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# Forbidden To Dream Again: Orwell and Nostalgia

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There is even a tendency to talk nostalgically of the days of the V1. The good old doodlebug did at least give you time to get under the table, etc. etc. Whereas, in fact, when the doodlebugs were actually dropping, the usual subject of complaint was the uncomfortable waiting period before they went off. Some people are never satisfied.

‘As I Please’, 1 December 1944 (*CEJL* 3: 320)

The Orwell century closed as the anniversary of his birth was marked in 2003. As it recedes, it is appropriate to think about the forms taken by retrospect. Andreas Huyssen has argued that contemporary culture is pervaded by commemoration. Memory, private or public, has been a theoretical focus and a political battlefield, in an era of controversial monuments and ‘memory wars’.<sup>1</sup> In what Roger Luckhurst has dubbed the Traumaculture of recent years, the relation of individuals and groups to the past has often been staged as grieving and self-lacerating.<sup>2</sup> But the flipside of the traumatic paradigm of memory has gone comparatively unexplored, despite its own weight in contemporary society. *Nostalgia* is vital to the appeal of the retro culture of the last twenty years, in cinema, literature and other arts.<sup>3</sup> It remains politically contentious: regularly involved, and often used as an accusation, in arguments over Englishness, social change, national decline. Yet the topic has yet to receive the attention accorded to darker forms of memory.<sup>4</sup>

This essay aims to enhance our thinking about it via a reading of George Orwell. Orwell was acutely aware of the past’s power – as resource, as site of struggle – in the present. In *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) the Spanish Civil War is extended into a battle of testimonies, a discursive struggle over historical accounts.<sup>5</sup> In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the maintenance of power notoriously involves control over accounts of the past. But in *Coming Up for Air* (1939) Orwell engaged with less obviously political complexities in the relation of present to past. The novel is one of the major stagings of nostalgia in modern English fiction. Yet the subtlety of its treatment has often been obscured by hasty commentators. D.J. Taylor calls the book ‘nothing less than an elegy for a bygone England’<sup>6</sup>. Geoffrey Wheatcroft likewise calls the novel a ‘locus classicus for Orwell’s yearning over a lost England’.<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, in an essay on the novel, writes that an ‘ideal childhood... existed only in Orwell’s imagination and ... his works represent a fairly consistent attempt to recreate and perpetuate this myth’.<sup>8</sup> This view of the text, as mere expression of authorial sentiment, is loosely encouraged by biographical testimony as to Orwell’s own allegedly backward-looking character. Richard

Rees remembered the Orwell of the 1930s as ‘rather old-fashioned’.<sup>9</sup> Fredric Warburg alleged that ‘He didn’t like progress; he preferred the old ways, the traditional ways’.<sup>10</sup> David Wykes writes that ‘the difference between the mental, moral atmosphere of the present and that of the not very distant past’ is one of Orwell’s ‘obsessive themes’.<sup>11</sup> Reviewing *Animal Farm* in 1945, Cyril Connolly dubbed him ‘a revolutionary who is in love with 1910’, and complained that ‘[n]ever before has a progressive political thinker been so handicapped by nostalgia for the Edwardian shabby-genteel or the under-dog’.<sup>12</sup>

These claims contain important truths. But this essay aims to take more seriously both nostalgia and Orwell’s work on and in it. After demonstrating the ambiguous place of nostalgia in Orwell’s writing generally, I will turn to *Coming Up for Air* in particular and seek a more nuanced account of the novel – as a literary construct rather than an outpouring of authorial emotion. As Nicholas Dames avers, ‘Reading nostalgia means, necessarily, reading its discursive manifestations’.<sup>13</sup> In developing a rhetoric of nostalgia, with subtle interactions between narrator and reader, Orwell explores the phenomenon’s effects on thought and language. Yet I do not mean to replace a nostalgic Orwell with an unsparing scourge of nostalgia. It is in his ambivalence, his scrupulous recognition of the potency of nostalgia as well as its pitfalls, that Orwell remains valuable.

Nostalgia involves a view of the past emotionally laden with positive value. The word’s etymology signals an ache for home; indeed it began life, in the late seventeenth century, as a medical term to describe the homesickness of Swiss soldiers removed from their native country. As Jean Starobinski’s history of the concept shows, it has travelled some distance from this physiological sense to today’s more loosely affective and ‘literary’ use. Immanuel Kant was among the first to point out that the object of longing might not be a departed place but a lost time.<sup>14</sup> Following his lead, our everyday use of it amounts to a translation of homesickness into specifically temporal terms. In a carefully restricted usage, nostalgia would require interaction with personal memory: it names a profoundly subjective, emotional response to memory and the objects that stir it. Yet the term also tends to be used more broadly, to denote wishful or approving attitudes to past times that the nostalgic subject never personally experienced. This ambiguity points us to an important fact: nostalgia is frequently socially conditioned. It is caught up in transpersonal, collective relations, even when it is indeed deeply personal.<sup>15</sup>

