



ORWELL'S POETRY

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Peter Davison's magisterial *Orwell: The Complete Works* (1998) prints 26 poems by, or ascribed to, George Orwell. They range, chronologically, from 'Awake Young Men of England', a jingoistic call-to-arms that appeared in *The Henley and South Oxfordshire Herald* two months after the start of the Great War, to the nine laconic stanzas of 'Memories of the Blitz', printed in a January 1944 number of *Tribune* shortly after Orwell's arrival there as literary editor. Of the 26, several are doubtful attributions affixed to unsigned work in Eton ephemerals. There are also two items for which Davison reserves the less lofty description of 'verse': an Eton squib from 1920 and the brief 'Suggested by a toothpaste advertisement', which probably dates from his Burma years. To judge from the hints dropped elsewhere in *The Complete Works*, these slim gleanings clearly represent only a fraction of Orwell's true poetic output. In 'Why I Write', he remembers, aged four or five, dictating a poem about a tiger with 'chair-like teeth', presumably inspired by Blake's 'Tyger, tyger' to his mother. There is also mention of 'bad and usually unfinished 'nature poems' in the Georgian style.' Biographers have turned up at least one additional 'lost' item. Dora Georges, a schoolgirl who met him in Southwold in 1930, was presented with an 'Ode to a Dark Lady', which she kept for some years but later destroyed. All this suggests if not a thorough-going determination to 'be a poet', as his younger contemporary Stephen Spender once put it, then an enthusiasm for poetry that in these formative years seems to have been as least as strong as any desire to write fiction.



What remains may be divided up into six more-or-less distinct categories: patriotic juvenilia (a second poem appeared in *The Henley and South Oxfordshire Herald* two years later, mourning the death of Kitchener); three poems presented to his teenaged inamorata Jacintha Buddicom; contributions to Eton ephemerals; a small group that Davison plausibly dates to his time in Burma, from 1922 to 1927; half-a-dozen written in the period 1933-36 when he was establishing

himself as a writer; and, finally, a very few from the 1940s. These include what is perhaps his best-known poem, 'The Italian Soldier Shook My Hand', with its ringing final stanza 'But that thing I saw in your face/Nothing can disinherit/No bomb that ever burst/Shatters the crystal spirit' (a pendant to the essay 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' which appeared in 1942 but is dated by the author to 1939) and an extended pastiche, the Byronic stanzas traded with the pacifist poet 'Obadiah Hornbooke' (Alex Comfort) under the heading of 'As One Non-combatant to Another', which appeared in *Tribune* in June 1943.

Undoubtedly poetry played a vital part in the development of Orwell's literary sensibility. The discovery of *Paradise Lost*, and in particular the lines 'So hee with difficulty and labour hard/Moved on with difficulty and labour hee' (which he later recalled 'do not now seem to me so very wonderful') brought home to the 16 year-old Eton schoolboy what he called 'the joy of mere words.' He harboured serious poetic ambitions until at least his later twenties: a letter written to his agent Leonard Moore from his school-teaching job at Hayes in the early 1930s mentions a long poem about a day out in London, 'which may be finished by the end of the term.' As 'London Pleasures', envisaged as a 2,000-line epic in rhyme royal, 'the kind of thing that should only be undertaken by people with endless leisure', this survives to haunt Gordon Comstock's long hours of solitary brooding over the gas-fire in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936). In some ways the entire novel may be read as a rather mordant commentary on Orwell's poetic 'side'. While as a mature writer his output was limited to intermittent vers d'occasion, his interest in the form endured. As literary editor of *Tribune*, and as a talks producer on the BBC's Eastern Service, he encouraged young poets such as J.M. Tambimuttu, Paul Potts and Nicholas Moore.

His tastes - in so far as he deliberately let them slip - were, in the context of the literary world in which he moved, rather old-fashioned. As a teenager he liked Rupert Brooke and Robert Service, a copy of whose collected poems he presented to his fag as a leaving present. As an adult he continued to esteem such Edwardian titans as Kipling and Housman (whom he met when dining with his old Eton tutor A.S.F. Gow at Cambridge) and occasional late-flowerings of the '90s hothouse such as Ernest Dowson's 'Cynara'. When the modernist chips were down, he preferred the early Eliot – much of which he claimed to have memorised – to the more spiritually attuned poet of *Four Quartets*. A revealing review of *Burnt Norton*, *East Coker* and *The Dry Salvages*, written for *Poetry London* late in 1942, analyses this stance in some depth. Musing over Eliot's career to date, it was clear to Orwell that 'something has departed, some kind of current has been switched off.' He attributed this decline to 'a degeneration in Mr Eliot's subject matter.' The early poems – he is particularly struck by the 'rocket burst' of 'Prufrock's closing

lines – had advertised a 'glowing despair', but the first three of the *Four Quartets* offered only a 'melancholy faith.' Among younger poets of the 1930s, Orwell disparaged Auden as a 'gutless Kipling', a remark he later qualified, and violently disliked Stephen Spender ('I am not one of your fashionable pansies like Auden and Spender' he told the compilers of *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* in 1937), although the two men later met and became friends.

