

The Long Weekend

LAURENCE BRANDER

THIS BOOK¹ discusses the work of intellectual English novelists between the wars and especially their reactions to the society in which they lived. It is not a picture of their society; that would have involved Wells, Bennett, Maugham, Galsworthy, and Priestley. It is the reactions of Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, Firbank, Huxley, Gerhardie, Myers, Orwell, Waugh, Isherwood, Rex Warner, Anthony Powell, which are considered. Many of them, we may think, were not very aware of what was going on. A few were ostentatiously unconcerned. Others were tormented observers and recorders. Though these two decades were better for fiction than any decade since, the general spiritual blight over Europe affected novelists then; the spiritual blight described by Karl Jaspers in 1931 as a loss of the indefinable substance which has nourished the European mind for centuries: 'May not the decay of art, poetry and philosophy be symptoms of the approaching exhaustion of this substance?'

That seems likely and the baffling thing is that through these two decades, as in every decade of our century, we enjoyed great scientific discoveries accompanied by remarkable technological advances. As a result, Western Man has never been so physically comfortable or so spiritually empty. Erich Fromm sums it up: we are clever without being wise. In terms of the novel, we are intellectually brilliant and imaginatively bereft. We have all that is physically needed to produce human societies in which the individual mind and spirit could flourish at a pressure hitherto undreamed of. Our imaginative writers have given us *Brave New World* and *1984*. It is impossible even to speak of poetry. In four centuries, English poets have never failed so abjectly to celebrate the imaginative visions of the times. Prose has helped. Not imaginative prose, but the lesser expository kind and very often

¹ Hena Maes-Jelinck, *Criticism of Society in the English Novel between the Wars*, Société d'Éditions 'Les Belles Lettres', 1970.

in lectures, lectures by scientists and philosophers expressing the piety of great minds, seeking to explain to us the discoveries which have been made and how they must qualify our thinking.

Is there anything in our imaginative fiction to approach the passionate appeal for intellectual and spiritual vitality in Ortega's opening lecture to his students in 1921? Or anything that gives us the consolation we find in that great culminating exposition of the nature of things in Sherrington's final Gifford Lecture in 1938? Or, to come nearer our own time, is there anything in fiction to equal the imaginative sweep in the lectures of Julian Huxley, as in this summary of what science has achieved in our century: 'man's unveiling of the face and figure of the reality of which he forms a part, the first picture of human destiny in its true outlines'? Is there any celebration of the human condition in fiction to rival Gabriel Marcel's final lecture in his Harvard series in 1961? When he worked on his audience until they could believe that it is an honour to be a man? All these expressions of the human spirit and many more, Freud's *Introductory Lectures*, Whitehead's Lowell lectures in 1926, Paul Valéry's *Regards sur le monde actuel* in 1931, remind us that we are living in one of the most fruitful eras of the human intelligence. Why is it that our fiction so obviously failed to celebrate this in imaginative terms?

Our metaphysics was in no better condition and probably for the same reason, that it takes time to digest great advances in other intellectual fields. We were also mentally and morally exhausted after the 1914 War. What this meant in our actual feeling about life is well expressed by Wilfrid Trotter in the 1919 Post-script to his *Instincts of the Herd*. He asks whether 'Western civilization may not be about to follow its unnumbered predecessors into decay and dissolution. There can be no doubt that such a suspicion is oppressing many thoughtful minds at the present time.' Among them, Oswald Spengler, who had published his *Decline of the West* in the previous year. Trotter referred to a main theme of that book: 'The view can be maintained very plausibly that all civilizations tend ultimately to break down, that they reach sooner or later a period when their original vigour is worn out and then collapse through internal disruption or outside pressure.' Trotter was not a victim to this despair. Active scientists seemed to be immune — they had progressed in so

many ways during the war — but it was in the air and blighted imaginative writing.

Forster expresses the feeling of these decades with his usual clarity in his Glasgow lecture in 1944 about English prose between the wars. There had been an earthquake in European societies and writers displayed 'unrest or disillusionment or anxiety'. They were 'the products of a civilization which feels itself insecure'. They had lived through the first total war in modern Europe and our prose was the 'product of a people who have war on their minds'. Our writers were acutely conscious that we were in a mess and if they weren't they were not worth reading. Four years earlier, Orwell suggested in his essay 'Inside the Whale' that the decline of imaginative writing in the second decade, the 1930s, was due to our obsession with politics:

On the whole, the literary history of the 'thirties seems to justify the opinion that a writer does well to keep out of politics. For any writer who accepts or partially accepts the discipline of a political party is sooner or later faced with the alternative: toe the line or shut up.