Nostalgia has a bad name. The word is commonly associated with sentimental stickiness, and reference to it often implies disdain. There are two prime and related reasons for the word’s negative charge.<sup>16</sup> One is that nostalgia is associated with falsification. A nostalgic view of the past, for some, is inherently suspect – even automatically false. Viewed this way, it is indeed

the sunny complement of the ‘false memories’ over which Freudians and others have fought in the Memory Wars in the last two decades.<sup>17</sup> The other objection is that it is associated with conservatism of various kinds. Nostalgia may seem to imply a regret that women ever came out of the kitchen, that gay people ever came out of the closet, or that Margaret Thatcher was ever forced out of Downing Street. There are, however, more positive ways of thinking about nostalgia. For instance, as historians of popular radicalism have demonstrated, nostalgia is not the exclusive property of the political Right. An appeal to a better past, whose conditions might still be recoverable, has been part of English dissent at least since the Peasants’ Revolt.<sup>18</sup> The political subtleties of the subject are discussed in one of the few major discussions of nostalgia’s power: Patrick Wright’s *On Living in an Old Country* (1985). Many of this book’s observations retain value today, not least in relation to Orwell. Wright’s discussion of popular historical consciousness draws on Agnes Heller’s theorization of everyday life to argue that the sense of the past is negotiated between individual and state, or in Habermasian terms between lifeworld and system. Despite the regular deployment of a selectively constructed national past for reactionary purposes, Wright insists that everyday historical awareness cannot be reduced to ideology. This applies even to nostalgia, which ‘testifies... to the destabilisation of everyday life’ in modernity<sup>19</sup>, and is in part a riposte from everyday consciousness to the austere ascendancy of a value-free science. ‘[E]veryday nostalgia’, Wright concludes, ‘therefore has a critical and subversive potential as well’ (p.26). That potential, as we shall see, is one of Orwell’s interests in *Coming Up for Air*. We can return to the politics of nostalgia in Orwell in closing: but let us now look more closely at how the phenomenon features in his work.

### **Progress Does Happen**

The first thing to say, *pace* Cyril Connolly, is that Orwell is not an especially nostalgic writer. He was capable of writing reminiscences without wistfulness: consider how, in the 1936 essay ‘Bookshop Memories’, his initial love of books is overwhelmed by his actual experience of the customers (*CEJL* 1: 273-277). While susceptible to hyperbole, Orwell was careful about discharging emotion in print. Even disgust or moral affront are characteristically expressed with detachment; and his work shows still less trace of such seemingly more sentiment-prone emotions as love – or nostalgia.

Orwell ‘hated modernity’, wrote John Wain in 1961.<sup>20</sup> While Wain’s article shrewdly points to the importance of nostalgia in Orwell’s thought, and accordingly sees *Coming Up for Air* as the central text in his *oeuvre*, it underplays the fact that in his analysis of history, Orwell was resistant to modes of thinking that might be thought nostalgic. Many times he defends the fact of progress against the view – heavily associated with conservatism – that

history either does not change or simply declines. To those who associate Orwell mainly with visions of a dystopian future, it ought to be surprising to realize how often he insists on the gains of modernity. In the first ever edition of 'As I Please' (3 December 1943), Orwell rereads the nineteenth-century novel *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance*, and notes that even this would-be radical text saw the London working classes as sub-human and beyond salvation. The situation of the poor, Orwell claims, was expected to worsen, not improve. 'Actually', he writes, 'such an improvement in the standard of living has taken place as Mark Rutherford and his contemporaries would have considered quite impossible'. 'Progress does happen', Orwell concludes, 'hard though it may be to believe it, in this age of concentration camps and big beautiful bombs' (*CEJL* 3: 75-6). The sardonic last words bring an abrupt return to hard-headedness, as though Orwell is wary of concluding on an optimistic note that the times make embarrassingly inappropriate. He must reassert at the last moment his air of gloomy vigilance: and it produces a paradoxical image, in which modern technological dangers and progress are part of the same process. As, indeed, they are. But Orwell insists on the reality of progress often enough elsewhere: in his comments, for instance, on the vanished mudlark beggars of the Thames. 'Say what you like, things *do* change', he insists: 'Is there anyone who would degrade himself in that way nowadays? And how many people are there who would get a kick out of watching it?' (*CEJL* 3: 322-3). And again, in his essay on Smollett, he concludes by stating that we need only consider the way that contemporary imitations of Smollett's style of joke are considered shocking, 'to see what an accumulation of pity, decency and public spirit lies between that age and ours' (*CEJL* 3: 286 [22 September 1944]).

Our habituation to generic laments for a lost past initially makes this statement hard to read right. It looks at first glance like a casual complaint that things aren't what they used to be. Actually it is a casual celebration that things aren't what they used to be. In passages like this, Orwell offers a powerful and underrated corrective to the most damaging kind of nostalgia – the view that nothing has, or can be, improved. His riposte to T.E. Hulme's classicism, in which he insists on the possibility of a progress conceived with appropriate modesty, a dissociation of Socialism from Utopianism (*CEJL* 3: 83 [24 December 1943]), is another version of this valuable feature of Orwell's writing. Even in November 1948, in arguably his most pessimistic period, he can be found denying T.S. Eliot's assertion that 'our own period is one of decline'. '[Before] writing off our own age as irrevocably damned', Orwell concludes, 'is it not worth remembering that Matthew Arnold and Swift and Shakespeare – to carry the story back only three centuries – were all equally certain that they lived in a period of decline?' (*CEJL* 4: 517).

## When The Trees Were Young

But it would be wrong to assume Orwell's own freedom from nostalgia. An intriguing example is the early poem 'On A Ruined Farm near the His Master's Voice Gramophone Factory', signed Eric Blair and published in the *Adelphi* in April 1934 (*CEJL* 1: 158-9). The poem's narrator stands at 'the lichened gate / With warring worlds on either hand'. One is old and rural:

To left the black and budless trees,  
The empty sties, the barns that stand

Like tumbling skeletons.

