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Steve Ellis

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The 1939 State

This book assembles and discusses the literary components of what E. M. Forster called ‘The 1939 State’, to quote the title of an essay he published in June 1939, three months before the outbreak of World War II. The essay appears at a time of ‘incalculable catastrophe, in which the whole of western civilisation and half oriental civilisation may go down’.¹ Forster dates the inception of the climate of anxiety, suspense and speculation that constitutes the ‘1939 state’ – the lower case here signifies that this is as much, if not more, the state of the individual as of the nation – not from the start of the calendar year, but from the Munich crisis and settlement of the previous September; indeed the essay was retitled ‘Post-Munich’ (and slightly revised) when it was collected in Forster’s *Two Cheers for Democracy* of 1951. ‘Munich’ – the mobilisation of the German army in pursuit of territorial claims to the Czechoslovakian Sudetenland, the French treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia and British obligations to France that thereby came into play, the drama of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s three flights to Germany in search of a peace solution when Europe stood on the brink of war – brought home to many people for the first time the actuality of an imminent European conflict. Before the settlement was signed at the end of September, British preparations included the digging of air raid trenches in public parks, the installation of anti-aircraft batteries and the mobilisation of the British fleet; the impending sense of ‘death at the doors’ and imminent ‘fireworks’ is memorably captured in parts VII and VIII of Louis MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal*, published in May 1939, in its tracing of the previous autumn’s events.²

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For Forster and many others, the peace that ‘flapped from the posters’ with the settlement was essentially a phoney peace, inaugurating the ‘Post-Munich’ period of continuing crisis where war was merely deferred. The resulting interval, the ‘war of nerves’ as it was commonly described at the time, is discussed in its many manifestations in the following chapters as writers respond to the unfolding events of 1939. By March the limits of the peace were clearly exposed when Germany, which had been ceded the Sudetenland, overran the rest of Czechoslovakia; by April the Spanish Civil War concluded with the triumph of the fascist forces. German ambitions for expansion into eastern Europe were evident in its claims upon territory in the Baltic states and Poland, prosecuted in the spring and summer of 1939, by which time Forster could note in his essay that ‘the Crisis . . . has become a habit, indeed almost a joke’ (p. 889). The signing of the Russia-Germany non-aggression pact in August 1939 confirmed a situation which was, in the words of Anthony Eden, ‘as grave and as perilous as any this country has faced at any time in her history’; the pact’s facilitating German claims to the Free City of Danzig, and hence Germany’s confrontation with Poland, resulted in the British declaration of war with Germany a few weeks later.³ Before this declaration we have about a year therefore of the ‘war of nerves’, stimulated not simply by events abroad but, of course, by the domestic planning for war that was stepped up from March onwards. After the Munich settlement, Chamberlain and his government were later to be accused of peddling a spurious ‘Golden Age’ of confidence and peace, brutally truncated by the German invasion of Prague: ‘Czechoslovakia vanished overnight. So did the Golden Age’.⁴ The leader-writer of the *Spectator*, calling for greater investment in Air Raid Precautions, spoke for many in arguing that ‘the danger since Munich has grown greater and not less; no-one in the country can feel sure that at any moment in the immediate future he will be safe from a sudden attack by General Goering’s bombers’.⁵ Chamberlain’s speech in Birmingham on 17 March 1939 effectively signalled the end of the policy of appeasement as well as the intensification of war measures, such as rearmament, evacuation planning, increasing ARP and conscription, with 20- and 21-year-old men being required to

enrol for military training on 3 June.⁶ The *Spectator*, in reporting on this latter development, notes its deeper significance: ‘since the days of Cromwell the Englishman has regarded conscription as incompatible with the preservation of his liberties, and as the foundation of the militarist systems of the Continent’.⁷

In his essay Forster’s sense of ‘the scene darkening and the powers of evil marching and the ravens gathering’ is particularly attuned to the *Spectator*’s further brooding on this situation two weeks later:

is there not . . . a real danger that Germany, by driving Great Britain to conscription, authoritarianism and other typical characteristics of German militarism, may be gradually robbing Englishmen of the freedom which Germans have long since had to surrender?⁸

Forster expresses what he calls this ‘hideous dilemma’ rather more sharply: ‘if Fascism wins we are done for, and . . . we must become Fascist to win’. Joining the national cause is inevitably ‘a betrayal of something good’, be this pacifism, freedom or individuality itself in the mobilisation, requisitions and emergency legislation required in a time of war or war preparation (this dilemma, of course, is recurrent in various guises, as with the present-day ‘war on terror’). To participate in the fight to save civilisation is to risk civilised values, but non-participation runs the same danger, and Forster rings a series of variations in ‘The 1939 State’ on the theme of the resulting sense of ‘paralysis’, where ‘no slogan works’ and the thoughtful ‘are vexed by messages from contradictory worlds’. ‘These mixed states are terrible for the nerves’, Forster states, but nevertheless they must be recognised and can only be improved ‘by thought’: the essay ends with a warning against ‘simplification’ and the proposal that ‘the only satisfactory release, I think, is to be found in the direction of complexity. The world won’t work out, and the person who can realise this . . . has done as well as can be expected of him in the present year’ (p. 889). We must resist easy answers, slogans and unilateral affiliations at a time when these are rife; we can only face the facts by being ‘double-faced’.