But writers do not have to join political parties to be affected by politics. The totalitarian regimes in Europe made sure that we were all too aware of politics and we were so weighed down by this sacriligious attack on the European spirit and by the dread of war that imagination was cramped. Again, the scientists seemed to be free from this burden on the spirit. What Orwell says a little later explains the novelists' disability: 'The novel is practically a Protestant form of art; it is a product of the free mind, of the autonomous individual.' We may also agree that 'No decade in the past hundred and fifty years has been so barren of imaginative prose as the nineteen thirties'.

But in these European intellectual considerations it is always to the French we must eventually turn for the clearest insight into our condition. In the Foreword to his *Regards* Valéry minds us in 1931 that our world has become finite. There was no longer any place or people unknown and therefore everything could be measured and compared. Europe was suddenly revealed to be comparatively small. It had discovered the world and changed it utterly. It had collaborated in a common intellectual life and yet failed miserably in its political life. As a result, in 1914 we went to war and that accelerated the already inevitable decline of Europe:

The simultaneous weakening of all her greatest nations; the glaring internal contradictions of principle; the despairing recourse of both sides to non-Europeans . . . the destruction of one another's prestige by western nations in their war of propaganda; not to mention the accelerated spread of military methods and means, or the extermination of the elite: such were the consequences, for Europe's position in the world, of a crisis long prepared by many illusions.

In the following year, in one of his lectures at the *Université des Annales*, he describes the state of the European mind and so explains the decay of our imaginative writing:

I propose to evoke for you the disorder in which we live. I shall try to show you the reactions of a mind as it observes that disorder . . . A certain effort is needed, for we have become accustomed to it, we live on it, we breathe it, we add to it, and sometimes we feel a real need for it. We find it around us and within us, in the newspapers, in our daily life, in our manners, in our pleasures, even in our knowledge. It sustains us; and what we have ourselves created is now dragging us whither we do not know and do not wish to go.

We were all in that European mess. For a decade after the war we tried phrenetic gaiety as a way of forgetting that we had no leaders or leading social class who could restore social and economic sanity. For a decade before the second war, we grew more and more fearful because we had no leaders in Europe who could withstand the drift to savagery; we had destroyed the elite who would have produced and supported sane leadership. Europe lived in torment and European novelists had their greatest and most tragic opportunity. Perhaps they were too near it and too involved; they were unable to take it. In the other great aspect of the evolution of Western Man in these decades, which dwarfed wars into minor episodes, Europe and America went on enjoying the most powerful age of scientific discovery ever experienced and thus gave their novelists an extraordinary opportunity to re-interpret the spirit of man. Again, imaginative prose writers failed. Consider one aspect, which Forster discussed in his lecture, the discovery of the subconscious:

This exploration is conveniently connected with the awful name of Freud, but it is not so much in Freud as in the air. It has brought a great enrichment to the art of fiction. It has given subtleties and depths to the portrayal of human nature . . . This psychology is not new but it has newly risen to the surface.

Very true, and it gave us, among others, Dorothy Richardson, Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and how well have they worn? The obvious explanation of the general failure is that our novelists, like our politicians, administrators and so many others, simply did not know what was going on in science. Our system of education was outrageously outdated and left them blind and deaf and therefore dumb in relation to the world of science.

These reflections are evoked by this massive and fascinating volume, which is an important addition to the literature of the inter-war English novel. The brief opening chapter discusses the crisis in our social life which was accelerated by the war. 'The abdication of responsibility by the ruling class brought to light the obsolescence and inadequacy of the social framework; it intensified the sense of insecurity created by the war itself.' A peaceful society had become restless and disenchanting. The novel gave

the atmosphere of forced gaiety and anxiety which prevailed in the post-war decade. The young men were eager for life and wanted to be free of the old restraints. The break between the old and young, which was one cause among others of the deterioration of the community spirit, resulted from the young people's contempt for the inadequacy of the established rules of conduct and way of life.

The chapter goes on to describe 'their disillusion about humanity as a whole' which 'lay at the root of neurosis among the younger generation'. They were inwardly lost, confused, disillusioned, cynical. It is all attributed to the war, which was a catalyst of a reaction against established forms and attitudes which 'had begun to take shape before 1914'. To many of us, it seems likely that young people then were suffering what young people of every generation since have suffered, the pangs of uncertainty and insecurity associated with an explosion of scientific knowledge and technology. Young Huxley may have remembered that when he was writing *Brave New World* in which scientific research was forbidden because it interfered with social stability. Society has been in flux all through the century in order one day to re-form on a new and better basis. So we hope, and meantime all of us await the next tremor of the earthquake.