On the other side of the gate stand 'The factory-towers, white and clear'; 'steel and concrete soar / In dizzy, geometric towers'; 'tapering cranes sweep round, / And great wheels turn, and trains roar by / Like strong, low-headed brutes of steel'. Torn between two worlds, the speaker bemoans his fate with ostentatious self-pity. Yet there is some complexity in the thought of the poem. The city of geometric towers, the speaker announces, 'is my world, my home': in some sense he belongs to modernity. But in just what sense is unclear, for he declares that realm 'alien still', and himself unable to 'Dwell in that world'. Meanwhile, the rural environment has been destroyed, poisoned by industry. Hence 'black and budless trees', 'empty sties', skeletal barns; moreover, 'The acid smoke has soured the fields, / And browned the few and windworn flowers'; unable to wield 'scythe and spade', the poet can only 'loiter / Among the trees the smoke has slain'. One world is dead, its replacement undead. The scene of the past has been rendered uninhabitable, but the writer has no desire to abandon it for the avenues of the future, even though with a certain largeness of perception he sees that those who have already embraced the modern are happily at one with it:

they who planned those soaring towers,  
They too have set their spirit free;  
To them their glittering world can bring  
Faith, and accepted destiny.

The future is inhabitable after all, but not for Eric Blair, not in this mood. He belongs, he implies, in the epoch 'when the trees were young'. The thought is ultimately close to the better-known poem of Orwell's, published in the *Adelphi* two years later (December 1936) and quoted in 'Why I Write':

A happy vicar I might have been  
Two hundred years ago,  
To preach upon eternal doom

And watch my walnuts grow....

‘[B]orn, alas, in an evil time, / I missed that pleasant haven’, the poem’s narrator explains, though even his lifetime has offered pastoral pleasures:

All ignorant we dared to own  
The joys we now dissemble;  
The greenfinch on the apple bough  
Could make my enemies tremble.

But girls’ bellies and apricots,  
Roach in a shaded stream,  
Horses, ducks in flight at dawn,  
All these are a dream.

It is forbidden to dream again;  
We maim our joys or hide them;  
Horses are made of chromium steel  
And little fat men shall ride them.

The last stanza articulates the speaker’s plaintive relation to his age:

I dreamed 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?

The earlier poem’s wistful meditation is now pulled from its seat and made to dance a jig. But much of the meaning remains. Orwell is again tragically disjunct from history. His fate two centuries ago has become ‘a pleasant haven’, an opportunity missed. But his actual life also offers an image of lost time and hopes dashed. ‘Later still the times were good’, and those times have a particular and unsurprising setting, the countryside. Trees, birds, horses, fish, apricots have offered the writer a tantalizing promise cruelly snatched by history. ‘All these are a dream’, and ‘It is forbidden to dream again’: which appears to mean either that those old locations of value are now unattainable, or more radically, that even to *remember* them is becoming impossible. Here is a prolepsis of Orwell’s ultimate concern with the responsibilities and failure of memory, its inability to do its duty to history.

In ‘Why I Write’, Orwell emphasizes the personal importance of the poem, asserting that in a ‘peaceful age’ he ‘might have written ornate or merely descriptive books’ (*CEJL* 1: 26).<sup>21</sup> Orwell discovers, again, that he is a man out of time, awkwardly lonely on the margins of history, and pining for an earlier period more suited to him. Part of his conception of himself is a

Freudian family romance on a grand scale: he dreams not of the secret, glamorous parentage that is really his, but of the secretly different century in which, but for a spanner in the cosmic works, he should really have lived. The wishful thinking in this aspect of the poem is clear: the 1930s might be ‘an evil time’, but the anti-nostalgic Orwell I quoted earlier, writing in the middle of world war, would have to concede that they also represent the latest stage in the progress whose reality he defends. But it is worth adding that the poem’s conclusion is not just an aggrandizing self-assessment: it is extended to the reader, and implicitly to every contemporary. *No-one* was born for an age like this: the contemporary is inhuman. Anyone’s nature would be ill-suited to such an unnatural age. Nostalgia is personal to Orwell, but is also posited as the fate of all humanity – or at least, given those surnames, all England or Britain.

Orwell introduces the poem into ‘Why I Write’ with the casual claim that he can still ‘remember’ it. He does not elect openly to remember, here, that he had subsequently written a whole novel that meditated on similar questions and issues: periodization and memory, the disliked modern, the vanished past, the perceptions and delusions involved. This was *Coming Up for Air*.

### **Does One Ever See A Penny Monster Nowadays?**

George Bowling, at once like and unlike his creator, is Orwell’s major attempt at a Leopold Bloom of his own.<sup>22</sup> Insofar as *Coming Up for Air* pivots around his childhood memories and their ironic relation to the present, he can also be read as a parody Proust, and the novel as an Everyman’s *Recherche*. Bowling’s adventure begins with an attack of involuntary memory outside Charing Cross, and the relevant passage bears close comparison with the discussion of names at the start of *The Guermantes Way*.<sup>23</sup> This casts an amusing light on Bowling’s protest that his reading didn’t improve *that* much during the Great War: ‘No, you’ve got it wrong! Don’t run away with the idea that I suddenly discovered Marcel Proust or Henry James or somebody. I wouldn’t have read them even if I had’ (CA 124). But while Bowling’s narrative may contain thematic continuities with other major works of memory, the language of *Coming Up for Air* is a specific one, which offers a particular register of remembrance. Through Bowling’s voice Orwell carefully composes a rhetoric of nostalgia, and we must look closely to discern its salient features.

In a book of memory, detail is the staple ingredient. Simply in order to give the pre-war period any substance, Bowling needs rapidly to pile up facts – describing domestic interiors, politics, the countryside – about Lower Binfield. Roland Barthes suggested that the accumulation of detail was realism’s route to plausibility, the ‘Reality Effect’.<sup>24</sup> A similar method here



fuels the 'Memory Effect' in a work like *Coming Up for Air*. A notable example is Bowling's memory of sweets:

You could buy things worth having for a farthing in those days. Most sweets were four ounces a penny, and there was even some stuff called Paradise Mixture, mostly broken sweets from other bottles, which was six. Then there were Farthing Everlastings, which were a yard long and couldn't be finished inside half an hour.... And what about Penny Monsters? Does one ever see a Penny Monster nowadays? (CA 39).<sup>25</sup>

Such a passage points us toward the importance of lists.