For a man who left school at the age of 18, with no formal training in English Literature other than the scraps picked up in the Hon. G.H. Lyttelton's Extra English classes, Orwell's knowledge of English poetry was considerable. As the essay 'How the Poor Die', an account of his stay in a Paris hospital in 1929, demonstrates, he was familiar with some of the murkier byways of Chaucer (Ravelston has the first six stanzas of *The Man of Lawes* tale summarised for him) and even so abstruse a part of the Victorian canon as Tennyson's 'The Children's Hospital'. *Keep The Aspidistra Flying*, too, displays evidence of an insider's absorption in the 1930s poetry scene, with its jokes about the kind of verse patronised by Ravelston, the editor of *Antichrist* (loosely modelled on Sir Richard Rees of *The Adelphi*), the reviews that Gordon fondly anticipates for the never-to-be-published 'London Pleasures' ('a welcome relief from the Sitwell school') and sly references to such long-forgotten ornaments of the Georgian era as John Drinkwater, whose *Collected Poems*, given to Gordon as a Christmas present by his sister Julia, is straightaway taken off and sold.

As for Orwell's own poems, it would take a very brave critic to suggest that, seen in the round, they have any conspicuous merits. With a few flaring exceptions they are derivative, solemn and rather lifeless affairs. The triptych addressed to Jacintha Buddicom are curiously formal in conception: not quite as fatalistic as Housman perhaps, but just as gloomy ('Friendship and Love' ends with the claim that 'My love can't reach your heedless heart at all'). 'The Lesser Evil' and 'When The Franks Have Lost Their Sway', from the Burma period, are the callowest kind of apprentice work, portentous, self-pitying and, in purely technical terms, lacking in scansion. 'Sometime in the middle autumn days', the first of Orwell's adult poems to be published, is a listless *hommage a l'Eliot* ('And I see the people thronging the street/The death- people, they and I/Godless, rootless, like leaves drifting/Blind to the earth and to the sky'). Where Orwell succeeds as a poet, alternatively, is on the occasions when he either offers straightforward reportage or touches on some personal dilemma he is increasingly anxious to resolve. 'Romance', which is about a Burmese prostitute who sticks out for a higher fee, and provides ballast for that well-known biographers' discussion topic: did Orwell sleep with Burmese women?), falls into the first category, as does 'A dressed man and a naked man', published in

The Adelphi in October 1933, which versifies an episode first described in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933).

*A dressed man and a naked man
Stood by the kip-house fire,
Watching the sooty cooking-pots
That bubble on the wire*

*And bidding tanners up and down
Bargaining for a deal,
Naked skin for empty skin,
Clothes against a meal*

While 'The Lesser Evil' and 'On a Ruined Farm near the His Master's Voice Gramophone Factory', published in *The Adelphi* in 1934, are negligible as poetry they gesture at preoccupations that would resurface in his prose work. 'The Lesser Evil', for example, sets up an opposition between conventional piety (the church where old maids caterwaul 'a dismal tale of thorns and blood') and the pleasures of the flesh ('visits to the house of sin'). 'On a Ruined Farm' touches on what might be called the *leitmotif* of Orwell's thought: the difficulty of bringing morality to secularism, formulating and applying objective standards in a world without God:

*Yet when the trees were young, men still
Could choose their path. The winged soul
Not awash with double doubts, could fly
Arrow-like to an unseen God...'*

Best of all from this Thirties period is 'St Andrew's Day, 1935', included in *Keep The Aspidistra Flying*, where bookseller's assistant Gordon runs the first lines over his tongue as he stands looking out of the shop window, and 'A Happy Vicar I Might Have Been...', which survived to illuminate the analysis of 'Why I Write.' Rather than dealing in gloomy abstracts, or peddling the deeply romanticised anti-romanticism of the early poems, each is about a subject with which Orwell was trying hard to come to terms: 'the Money God' of inter-war consumer materialism, and the stand-off between old-style literary quietism and the direct political action. 'St Andrew's Day' ends with a striking image, the idea of money as a 'sleek, estranging shield' (possibly the first reference to a condom in English poetry) placed 'between the lover and his bride.' 'A Happy Vicar' brushes aside the writer's distaste for the modern world and ends with what is practically a call to arms:

*I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls
And woke to find it true
I wasn't born for an age like this
Was Smith? Was Jones? Were you?'*

If no great claims can be made for Orwell the poet, these occasional verses were a useful minor weapon in his literary armoury. Rather like Philip Larkin, who always regretted the passing of his short-lived career as a novelist, Orwell never forgot his early hankerings. 'As One Non-Combatant to Another', which runs to 160 lines, carries a terrific sense of relish, as well as displaying an enviable facility with the difficult *terza rima* form. It is significant, perhaps, that the experience that shaped his mature political views – fighting on the Republican side in Spain – and the symbolic moment in which these views took root in his mind should have inspired him to poetry. It was as if he believed, despite the sparseness of his poetic output and the relatively old-fashioned nature of his aesthetic stance, that there were some emotions that only a poem could satisfactorily contain.

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