There are many other manifestations of the ‘1939 state’ in the literature of the time, however, which are described in the following

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chapters. This book opens with a discussion of the religious revival that occurred as a consequence of Munich, with the sense that the nation's prayers to avoid war had been answered through Chamberlain's negotiations, before looking at the debate – in which T. S. Eliot is my principal figure – about the nation's spiritual health, or lack of it. In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, published in October 1939 but delivered as a series of lectures the previous March, Eliot notes how the work had been prompted by his own crisis over Munich, the sense of personal 'humiliation' through incrimination in a society which, in its negotiating with Hitler, 'could not match conviction with conviction', and 'had no ideas with which we could either meet or oppose the ideas opposed to us' beyond 'a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends'. Eliot argues that 'many persons' must have shared his sense of dismay, not necessarily because Britain avoided going to war to defend Czechoslovakia, but in the more general crisis of national identity that Munich revealed.⁹ Eliot's arguments with the Moral Rearmament movement and other Christian apologists including John Middleton Murry, Jacques Maritain and the circle of writers attached to journals such as *Christendom* and the *Christian News-Letter* are discussed, as well as his reflections on Germanic 'paganism' and on the materialism and social developments that were leading Europe to war. As with many writers of the time, the essential enemy is seen as lying within, in the corruption of our own institutions. The vigorous dissension between those who supported the peace, or at least the postponement of war, that Chamberlain achieved, and those who for various reasons contested the appeasement policy, was not, of course, confined to religious adherents.¹⁰ Furthermore many others were torn between these positions, afflicted by the 'dilemma' of both 'shame and relief', in David Faber's words; thus Leonard Woolf recorded the ambivalence he suffered 'all through the Munich crisis' between the 'extraordinary' sense of relief the peace brought alongside his conviction that Chamberlain's policy was 'shameful and morally and politically wrong'.¹¹ All this added up to what Harold Nicolson called the 'strange condition of emotional inflammation' brought on by Munich, and my second chapter follows the complexities of this response through the almost-forgotten genre of the 'Munich crisis novel' and

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associated works that record the impact of the situation on everyday lives.¹² In the post-Munich summing-up of a character from one of these, ‘it’s something people have never experienced before, this living in a tense atmosphere of preparation for a war which hasn’t yet come . . . It’s going to be a long business, this state of tension and strain . . . People will have to learn a new sort of courage to meet it’.¹³

The major factor in this state of ‘tension and strain’ was of course the newly developed capacity for aerial bombardment which meant that civilians were now as exposed to the dangers of war as those fighting overseas. J. B. S. Haldane’s book *A. R. P.*, published in 1938, speculated on an enemy attack on London that might kill 50,000–100,000 inhabitants, offering in its second chapter, ‘History of Air Bombing’ a description of recent fascist raids in Abyssinia and Spain, notably at Guernica, where ‘some 2000 people were killed, many being roasted alive’, though these were ‘almost trivial’ compared with the ongoing Japanese assaults on China, where in Canton alone fatalities from air raids ‘must far exceed 10000’.¹⁴ These worries pre-date Munich, of course, as the *London Mercury* testified:

it has been dinned into our consciousness that a war, if it comes, will be totalitarian; that all our activities . . . will be subordinate to it, and that it will strike at all indiscriminately, in their homes or at their work, and that civilians in the towns may feel the brunt of it before any troops have been engaged.¹⁵

Munich however translated that ‘if it comes’ into a frightful imminence, again in the words of *Autumn Journal*:

The night grows purple, the crisis hangs
Over the roofs like a Persian army
And all of Xenophon’s parasangs
Would take us only an inch from danger.
Black-out practice and A. R. P.,
Newsboys driving a roaring business,
The flapping paper snatched to see
If anything has, or has not, happened.

(MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 119)

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Whatever the actual distance from enemies on the continent (a parasang is an ancient measure of length of just over three miles), the civilian threatened by air warfare remains 'only an inch from danger'. Chapter 2 thus also considers the focus on air bombardment or the more incidental treatment of it in the literature of 1939, an example of the latter occurring in George Orwell's novel *Coming Up for Air*, written in the months after the Munich crisis and published in June. Early in the novel the protagonist, George Bowling, and his fellow-passenger in the train watch a 'great black bombing plane' overhead:

I knew what he was thinking. For that matter it's what everybody else is thinking . . . In two years' time, one year's time, what shall we be doing when we see one of those things? Making a dive for the cellar, wetting our bags with fright.¹⁶

Alongside a literature of anxiety we find other types of commentary in the writing of 1939 that offer a spectrum of response from distraction and entertainment pure and simple to attempts to build morale and active engagement in social and political critique and schemes of reconstruction. The latter position is exemplified by H. G. Wells, whose prominence at this time has been largely forgotten, and whose early 1939 novel *The Holy Terror* is accompanied by a mass of writing throughout the year and into the next outlining his schemes for a 'new world order'. Wells and those he supports, such as Leonard Woolf and J. B. Priestley, and the many opponents he trenchantly dismisses, form the subject of Chapter 3. Here I emphasise the fact that, just as Forster dated the '1939 state' from September 1938, so it hardly ceases with the declaration of war in September 1939, given that there followed several largely uneventful months compared with the hostilities that had been expected, comprising the phase of the so-called twilight or phoney war. The span from September 1938 to May 1940, when sustained military engagement begins following the German invasion of Holland and Belgium, can thus be seen as having to some degree a unitary character in the peculiar emotions and responses resulting from the war of nerves, a period in which, in Orwell's phrase, 'the peace that is not a peace slumps into a war that is not a war'.¹⁷ What follows can therefore be

seen as a literary ‘year study’ of what might be called the ‘long 1939’ rather than of the calendar year. During this period Britain had more time to rearm, but its writers also had more time to think, and the results of this thinking were often very uncomfortable. For figures such as T. S. Eliot, brokering a state of shameful quasi-peace brought to the fore questions that included what, as a nation, do we stand for, and how far is what we stand for worth preserving? Other prominent and not so prominent writers also responded to the 1939 state in investigative mode, and following the chapter on Wells, two further chapters consider the work of Orwell, Forster, Priestley, W. H. Auden, Virginia Woolf and many others in its various interventions and proposals for how that state and the State itself can be addressed and remedied.

The literary/cultural ‘year study’ has exemplars such as Michael North’s *Reading 1922* and Jean-Michel Rabaté’s account of 1913, and as in those works I consider a wide range of material published in the chosen year in order to give a solid context for the writers on whom I concentrate.¹⁸ But there are significant differences: for one thing, taking 1922 as a comparison, 1939 is not a monumental literary year, though it did finally see the publication of *Finnegans Wake* to set beside *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. In comparison to the ‘encyclopaedic’ character of these latter works, and their relating of modernity to the entire European tradition and beyond, we might say that 1939 is much more circumscribed in outlook for the most part, and much more focussed on a single issue. In other words, for its writers there is only one game in town: the approaching war. This is tantamount to saying that the pressure of historical circumstances and the narrowing focus involved in responding to them is one factor signalling the end-phase of modernism, and its wider experimentation, scope, diversity and pluralism. Another factor, of course, is the death of many of its key figures in this year or shortly thereafter: Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, Freud, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, as well as the end of Eliot’s *Criterion*. In stressing the dominance of the theme of war, we should also note, again in the words of Orwell, that ‘at any given moment . . . there is a huge tribe of Barries and Deepings and Dells who simply don’t notice what is happening’.¹⁹ In fact there is a whole gamut of

non-involvement also investigated in the following pages, and which, as with Orwell, often shows a nostalgia for modernism even as this is in its death-throes, a nostalgia also to be found in the more principled refusals of Cyril Connolly: 'one excellent counsel I could give to writers would be: keep off the war'.²⁰ But the writers previously noted are certainly not 'keeping off the war', even though their contributions to the discussion are notably different. Thus while Eliot and his circle of Christian apologists debate spiritual renewal and Wells campaigns for global political reconstruction, Orwell is promoting first pacifism and then support for the war grounded in socialist reorganisation, Aldous Huxley offers 'detachment' and Forster musters a beleaguered humanism, a position shared by Virginia Woolf though here informed by her continuing struggle with the patriarchy. There are also many interesting overlaps among such positions, together with conscious oppositions between writers which sharpen individual cases, so that looking at this group side-by-side in synchronic fashion, especially in the case of writers who are not normally discussed together such as Orwell and Virginia Woolf, reveals significant and hitherto overlooked contiguities. One major concern is not simply the conduct of and rationale for war, but a wider perspective that considers 'peace aims' and what kind of post-war world writers would like to see.

