. Its anti-hero, Guy Crouchback, reflects Waugh’s own disillusion with the war from enthusiastic supporter to believer that all has gone wrong. One enemy, Nazism, had been vanquished but at the price of allying with an even greater evil, Stalin’s Soviet Union.

Orwell, from his position as a radical socialist, also grew disillusioned with the alliance with Russia. He saved some of his most savage attacks for the pro-Communist sympathies of his fellow socialists. As a result of what he considered the communist betrayal of the cause of revolution in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, Orwell became wary of those who overpraised the Soviet Union. At the height of admiration in England for Russia during the war Orwell wrote: “I consider that willingness to criticize Russia and Stalin is the test of intellectual honesty.”

Orwell tried to enlist, but despite his military experience—he had served at the front during the Spanish Civil War—and his background as a policeman, he was turned down for health reasons: he suffered from a pre–tubercular condition that would eventually kill him. He instead joined the Home Guard, a military reserve force, and then spent two unhappy years directing broadcasting to the Indian subcontinent for the BBC. His experiences during the war and especially at the BBC provided fuel for his two great successes. *Animal Farm*, which he started while at the BBC, savagely indicted the betrayal of the idea of Revolution. The book caused anger in left-wing circles with its characterization of the leaders of the Russian Revolution as pigs. Waugh, however, loved *Animal Farm* and told Orwell that he found it an “ingenious & delightful allegory.”

Many of Orwell’s vivid insights in *Nineteen Eighty-four* about the insidious nature of bureaucracy and propaganda came out of his years at the BBC. For example, the awful cafeteria in *Nineteen Eighty-four* and the ghastly ersatz food that Winston Smith eats were based on Orwell’s memories of BBC cuisine. The Ministry of Truth also derived from Orwell’s experiences at the BBC.

Toward the end of the war, Orwell and Waugh began to correspond. Orwell had begun to establish his reputation as a major literary figure. *Animal Farm* appeared to rave reviews and large sales in August 1945. A year later it was published in the United States to even greater success. As a Book-of-the-Month club selection, it was guaranteed huge sales. For the first time in his life, Orwell was financially secure. At the same time, Waugh had completed his most famous, and in many ways most controversial, novel, *Brideshead Revisited*. It appeared in May 1945, the month the war in Europe ended, and was greeted with largely positive reviews. The leftist *New Statesman*, no great admirer of the reactionary Waugh, called it “deeply moving” and “a fine and brilliant book.” Like *Animal Farm, Brideshead Revisited* was adopted in the United States as a Book-of-the-Month club selection. It made Waugh a rich man.

With certain limitations, the two men had become admirers of each other’s work. What drew them together? One point was
genuine pleasure in good writing. Both men were master stylists, obsessed with craftsmanship in prose and the relationship between language and class. Both were moralists: Waugh from a deep and abiding religious faith; Orwell as a humanistic agnostic.

In April 1946 Waugh enthusiastically reviewed a collection of Orwell’s essays for the Catholic weekly, The Tablet. He described the book as a “work of absorbing interest” and a brilliant example of the “new humanism of the common man.” Waugh contrasted Orwell’s approach to that of what he labeled “the Mandarin school” of criticism where only overarching themes deserved analysis. Orwell, on the other hand, wrote incisively about seemingly insignificant matters: vulgar postcards, murder mysteries, children’s magazines, the stories of P.G. Wodehouse. Both men, by the way, shared a deep love for Wodehouse whom Waugh called “the Master.” Orwell had defended Wodehouse from charges that he collaborated with the Nazis when he gave radio broadcasts while a prisoner early in the war. Waugh also had come to Wodehouse’s defense, calling him a victim of persecution by the Age of the Common Man.

Waugh was stimulated by Orwell’s literary criticism. He believed, however, that Orwell’s approach suffered from a major flaw. Although he possessed a high moral sense, “he seems never to have been touched at any point by a conception of religious thought and life....He frequently brings his argument to the point when having, with great acuteness, seen the falsity and internal contradiction of the humanist view of life, there seems no alternative but the acceptance of a revealed religion, and then stops short.”

Religion then was the issue that separated these two otherwise similar men. Waugh, beneath his cheerful sense of anarchism, was profoundly religious. His conversion to Catholicism in 1930, after a disastrous first marriage, had saved him from despair and possibly from suicide. From the Second World War on, Waugh’s Catholicism was the anchor of his life. Religion figures crucially in Brideshead and in the Sword of Honor as what makes life bearable.

Orwell, however, lacked religious convictions. His attitude toward Catholicism was that of a typical English radical such as William Cobbett or William Hazlitt. He shared their suspicion of Catholic power, bureaucracy, and Papal authority. He also feared Catholicism’s ability to demand unquestioned loyalty and obedience, as well as its flirtation with fascism. These fears made him suspicious of Catholic writers. Orwell noted a tendency among Catholics to refuse to treat non-Catholics as intellectually honest, thus to imply that non-Catholics knew the truth but resisted it out of selfish motives. In his essay “Inside the Whale,” about the English literary scene between the wars, Orwell argued that many gifted writers retreated to Catholicism as an escape from the problems of the world. Waugh was one of them although Orwell believed that the sense of despair that drove Waugh to the Catholic Church was partly a pretense.

Thus Orwell felt wary when he dealt with Waugh and his work. And yet it did not stop him from admiring Waugh’s powers as a novelist. Shortly before his death, Orwell began collecting notes for an essay on Waugh and Brideshead Revisited in particular. The notes show what a first-rate critic Orwell could be when he grappled with a topic that interested him.

Orwell believed that the keys to Waugh were not only his Catholicism but also his snobbery, his worship of the aristocracy and of a society which was no longer viable. Orwell also thought that the use of first-person narrative was a flaw in Brideshead. He did not like the crucial last scene where the unconscious Lord Marchmain makes the sign of the cross. “One cannot really be Catholic & grown–
up,” he said of the religious atmosphere of the novel. Still he believed that Waugh was about “as good a novelist as one can be...while holding untenable opinions.”

While Orwell was making notes for his essay on *Brideshead*, Waugh read *Nineteen Eighty-four* that Orwell had sent him. He wrote Orwell a long letter that demonstrates the impact that the novel made on him. Waugh called it stimulating and expressed “admiration for your ingenuity & for many parts of the writing, esp. the delicious conversation in the pub when Winston tries to pump the old man for memories of pre–revolutionary days.”

But Waugh also told Orwell that ultimately *Nineteen Eighty-four* was flawed. Winston’s rebellion was “false” because the Brotherhood is nothing more than a gang like the Party. He also argued that the form of Winston’s revolt, copulating “in the style of Lady Chatterley” was also unconvincing. Still he admitted that the book so excited him “that I risked preaching a sermon.”

According to some sources, Waugh visited Orwell when he was in the hospital. Malcolm Muggeridge thought the pairing droll—the bogus country gentleman gossiping with the equally bogus proletarian, “both straight out of back numbers of *Punch*.” Waugh thought Orwell “very near to God” with the look of death about him.

These slightly absurd men left a deep mark on English letters in the middle years of the twentieth century—a century that in some way bewildered both of them. They were fresh, brilliant literary craftsmen, perhaps the best prose stylists of their age. One hundred years after their birth we remain in their debt.