'The List' has lately become an ominous phrase in discussions of Orwell<sup>26</sup>; but as a form of language it also has an under-remarked role in his literary method. He repeatedly uses it to polemical purpose, for instance, in 'Inside the Whale', where 'Paris was invaded by such a swarm of artists, writers, students, dilettanti, sight-seers, debauchees and plain idlers as the world has probably never seen' (CEJL 1: 541).<sup>27</sup> One term reinforces another: it is hard to notice on first reading that such harmless types as students and sight-seers are being enlisted to a catalogue that appears to drip with scorn. George Bowling, too, makes ominous lists. A recurrent motif through the novel is the tally of totalitarian features that he fears in the England of the post-war future: 'The bombs, the food-queues, the rubber truncheons, the barbed wire, the coloured shirts, the slogans, the enormous faces, the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows' (CA 238). It is thus all the more pointed that the list is also central to the childhood memories he counterposes to that future. The accumulation of detail necessary to a work like *Coming Up for Air* tends naturally towards this form. 'Sugar mice and sugar pigs were eight a penny', recites Bowling, 'and so were liquorice pistols, popcorn was a halfpenny for a large bag, and a prize packet which contained several different kinds of sweets, a gold ring and sometimes a whistle, was a penny' (CA 39).

But there are lists and lists. The list of sweets looks like a fond reminiscence, but is actually quite emotionally dry.<sup>28</sup> This is still the zone of historical recovery rather than of overwhelming affect.<sup>29</sup> The true list of nostalgia is subtly different. How do we recognize its raising of the emotional tone? An important sign is the appearance of incongruity in the objects listed. Bowling's list of sweets, like his catalogue of the fruits available in the Oxfordshire countryside (CA 38), is coherent: it deals with one kind of object. Compare those to this memory of boyhood:

The white dusty roads, the hot sweaty feeling of one's clothes, the smell of fennel and wild peppermint, the dirty words, the sour stink of the rubbish dump, the taste of fizzy lemonade and the gas that made one

belch, the stamping on the young birds, the feel of the fish straining on the line – it was all part of it (CA 66).

The listing process now starts to exceed any particular class of object: to extend across boundaries, powered by sensory and emotional association. The diversity of experiences mentioned is part of the point. Nostalgic writing is a matter of details, certainly, but it is also inclined to the panoramic. It is essential to the emotional effect that the memories mentioned should be disparate: the sense is of a mind straining across distinctions, making affective connections, as though stretching for a vision of wholeness which remains just out of reach.

Stylistically, we also notice the syntactical simplicity. Nostalgic prose tends toward the abolition of complex verbal structures, replacing them with a string of associations, held taut by sheer emotional energy.<sup>30</sup> As Bowling's nostalgia grows, he offers numerous instances of the list in which the definite article is the main principle of continuity. In the quotation above, places, sensations, language, and even an action are all momentarily given a semantic and emotional equality by that modest key word, 'the'. The same principle is at work in the famous evocations of English iconography in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) – '[t]he clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pintables in the Soho pubs...'<sup>31</sup> – a clue to the formative role of nostalgia in that hymn to revolutionary patriotism. In much of *Coming Up for Air*'s invocation of the past – 'The still summer evening, the faint splash of the weir, the rings on the water where the fish are rising, the midges eating you alive, the shoals of dace swarming round your hook and never biting....' (CA 73) – a principle of sheer enumeration comes to the surface, in a hurtling attempt to name experiences as they come to the remembering consciousness. Punctuation tends to fade out at the highest moments of nostalgia. In Bowling's description of his mother's kitchen, 'with the stone floor and the beetle-traps and the steel fender and the blacklead range' (CA 56) – the beginning of this process is visible. But Bowling usually retains the minimal rhythm of the comma, even at his most rhapsodic: 'The endless June evenings, the path under the chestnut trees, an owl hooting somewhere and Elsie's body against me... And then the cool of the evening outside, the smell of night-stocks and pipe-tobacco in the lane behind the allotments, the soft dust underfoot and the nightjars hawking after the cockchafers' (CA 109).

Another point of punctuation deserves notice. Commentators on *Coming Up for Air* record its determined dearth of semi-colons.<sup>32</sup> Less often remarked is its compensatory proliferation of exclamation marks. Bowling's penchant for these is part of the relative roughness of his voice: they are one marker of the man who can make himself at home among commercial

travellers in the public bar. Many of them appear when he is making one of his characteristic disavowals –

But it's also a fact that internally, mentally, I'm not altogether fat. No! Don't mistake me. I'm not trying to put myself over as a kind of tender flower, the aching heart behind the smiling face and so forth. You couldn't get on in the insurance business if you were anything like that (CA 20).