It is notable that many of the most prominent voices, and among those most discussed in contemporary journals and news articles, belong to writers of an older generation, such as Eliot and Wells. Another response to the 1939 state might simply be to absent oneself from it: in 'Waldemar', the third part of his autobiographical retrospect *Down There on a Visit*, Christopher Isherwood gives his own account of Munich. Here the day-to-day uncertainties and postponements of September 1938 result in a sense that 'time has slowed down', so that 'the crisis is like a newly-discovered dimension', a 'neutral zone' in which 'we might conceivably live . . . for the rest of our lives', a state of suspension worked up in Forster's essay.²¹ As it is for Orwell's George Bowling, it is not so much 'being bombed or even . . . a Nazi invasion' that the narrator dreads as much as the prospect of '*English* authority', 'the state of being *under orders*', imaged as the rule of Isherwood's 'first headmaster': 'I realise that

I have a terror of *uniform*, and all that it implies' (*Down There on a Visit*, p. 189, emphasis in original). Another 'discovery about myself, and I don't care if that's humiliating or not', is that 'nothing, nothing, nothing is worth a war', and although Isherwood connives with those who regard Munich as a 'great betrayal', his relief at the postponement of war is evident and cements his resolve to return to America (pp. 201–2). By the end of 'Waldemar', both the eponymous protagonist and the narrator are ready to leave England: 'Waldemar's decision had somehow related itself to mine. And now my own departure had become just that much more of an accomplished fact' (p. 206). Isherwood and Auden's removal to America at the start of 1939 led to their joining Huxley and Gerald Heard, who had already settled there, in a group regarded at home as 'lost leaders', their absence being particularly debated in the pages of the *Spectator* in the spring and summer of 1940 as the war intensified, prompted by Harold Nicolson's lament that these writers demonstrate 'by their exile . . . they wish to have no part in the blood-stained anarchy of Europe'.²² In pioneering accounts of 1930s writing such as Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation*, this 'withdrawal' from Europe leads to the picture of the pre-war period as 'a time of endings, but of no beginnings, a time in which the great issues of the thirties . . . were disappearing into the wings, and the stage emptied for the final scene'.²³

To argue as Hynes does that a 'true literary history of the thirties' is synonymous with the younger generation of writers (*The Auden Generation*, p. 394) arguably misrepresents the long 1939 in particular, and this book calls attention to an older generation, no less writers of the 1930s than Auden and his circle, who dominate the stage as this 'final scene' approaches. I therefore offer a corrective sense of a literary 1939 as it might look to those living and reading through it, and the younger writers, while by no means neglected, tend to occupy a space 'in the wings' of the following study. The active interventions of Eliot, Wells, Priestley, Virginia Woolf and so on at this time – anticipated indeed by their writings throughout the 1930s – suggest that 1939 in particular might be reclaimed from customary understandings of what the 'literature of the 1930s' is.

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Of course, since Hynes's study was published, there have been many revisionist accounts of 1930s writing, but books with titles like *Recharting the Thirties* tend to concentrate on relatively marginalised writers of Auden's generation rather than bring older writers into the fold.²⁴ Likewise Andy Croft's *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* widens the net to include neglected working class and socialist imaginative writing, while studies by Janet Montefiore, Phyllis Lassner and Gill Plain have done essential work in redressing the neglect of women's writing in previous histories.²⁵ But none of these works, nor Valentine Cunningham's encyclopaedic *British Writers of the Thirties*, offers much on the texts, writers and historical events that constitute the end of the 1930s as presented in what follows.²⁶ Perhaps the closest study to my own is Sebastian Knowles's *A Purgatorial Flame*, which covers a number of the writers I treat and discusses the pre-war period in some detail, though offering a sketchy historical context and not much on the secondary debate the material has occasioned.²⁷ Phyllis Lassner's study is also valuable in the attention it gives to the late 1930s as it pursues the careers of writers entering World War II.²⁸

Studies of the writing of the following decade, the 1940s, tend to follow in Hynes's track in positing, in 1939, the 'overwhelming sense of an ending' represented by the departure of Auden and Isherwood, and thereby inaugurate their own convenient historiographical 'beginning'.²⁹ But if 1939 is an ending, it is so for more far-reaching reasons than this, as already suggested in relation to modernism, an ending that would lead one moreover to contest the idea frequently found in historians looking for a few literary landmarks that Auden's poem 'September 1, 1939', with its farewell to a 'low dishonest decade', is the definitive literary event of the year.³⁰ The truly significant *envoi* is not to a decade merely, nor should it be located so late in that decade. Here I endorse Ronald Blythe's protest at 'the popular decadal chopping-up of recent history into neat packets labelled "the Nineties", "the Twenties", "the Fifties", etc'.³¹ In making this comment, Blythe is discussing his novel of 1960, *A Treasonable Growth*, set in 1939, where he confirms the special quality of the period under discussion: