

THE SPACE BETWEEN

The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell: The Novels from Burmese Days to Nineteen Eighty-Four. By Loraine Saunders. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. viii + 159 pp.

Given the stature of George Orwell, it is remarkable the lengths to which critics feel the need to go to assert the value of his work. A recent example might be John Rodden's *Every Intellectual's Big Brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings*, featuring interviews with, among others, Christopher Hitchens, Todd Gitlin, and Richard Rorty. Many of these texts aver the necessity of reading Orwell in our times. Abbott Gleason and Martha Nussbaum opine, for instance, "George Orwell remains at the center of modern political life. . . . Changed though the world seems to be, we still cannot help finding Orwell in it" (1, 3). Concomitant with the assertions of the ongoing political relevance of his work are claims of equal strength and vigor for the artistry of his writing, the "literariness" of his works; see particularly essays in the recent *Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*. In other words, Orwell readers and scholars argue not only for his value as a political thinker, but also for his value as a literary figure, using both his essays and his novels to make their case.

It would seem to be a difficult case to make. Consider the problem of Orwell's novels. Michael Levenson echoes numerous critics when he writes, "The book-length journalism of the 1930s . . . has had a far more prominent afterlife than the fiction" (59). Michael Shelden has noted Orwell's difficulties and insecurities as a novelist, saying "He was simply unable to describe a completely fictional character with the sharp perception he brought to his nonfiction" (223). Q. D. Leavis, in 1940, put it most succinctly (and harshly): "Nature did not intend him to be a novelist" (qtd. in Gottlieb 194).

Lorraine Saunders's *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell* offers a corrective to, first, the neglect of Orwell's fiction in favor of his political writing (particularly in a post-9/11 world); and second, the longstanding

critical consensus that Orwell's fiction is less technically and stylistically sophisticated than his other writing or that of his contemporaries. While many critics have conflated author and narrator in order to point out that Orwell's characters do not have lives of their own, serving mainly as mouth-pieces for the author, crucial to Saunders's argument is that Orwell was a skillful manipulator of narrative perspective and style, specifically free indirect discourse. Writing that Orwell "layers his narratives with a distinctive polyphony" (5), she uses the theoretical apparatus of Mikhail Bakhtin as a framework for elucidating Orwell's technical experimentation.

Rather than make extravagant claims for Orwell as a modernist (although she does note some affinities with James Joyce), Saunders seeks to situate her subject *both* within modernist tendencies towards multivalent narrative and shifting focalization, *and* within a robust realist tradition resonant with Orwell's politics and with his style. In particular, Saunders cites George Gissing as an important forebear; yet while Gissing is clearly important in terms of the genealogy of the British realist novel, he also serves Saunders's purpose in distinguishing Orwell as not "just" a realist author. Saunders argues that those who would view Orwell as positioned squarely within that mode, writing about the same proletarian underclass that preoccupied Gissing, are missing Orwell's sophisticated "management of narrative sympathies" (72). Orwell negotiates the competing psychological tensions of his characters through free indirect discourse, eschewing the more straightforward tactics of his nineteenth-century predecessors.

The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell seeks to place the focus on the "artistry"; acknowledging his importance as a nonfiction prose writer, Saunders redirects our attention to Orwell's fiction. She does so with clarity, sympathy, and a fine eye for close reading. However, while much of her textual analysis is persuasively done, the exhortative nature of her argument cannot quite overcome the limitations of Orwell's work as a fiction writer. The main thrust of her argument—debunking the prevailing criticism that Orwell's characters are overshadowed by their author, his concerns and voice—is finally weakened by the reality that George Orwell is stronger than his fictional creations.

Works Cited

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