This repeated structure of address, in which Bowling corrects an impression that he believes he has created in the reader, is a neat distinguishing device on Orwell's part, and regularly uses the crash sign to give it an initial thrust beyond false perception. So do Bowling's exclamations of disgust and anger: the paragraph in which he bites into his inedible sausage contains four of them (CA 23). But elsewhere they also serve a role as markers of memory. Bowling is still in his first flash of recollection at Charing Cross as he declares 'How it came back to me!' (CA 30). At the start of Part II he uses equal emphasis to reflect on a phrase which he has just used casually, and which lies at the heart of the book: 'Before the war!' (CA 35). Later he lets a whole paragraph consist of the word 'Fishing!' (CA 82). And as his reminiscences reach their crescendo, the role of the exclamation mark is clearer still: '1913! My God! 1913!' (CA 107); 'It was a hot July that year. How we sweated in the shop, and how the cheese and the ground coffee smelt!' (CA 109). It is striking that the progress of the exclamation mark through *Coming Up for Air* amounts to an inversion. What begins as a signal of Bowling's suburban insensitivity becomes the rawest index of his exposed feelings. In that small sign we can see some of Orwell's achievement in this novel, which takes a figure of self-proclaimed unsentimentality and leads him to ejaculations of emotion.

### **I Tell You They Were Enormous**

The rhetoric of nostalgia is thus pervasive in Part II of *Coming Up for Air*. Orwell gradually raises its tone as Bowling becomes more immersed in the past and less able to deny his own investment in it. But this leads us towards a key question. How are we to judge nostalgia in this novel? What *evaluation* of nostalgia is offered by Bowling and Orwell?

There is enough canny suspicion in *Coming Up for Air* to stop it being a sentimental book. Notwithstanding some commentators, George Bowling is a construct, his childhood distinct from Orwell's own. John Wain considered Bowling a vehicle 'to express a pastoral nostalgia' ('Here Lies Lower Binfield', p.77), but this judgement not only understates the distinction between author and narrator, it neglects Bowling's own self-criticism and ambivalence. Yet

nor can the book be treated as a rejection of nostalgia. Its attitude remains more complex. Bowling's perceptions sometimes take the form of a double consciousness, a frank incoherence: 'Before the war, and especially before the Boer War, it was summer all the year round. I'm quite aware that that's a delusion. I'm merely trying to tell you how things come back to me' (CA 37). It is interesting to set this against Orwell's better-known, uncompromising insistences on the truth and rationality which he saw totalitarianism as abolishing: in the figure of Bowling he is much readier to acknowledge and explore the paradoxes of perception, the misperceptions basic to memory.

*Coming Up for Air*, a book about nostalgia, is marked by disavowals of nostalgia. Here is Bowling on the defensive:

Don't mistake what I'm talking about. It's not that I'm trying to put across any of that poetry of childhood stuff. I know that's all baloney.... The truth is that kids aren't in any way poetic, they're merely savage little animals.... A boy isn't interested in meadows, groves and so forth.... And yet all the while there's that peculiar intensity, the power of longing for things as you can't long when you're grown up, and the feeling that time stretches out and out in front of you and that whatever you're doing you could go on for ever (CA 75).

Amid the received view of Orwell's abilities in the novel genre, the complexity and ambivalence of a passage like this (edited here) is too easily neglected. It dramatizes a man arguing with himself. The passage begins as a rejection of nostalgia. The coarseness of Bowling's idiom – 'that poetry of childhood stuff', 'baloney', 'savage little animals' – is a line of defence against the emotion. Yet it modulates inexorably beyond its own doubts, as the narrator is overcome by the past, the voice overrun by the rhetoric of nostalgia that we have just observed. In one sense much of the novel's shape is presented here in miniature. But something slightly more nuanced is going on. What Bowling is really rejecting is not nostalgia as such, so much as a processed, received version of it. In rejecting 'that poetry of childhood stuff' – he mentions and half-quotes Wordsworth, and notes that his friend Porteous is given to reciting such material – Bowling is not denying his past, but looking to extricate it from beneath literary models given by others. In one sense the passage moves from hard-headedness to swooning; but it also possesses an underlying continuity, in the attempt to establish an authentic rather than a generic nostalgia.

This distinction finds material form in Bowling's encounter with a modern inhabitant of Upper Binfield, which has become an expensive estate where one can live 'in the midst of Nature': a 'Woodland City' designed by an architect with 'such a feeling for the Tudor... such a wonderful fellow at finding genuine Elizabethan beams in old farmhouses and buying them at ridiculous prices' (CA 226-7). Bowling's encounter allows Orwell to vent some

of the prejudices notoriously familiar from *The Road to Wigan Pier*: the representative of Upper Binfield, wearing shorts and sandals, claims that his fellows are 'enlightened people', three-quarters of them vegetarian. But the scene also more cannily points to the manufacture of authenticity, to nostalgia's manipulation as an impersonal commercial power, rather than an intensely subjective relation to the past. *Coming Up for Air*, we have seen, is all too readily described as 'an elegy for a bygone England' (D.J. Taylor): its critical relation to the veneration of the past goes unregistered. Bowling rhapsodizes over his own past, but he is instantly suspicious of the architect's commercial deployment of 'genuine Elizabethan beams' and Tudor houses, let alone the renaming of his familiar copse as 'the Pixy Glen' (CA 229). In one sense it is a matter of the ownership of memory: Bowling wants to preserve his enchanted past as distinct from the back-projections of those who have subsequently occupied the spot. But the difference is not merely between one individual's recollection and another, but between an intensely subjective sensation and a vision of antiquity produced for the market, devoid of affective charge. In the Upper Binfield of the late 1930s, and in the mock-antique George Hotel and Wendy's Tea Shop down the hill (CA 196-8), we witness the transmutation of nostalgia that Patrick Wright would describe fifty years later: 'Where there was active historicity there is now decoration and display; in the place of memory, amnesia swaggers out in historical fancy dress' (*Old Country*, p.78). Orwell is ready to give space and rhetorical expression to Bowling's nostalgia, but his narrator is scathing about what would become a major area of cultural production and leisure in the later twentieth century. Against the mass-marketed nostalgia of the culture industry, the individual subject seeks fiercely to distinguish, in Wright's phrase, his unvoiced 'subjective surplus' (p.22) of pathos.

The novel's attitude to nostalgia is thus more complex than hasty readers have reckoned it. It involves a statement of simultaneous belief and disbelief in it, an unsuccessful rejection of it, an attempt to distinguish better and worse forms. In Orwell's attempt at a discrimination of nostalgias, the emotion is neither to be uncritically indulged nor prematurely dismissed. A telling example here is the giant fish that Bowling remembers finding in the pool at Binfield House. Seeing the first carp, he tells us: 'I don't exaggerate when I say it was enormous. It was almost the length of my arm.... It was far the biggest fish I'd ever seen, dead or alive' (CA 80). There could be no more obvious emblem of the hazards of memory. At this stage the novel is hinging on the question of the validity of memory, its shaping or misshaping by nostalgia; and into this Orwell drops a literalization of the issue which is almost comically clear. The One That Got Away, we may think, is an apt image of the past as known to nostalgia. But even as Bowling's voice becomes a lament – 'One never does go back' (CA 81), he says, in one of the novel's most starkly sad lines – he ends the chapter on a note of defiance:

I know, of course, that you think I'm exaggerating about the size of those fish. You think, probably, that they were just medium-sized fish (a foot long, say) and that they've swollen gradually in my memory. But it isn't so. People tell lies about the fish they've caught and still more about the fish that are hooked and get away, but I never caught any of these or even tried to catch them, and I've no motive for lying. I tell you they were enormous (CA 81).

The worm turns. If the size of the fish is an allegory of the truth of nostalgia, then Bowling is ready to throw down the gauntlet in defence of it. In a moment of intricate interaction with the reader, he acknowledges our likely reaction, then dismisses it, with a series of defensive qualifications. It is not nostalgia, here, but our over-ready scepticism about it, that is the cliché, the stock feeling. Beyond probability, beyond generic responses, Bowling insists on the unlikely truth of the quality of the past – and we, of course, have no means of doubting him. To maintain our contract with the novel is provisionally to accept the size of the fish; and perhaps, by extension, to suspend our suspicion of Bowling's account of his youth.

### **Seems a Pity Somehow**

In another sense too, the value of nostalgia is up for debate. This involves its relation to history. The historical equivalent of Bowling's 'I tell you they were enormous' is his claim that life has in some respects declined since before World War I: that certain losses have been real, not just the fantasies of a middle-aged man (CA 109-112). What is distinctive here is the historicization of nostalgia. Bowling's claim is that all nostalgias are not equal: his own is a response to a period of unprecedented change, and thus cannot be written off as blind sentiment. In this respect as in others, nostalgia is like love: yes, so many others have felt it, but this one is different because it's mine. But Bowling makes a more specific claim. '[In] a manner of speaking', he admits, 'I *am* sentimental about my childhood – not my own particular childhood, but the civilisation which I grew up in and which is now, I suppose, just about at its last kick' (CA 76). Bowling's ultimate experience in Lower Binfield is very ambiguous in this respect. To find that the past has been destroyed by an encroaching modernity might well result in an escalation of nostalgia. Bowling reacts in the opposite way: 'The old life's finished, and to go about looking for it is just waste of time. There's no way back to Lower Binfield, you can't put Jonah back into the whale' (CA 237) – the last image being glossed elsewhere by Orwell as a version of the womb (CEJL 1: 571). But Orwell's writing is more troubled by loss than one would gather from the brave, brash face that Bowling puts on things. As the essay 'Inside The Whale', among numerous

other texts, makes clear, Orwell himself believed, at this point in time, that civilization was at its last kick, and vast changes imminent.

Nostalgia is deeply bound up with loss; and the most subtle form of nostalgia in Orwell himself involves not the loss of the world of 1913, but the imminent loss of features still enduring around him. In an untitled poem in the *Adelphi* Orwell writes:

So shall we in the rout of life  
Some thought, some faith, some meaning save,  
And speak it once before we go  
In silence to the silent grave (*CEJL* 1: 143).

‘Some meaning save’ turns out to be a central principle in Orwell’s work. It is not only ‘meanings’ but objects, experiences and feelings that he wishes to ‘save’. His numerous pieces in defence of the English landscape, both natural and social – ‘A Nice Cup Of Tea’ (*CEJL* 3: 58-61), “‘The Moon Under Water’” (*CEJL* 3: 63-5), ‘Thoughts on the Common Toad’ (*CEJL* 4: 171-5), the praise of the Woolworth Rose (*CEJL* 3: 104) – do not lament something long gone, but mark the value of something now under threat.<sup>33</sup> They might be best characterized by the paradoxical formulation, *nostalgia for the present*. This principle is visible in the fiction, too. When George Bowling’s train is followed by a bombing plane, he looks across the suburban landscape and reflects:

Seems a pity somehow.... I looked at the great sea of roofs stretching on and on. Miles and miles of streets, fried-fish shops, tin chapels, picture houses, little printing-shops up back alleys, factories, blocks of flats, whelk stalls, dairies, power stations – on and on and on. Enormous! And the peacefulness of it! Like a great wilderness with no wild beasts (*CA* 21).

This passage is a notable corrective to Orwell’s tendency to indiscriminate attacks on suburban modernity: the final image shows a generous readiness to see the urban present in terms of his beloved natural world. But it should also be compared with Bowling’s reminiscences of the Edwardian countryside. Here again are the unfurling list, the telling detail, the panoramic impulse, even the exclamation mark. When the present is under threat, it too becomes subject to the rhetoric of nostalgia. ‘In an age of destruction’, Richard Harman wrote in 1943, ‘there is a reawakened interest in the things that “endure”’.<sup>34</sup> But there is still greater poignancy in the things that may *not* endure. Finitude concentrates the mind.