For the origins, the author herself takes us further back in her chapter on D. H. Lawrence:

The collapse of traditional attitudes and ways of life after the First World War and the breakdown of values were not the immediate result of people's experience in the War. Rather, this experience made people aware of the changes which had been preparing for a very long time: the shock of the War precipitated a revolution already simmering in the nineteenth century.

This first chapter is about the only genius in her list. Aldous Huxley, Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh were sufficiently talented to provide interest and pleasure still. Two are still at work; but is it too unkind to say of the others that their work is distinguished and dead, or that their views on society can be of interest only to academic historians?

With D. H. Lawrence it is different. 'His novels create a new and original pattern of the highlights of existence.' He explored the effects and consequences of the accelerating changes when they were just beginning to be felt; and in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, published during the war, he becomes 'the first modern English writer to have analysed with such perspicacity the deeper trends of contemporary civilization'. Splendid, though most of us will recall many writers, even novelists, who had been doing that with notable perspicacity for more than a decade. Lawrence soon carries the critic away. That is what happens in criticism when it is sincere; immerse yourself in an author and it is the very devil to keep him in his place. Anyone who feels in need of a corrective to the general Lawrence Adoration can always turn to Bertrand Russell in his *Portraits from Memory* and *Autobiography*, where he gives the judgement of the Cambridge Apostles on our imperfect novelist:

The world between the wars was attracted to madness. Of this attraction Nazism was the most emphatic expression. Lawrence was a suitable exponent of this cult of insanity.

We are aware of it in his schoolbook, *Movements in European History*, in which he describes the everlasting European quarrellings with relish and displays his natural authoritarian leanings. These are the two views of D.H.L. on politics and society, that he was an inspired prophet who saw that a satisfying democracy was impossible in huge industrial populations or that he had the usual working class authoritarian outlook.

The present exposition of his work concentrates on his general beliefs about human existence and demonstrates the urgent power

of his exposition. It is a good example of the critical method in this book, which is to open with an exposition of the author's main beliefs and then discuss the individual novels. In the case of Lawrence, this opening exposition has the power which quotation from him is bound to accumulate. 'Life as a powerful urge pervading the universe, a dark, unknown force stirring every part of the physical creation. Life in its manifold aspects, immanent, spontaneous, irresistible.' The desire to preach consumed him, the novel was Protestant for him all right, and it led to failure in his later novels, when he tried to reconcile his teaching on individual salvation and his puritan conscience, which told him he must state a doctrine of socialization. He was an anarchist who could not get away from his inherited puritan conscience; in other moods, he was a theoretical fascist who would have fled from the practical results of total rule. Just to complicate the diagnosis, Russell suggests that Frieda had the ideas and Lawrence gave them expression.

The same agreeable method is followed in the piece on Virginia Woolf. The activating belief is examined before the individual novels:

she attempted to re-define the individual relationship with his surrounding world and reversed the actual process of exploration by doing away with the external approach and going straight to what was essential to her: the inner life of human beings and the quality of their experience rather than experience as such.

Even in the first novel she 'explores the nature of life and draws attention to the individual's need to assess the meaning of existence'. That was indeed the search, and it was touched with tragedy, as probably for the first time intelligent English society could find no satisfying belief. Forster, it is true, declared himself unhappy because he was living in an age of Faith and declared, 'I do not believe in belief' and used for prayer, 'Lord, I disbelieve — help thou my unbelief'. He was tough and survived. His friend, Virginia Woolf, did not survive and as a writer is becoming a shadow describing shades. Her work is discussed here with great sympathy, a celebration of a woman who could not discover any belief and had to rely on ephemeral understanding between individuals in a society which irked her for it also had ceased to believe.

When we come to Aldous Huxley, the chapter is headed with a neatly apposite quotation from *Ends and Means* — the quotations in this book are a joy — ‘For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation’. Those who sustained the old Victorian code claimed that it ‘embodied the meaning of the world’ while ‘we could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever’. This philosophy is the essence of his early novels. ‘He expresses the unavowed despair which underlies their defiant negation of values and shows the vulnerability of modern man, his distrust of his fellow-beings and his reluctance to face life responsibly.’ True, and the essential interest of Huxley’s writings is that he was developing all the time, facing life more and more responsibly, seeking belief more and more strenuously. Within the decade of these considerations he got as far as a loathing of war and human aggressiveness, an inevitable reaction when Europe was rushing towards self-destruction.

In these early novels, he captured his audience by shocking them and never more than in *Brave New World*, where he rejected outrageously the moral and scientific outlook of his family and class. The book is an inverted treatment of the greatest social problem of the century, the struggle of the individual against the herd. It would be convenient if the necessary herd could be produced synthetically and if some harmless drug like soma could be manufactured to eliminate the violence in herd nature and compassionately carry it through its waste of hours. Western man is losing the art of dealing with time; that requires belief. In *Brave New World* truth and beauty were abandoned, because the herd had no further use for them, in favour of happiness and contentment. Scientific progress was prevented to retain stability. The book is a sordid satire of the human race, far too near the truth today to be comfortable, one of the documents in the history of the fear of the masses which has grown through the century. Huxley reminded us that, by removing the desire for truth and beauty and compassion, humanity could be reduced to animal docility with the aid of benign chemical conditioning. Orwell suggested in a *Tribune* paper that ‘no society of that kind would last more than a couple of generations, because a ruling class which thought principally in terms of a “good time” would soon

lose its vitality'. But Mustapha Mond chose to be Controller to serve other people's happiness, not his own. He was one of these dedicated fanatics who from time to time threaten civilization. Huxley said he would have liked to rewrite the dialogue between Mond and the Savage. If he had done so, he might have shown us that there were enough unconditioned amiable alphas left in his brave new world to make all the chemistry worth while. It could be a decision alpha people will have to take.

In his later writing, Huxley is more and more concerned with the individual and the possibility of more developed intelligence and greater awareness. The physical conditions are available for western man to develop his full potential. For Huxley that included belief in the spiritual dimension in man and he came to believe in an impersonal God, avoiding the violence inherent in Middle Eastern religions and giving up the cherished western idea of indestructible individual personality. His critic here suggests that this deprives his ideal of meaning because it requires man to free himself from his nature. In the East there is no difficulty. The most aware and sympathetic orientals are those who find this transition perfectly natural. It is a small caveat on a chapter which displays understanding of Huxley's spiritual development, much the most interesting among the novelists considered here. Most of them petered out; Huxley progressed. He was not a natural novelist and his letters show that he knew it. He learned the trick of writing fiction well enough to give him sufficient reputation to get his more genuine work published and read.

This was true also of Orwell, who was more equally not a novelist. His *1984* is horrible, with some satirical essay writing of classical quality embedded in it. His earlier London novels fail more quietly. They are documents rather than fiction and Madame Maes-Jelinek exercises her talent for quotation by culling from them some excellent things on society and politics, more than one remembered were there. Orwell, like Huxley, was a natural essayist writing at a time when essay writing no longer paid. So he wrote novels and the first two London novels are vivid personal documentaries, by no means his best prose. He never allowed them to be republished while he was alive, probably because they reminded him of the minor Edwardian fiction he knew so well. We sometimes forget how little he knew well. He had no

academic training because he transported himself after school to a civilization with no connections with our own. He had no regular training in literature, philosophy, economics, politics or sociology. He brought a fresh and uninhibited mind, like Shaw, to politics and social questions and because he developed a gift for writing prose as clear as a windowpane, he spoke very well for all of us who come as freshly to them as he did.

The best obiter dicta about Orwell come from E. M. Forster, who speaks of his peculiar blend of gaiety and grimness, of his being a bit of a nagger, of his attempts to ameliorate a world which was bound to be unhappy, of there being no salvation through politics, of his belief in kindness, good temper and accuracy; of his confusing belief with compassion when he said the people would make good. His main hope was in common decency and that badly wants nourishing everywhere. There have been so many books on Orwell that there is nothing new to be said; just a few modifications after studying the four volumes of his papers. Why, by contrast, so few on Huxley? The trend of our sociological-political preoccupations? The magnetic attraction of Orwell's uncompromising integrity — he so obviously enjoyed Lessing's *selbstdenken*, independent thinking for himself? Or his journalistic gift of saying very neatly what we all want to say? Once again, the method adopted in this book serves well. His general views are assessed and then each novel is considered, adding up to a useful seventy-page review effectively illustrated with quotation; all the essentials.

This is a book which we may expect to find in every English Literary library. It is thorough; it considers all the books and the best criticism on the books. Its bibliographies and index are invaluable. Its distinctive advantage is that it is written from a European outlook; we find our insular concerns observed from the centre. The writer is critical with a bias towards discovering the best in us. It is therefore a model for young critics, who have had too much encouragement to forget that it is not very sensible or very agreeable to destroy the house in which you live. We have had so much bad temper and peremptoriness — provincial antics in Cambridge — that it has become a valued pleasure to read work written from the centre and mellowed by much reading and thought.