The very gesture of setting *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the future makes it possible for the bric-a-brac of the post-war present to become the sign of loss, part of a better past. ‘It is *old*, if not always precisely residual, meaning that Orwell values’, writes Patrick Wright: ‘the only sort, indeed, that can exist in

the constrained world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*' (*Old Country*, p.219). In that sense, it would be possible to show that nostalgia is a powerful principle in Orwell's last novel. But part of the point there, of course, is that nostalgia is not what it used to be: memory is growing ever more discontinuous, unreliable and suppressed. As in the poem quoted earlier, it is forbidden to dream again: it is not merely the past that is being lost, but the means to register its loss. In *Coming Up for Air*, Bowling reports his friend's mistaken belief that 'Hitler and Stalin will pass away, but something which old Porteous calls "the eternal verities" won't' (CA 167). The error is to believe that standards will endure by which to judge the coming times. What is under threat is the possibility of remembrance itself.

Nostalgia is indeed important to Orwell, then, but in a more challenging way than commentators have suspected. It recurs as a concern in numerous ways, cropping up as a basis of taste in the essay on Dickens (*CEJL* 1: 492) and as a respite amid the squalor of 'Such, Such Were The Joys' (*CEJL* 4: 394-6). In *Coming Up for Air* he explores and critically performs it, but refuses simplistically to dismiss it. In this the novel is echoed in 1948 by Orwell's review of the third volume of Osbert Sitwell's autobiography, in which he reflects critically on a 'widespread idea that nostalgic feelings about the past are inherently vicious', arguing that the attempt to 'live in a continuous present, a minute-to-minute cancellation of memory', reflects 'a snobbish terror of growing old'. '[A] writer, in particular', Orwell concludes, 'is throwing away his heritage if he repudiates the experience of his early life' (*CEJL* 4: 504). The past is a literary heritage, to be handled delicately: but it is also a political resource. Orwell made memory central as a political weapon; and like many, he drew value from the past, and from objects and experiences he saw as threatened with extinction. As Terry Eagleton has commented, Orwell's brand of radicalism 'insists on the continuity between the class-bound present and the socialist future, rather than on some apocalyptic break between them'.<sup>35</sup> To that extent nostalgia has a positive political value in Orwell.

His place in today's nostalgia culture, however, is another matter. Orwell sketches the beginnings of a heritage culture in Upper Binfield. But in his overall political analysis, he did not anticipate that the twentieth century would end with a surplus, not a deficit, of memory. He was interested in the future of leisure in an increasingly technologized world, but seems not to have guessed that the West would one day have the leisure to turn large tracts of the present into a museum, in the form of an ever-expanding archival culture.<sup>36</sup> He often advocated simplicity, agricultural toil, the need for modern society to shed cultural weight. Orwell understood the 'critical and subversive potential' that Wright posits in everyday nostalgia, but the mass-mediated retrospection pervasive in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century might have tasted to him rather like George Bowling's sausage. Yet in the subtlety with which he composed a rhetoric of nostalgia, refusing its easy dismissal or indulgence,



seeking to distinguish subjective intensities from the processed history of the market, he left a valuable example for our own negotiations with the romance of the past.

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## Notes

The abbreviation *CEJL* refers to *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). Volume number and page number are separated by a colon. The abbreviation *CA* refers to George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989 [1939]).

<sup>1</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), and *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), esp. pp.1-29.

<sup>2</sup> See Roger Luckhurst, 'Traumaculture', *New Formations*, 50 (Autumn 2003), pp.28-47. Despite the pervasiveness of the traumatic paradigm that Luckhurst demonstrates, Huyssen is correct to note that discussions of memory should not focus solely on trauma: 'trauma cannot be the central category in addressing the larger memory discourse. It has been all too tempting to some to think of trauma as the hidden core of all memory' – *Present Pasts*, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Among the first and most influential academic observers of this was Fredric Jameson: see *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp.18-21.

<sup>4</sup> I will discuss some of the existing critical work on nostalgia in this paper, but must distinguish my approach from one recent deployment of the concept: Nicholas Dames' *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Dames ingeniously argues that memory in the Victorian novel, unlike its manifestation in modernism, is largely a matter of strategic amnesia. Characters remember only to leave the past behind, and memory is only permissible insofar as it serves present purposes – whereas in Virginia Woolf's fiction, for example, a Bergsonian 'pure memory' surges through, uncontrolled by function. The secure, regulated memory of the Victorian novel Dames designates as 'nostalgia'. My own understanding of the term differs radically from this: I see nostalgia as on the side of 'pure memory', the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, the sudden bittersweet flicker of contingency. This is precisely how George Bowling's nostalgia works too (*CA* 27). Far from being a source of security and regulation, his nostalgic sensations launch him into a daring trip outside his normal life. Dames' theory, then, may illuminate the Victorian novel, but it lacks purchase on Orwell's novel of the 1930s; and his claim that 'the nineteenth-century novel invented modern nostalgia: a nostalgia conceived as a cultural habit and as an *askesis*, a method of self-control and regulation' (p.6) is dubious.

<sup>5</sup> Orwell's determination to join this battle over the historical record is clear in the lengthy Chapter XI of the first edition, which in the 1989 Penguin edition becomes Appendix II. Orwell suspects that 'a completely accurate and unbiased account of the Barcelona fighting' may be impossible, but aims to 'contradict some of the more flagrant lies': *Homage to Catalonia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989 [1938]), p.216.

<sup>6</sup> D.J. Taylor, *Orwell: The Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), p.260.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'St George's Shroud', *Prospect* (February 2000), p.38.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, 'Orwell's Apocalypse: *Coming Up for Air*', in *Modern Critical Views: George Orwell*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), p.91.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rees, 'A Fugitive from the Camp of Victory', in *Orwell Remembered* ed. by Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick (London: Ariel / BBC, 1984), p.117.

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Warburg, 'His Second, Lasting Publisher', in *Orwell Remembered* ed. by Coppard and Crick, p.194.

<sup>11</sup> David Wykes, *A Preface to Orwell* (Harlow: Longman, 1987), p.106.

- <sup>12</sup> Cyril Connolly, 'Review: *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell', in *Horizon*, 12:69 (September 1945), p.215.
- <sup>13</sup> Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, p.11.
- <sup>14</sup> See Jean Starobinski, 'The Idea of Nostalgia', *Diogenes* 54 (1966), pp.81-103; on Kant, pp.94-95.
- <sup>15</sup> In this it recalls Maurice Halbwachs' assertion about memory in general: 'No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections' – *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.43.
- <sup>16</sup> 'In current usage', writes Starobinski, 'its acquired poetic meaning has little by little taken on a pejorative connotation: the word implies the useless yearning for a world or for a way of life from which one has been irrevocably severed' – 'The Idea of Nostalgia', p.101.
- <sup>17</sup> See for instance Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria* (New York: Scribner's, 1994). For a swift, well-informed survey of the debates, see Luckhurst, 'Traumaculture', pp.29-33.
- <sup>18</sup> Instances of this can be found in Christopher Hampton (ed), *The Radical Reader: The Struggle for Change in England 1381-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984). Reviewing this book alongside an anthology edited by Tony Benn, Raphael Samuel counselled caution in the treatment of left-wing inventions of tradition. See 'Ancestor Worship', in Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume II: Island Stories* (London: Verso, 1998), pp.272-5.
- <sup>19</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country* (London: Verso, 1985), p.20.
- <sup>20</sup> John Wain, 'Here Lies Lower Binfield', *Encounter*, XVII:4 (October 1961), p.80.
- <sup>21</sup> Raymond Williams was among the first to point out the strange strain of Orwell's thinking here: see his *Orwell* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1971), pp.33-40.
- <sup>22</sup> On the book's references to Joyce, see Meyers, 'Orwell's Apocalypse: *Coming Up for Air*', pp.93-4.
- <sup>23</sup> See Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Vol 2*, trans. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp.5-6.
- <sup>24</sup> See Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in Lilian R. Furst (ed), *Realism* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), pp.135-41.
- <sup>25</sup> The passage is one of the few from this novel upon which Taylor's biography remarks. He comments that 'Towards the end of his life Orwell allowed himself a certain amount of nostalgia over this prelapsarian round of endless summers and village sweet shops. (Bowling provides a page-long description of Edwardian confectionery, with prices included.)' – *Orwell: The Life*, p.21. This appears, unhelpfully, to conflate Orwell's alleged nostalgia in the late 1940s with his exploration of nostalgia in the novel of the late 1930s; and Taylor has little to say about the formal dimensions of this exploration.
- <sup>26</sup> For a defensive discussion of Orwell's list of suspected fellow-travellers, see Christopher Hitchens, *Orwell's Victory* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2002), ch 7.
- <sup>27</sup> Or again, the 1920s was 'an age of eagles and of crumpets, facile despairs, backyard Hamlets, cheap return tickets to the end of the night' (*CEJL* 1: 559).
- <sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, sweets have remained potent in the repertoire of nostalgia: see for instance Jeremy Novick and Mick Middles, *Wham Bam Thank You Glam!: A Celebration of the 70s* (London: Aurum, 1998), p.142. For a more thorough historical overview see Nicholas Whittaker, *Sweet Talk: The Secret History of Confectionery* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998), whose discussion of nostalgia (pp.9-10) is comparable to Bowling's. Orwell might have been amused to note the publisher of this work.
- <sup>29</sup> In 'Why I Write' Orwell cites 'Historical impulse', the formation of a record for posterity, as one of a writer's major motives: *CEJL* 1: 26.
- <sup>30</sup> For further examples of the potency of the list as the syntactic form of nostalgia, also in the context of rural England, see Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, pp.76-7, 81-4.
- <sup>31</sup> George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982 [1941]), p.36.
- <sup>32</sup> See Peter Davison's 'Note on the Text', *CA* vi-vii.
- <sup>33</sup> As Laura Coffey has pointed out, Orwell's mobilization of a 'pastoral' care for the countryside in an essay like 'Thoughts on the Common Toad' is not a *retreat* from modernity's troubles, but a conscious *response* to them. See her PhD thesis, 'The Recovery of History Through Memory and Nostalgia in the Mid Twentieth-Century Novel' (University of London, 2005).

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Harman (ed), *Countryside Mood* (London: Blandford Press, 1943), p.5, quoted in Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*, p.85.

<sup>35</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'Reach-Me-Down Romantic', *London Review of Books*, 19 June 2003, p.8. John Wain also sees that 'Orwell's socialism... nourished itself on the past' ('Here Lies Lower Binfield', p.71), though he misleadingly tends to see socialism and the past as antithetical principles. See also Christine Berberich, 'A Revolutionary in Love with the 1900s: Orwell in Defence of "Old England"', in *The Road from George Orwell: His Achievement and Legacy*, ed. by Albert Lazaro (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), pp.33-52: this article finally overcomes its dichotomies and accepts that for Orwell, progress and preservation need not contradict each other.

<sup>36</sup> The German philosopher Hermann Lübbe argued in the 1980s that a process of 'musealization' was taking place in contemporary culture, not limited to physical museums but pervading everyday life. For a critical discussion of this model see Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, pp.13-36.