

# Anti-State Fantasy and the Fiction of the 1940s

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## Abstract:

This essay argues that the wartime institutionalisation of emergency governmental powers and the expectation of their continuance under a post-war socialist administration led to a pervasive anti-statism indistinguishable from anti-Communism in the mid-century British novel. Focusing on less-read dystopias of the period, Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941) and C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* (1945), I argue that these conservative novels are best understood as extreme iterations of a more widespread anxiety about the potentially totalitarian elements of a centralising and technocratic democracy at war.

## Keywords:

Totalitarianism; dystopia; mid-century novel; Lewis, C. S.; *That Hideous Strength*; Warner, Rex; *The Aerodrome*

Parliamentary legislation enacted between the Munich Crisis and the evacuation of the army at Dunkirk transformed relationships between citizens and the state in Britain. Instituted in a relatively modest way in the autumn of 1938, emergency state powers enlarged their reach to a vast extent on 22 May 1940 in response to the dire prospect facing Britain as Western Europe collapsed. The implications for civil liberties were clear: in the language of the new Emergency Powers (Defence) Act, what emerged were 'regulations making provision for requiring persons to place themselves, their services, and their property' at the state's disposal and Winston Churchill, with characteristic drama, wrote in his history of the Second

World War that the Act had given his new government 'practically unlimited power over the life, liberty, and property of all His Majesty's subjects in Great Britain'.<sup>1</sup> This essay describes how novelists responded to this sudden consolidation of the state's power, when the negative example of contemporary Soviet Communism gave force to a pervasive fear that the emergency centralisation of power in wartime could prove to be the permanent post-war norm.

### **I. 'Exceptional and Dangerous Powers'**

Unease set in early. Indeed, even the *Times's* report on the passage of the 1940 Act reveals a degree of ambivalence unexpected in the news outlet then almost axiomatically the mouthpiece of the British political establishment. The main item on the Act is headlined with the propagandistically uplifting 'All Resources for Victory'; immediately below that, however, comes a more ominous clarification: the sobering, even dystopian, subheading 'State Powers of Full Control'.<sup>2</sup> Seen from one angle, then, emergency powers reflect a truly united nation giving its all; seen from another, such powers are nakedly totalitarian. No less interesting is how the *Times's* parliamentary correspondent reported on events in a tiny column in the same day's newspaper: he noted that it had taken less than three hours for measures that it had been decided to execute only that morning to go through every parliamentary stage from the House of Commons and the House of Lords through to Royal Assent. And yet, as he put it, '[i]t is doubtful whether such powers have ever been in the hands of the Executive since the seventeenth century'.<sup>3</sup> Independent Member of Parliament Eleanor Rathbone had already given voice to this sense of threat when she commented during the reading of the Bill on 'its exceptional and dangerous powers, which we recognise as necessary'.<sup>4</sup>

This extraordinary consolidation of state power might serve to confirm E. M. Forster's despairing axiom from a year earlier that 'if Fascism wins we are done for, and . . . we must become Fascist to win'.<sup>5</sup> But in reality the apprehension in 1940 was of a government hurtling not rightwards but leftwards. In an article tellingly titled 'Magna Carta, 1215–1940', the BBC's *Listener* magazine marked the passing of the Act with the peculiarly proto-Orwellian formula that '[w]e must forgo our freedom to be free'.<sup>6</sup> The magazine was editorialising on a speech by Clement Attlee, the future Labour Prime Minister, who had been entrusted with the task of explaining Emergency Powers to the nation at large over the wireless. 'Parliament has given to the Government full power to control all persons and property', Attlee explained: 'There is no distinction between rich and poor, between worker and employer, between man and woman; the services and property of all must be at the disposal of the Government'.<sup>7</sup> His Labour colleague, Arthur Greenwood, wartime Minister without Portfolio, is said to have characterised this development on the spot as '[n]ot so much Socialism in our time as Socialism in no time'.<sup>8</sup>

Many found it impossible to share his feeling of triumph and the English novel in the 1940s articulates high anxiety about the almost unprecedented power of a levelling State and about what some went so far as to consider an embryonic totalitarianism of the left. What these commentators feared was a kind of Communism not imported from abroad but insidiously emerging, home grown, out of the corporatism of a technocratic and bureaucratic democracy—or former democracy—at war, with the national government acting as an unwitting fifth column even in its very efforts to secure the nation's continued existence. Consequently, it is possible that anti-Communism at mid-century might at times have been less a thought-through political stance or a reflection on the international situation than a way of articulating the severe stresses of Britain's domestic political culture in the 1940s, stresses historically obscured by the association of this period with coalition government and the

emergent politics of consensus. Focusing on a distinctive manifestation of this period's anti-state feeling, the culturally conservative war dystopias of C. S. Lewis and Rex Warner, this essay argues that these under-read novels are particularly instructive as extreme amplifications of a tendency towards anti-state fantasy that is also to be found in the more canonical and mainstream fiction of the 1940s.

## II. 'The National Institute of Coordinated Experiments'

Lewis' *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups*, completed at the end of 1943, was published in the summer of 1945 when it was reviewed alongside one of the period's better-known allegories of left-wing utopias gone wrong, George Orwell's *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*.<sup>9</sup> The final instalment of the science fiction series known as the 'Space Trilogy', *That Hideous Strength* is also a generic hybrid of political satire and the university novel. The action takes place in a small collegiate university in a beautiful provincial city on a river, a setting sufficiently resembling Durham University as to require an explicit disavowal in the novel's preface; Lewis had visited Durham shortly before he wrote this novel in order to deliver the lectures published as *The Abolition of Man* (1943), a defence of traditional values against what Lewis considered destructive modern materialisms. Given the subject matter, *The Abolition of Man* is evidently a companion piece to *That Hideous Strength*, which hinges on a battle between English tradition and an attempt to remake society and with society the human being itself.

The novel begins shortly after the imagined end of the war, when the fictional University of Edgestow embarks upon a collaboration with a vast new state-funded institute, the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.) a collaboration resulting from covert manoeuvring by a left-leaning academic faction, the self-described, self-congratulating 'Progressive Element in College'.<sup>10</sup> The N.I.C.E. is variously described as 'the

first-fruits of that constructive fusion between the state and the laboratory on which so many thoughtful people base their hopes of a better world', 'the greatest triumph of practical idealism that this century has yet seen' and 'science applied to social problems and backed by the whole force of the state, just as war has been backed by the whole force of the state in the past'.<sup>11</sup> The outcome of this collaboration of radical academics with what proves to be revolutionary totalitarianism is that the university and town and ultimately almost the entire country are taken over and obliterated by the Institute. But what the university does not know is that the wizard Merlin lies dormant under the land they have traitorously sold to N.I.C.E. and when Merlin awakes he joins the defenders of the traditional society the Institute aimed to eliminate: technocratic evil is thwarted for now, although the novel's ending warns that such evil can return at any time. This, of course, is a familiar wartime moral about eternal vigilance as the price of freedom, the conclusion of contemporary takeover allegories as different as Bertolt Brecht's satirical rendering of Adolf Hitler's career in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (written 1941) and Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947).<sup>12</sup> But there is a crucial difference: Lewis's warning pertains neither to fascist warmongering (as in Brecht) nor to the inevitable recurrence of war itself (as in Camus) but to a leftist post-war peace—this, for Lewis, is where invisible evil lurks.

Lewis's protagonist, Mark Studdock, is a naïve but careerist sociologist among the 'progressive element', attracted to the Institute because he is led to believe that contributing his academic talents to this nationally transformative body will finally give his scholarship impact beyond the limited audience of his academic peers. Outmanoeuvred by the sinister operatives of N.I.C.E., he loses his academic appointment at Edgestow and is forced to remain with the Institute at Belbury even as he loses confidence in its ability to advance his career. And ultimately the novel suggests that his downfall and that of the university as a

whole are deserved because their intellectual collaboration has made the dystopian Institute possible. As one character asks rhetorically,

But all the same . . . was there a single doctrine practised at Belbury which hadn't been preached by some lecturer at Edgestow? Oh, of course, they never thought anyone would *act* on their theories! No one was more astonished than they when what they'd been talking of for years suddenly took on reality. But it was their own child coming back to them: grown up and unrecognisable, but their own.<sup>13</sup>

Lewis' attack on the utility of ultimately unreflective intellectuals to those who would advance sinister agendas is further underscored by the fact that, even at its nastiest, the Institute continues to use as a public front what the novel caricatures as an empty-headed left-wing thinker, whose barren conversation is all high-minded, enlightened talk about the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents and the importance of sex education.

Having joined this outfit out of professional vanity, Lewis' sociologist protagonist finds that his work has impact only in a way he could not have anticipated and one which speaks directly to Lewis' fear of a too-biddable populace vulnerable to manipulation by the state. Studdock's sociological research is directed now not towards the amelioration of social problems but to the management of public relations for the Institute. It is his task not to 'write up all this' but 'to write it *down*':

We want you to write it down—to camouflage it. Only for the present, of course. Once the thing gets going we shan't have to bother about the great heart of the British public. We'll make the great heart what we want it to be.

But in the meantime, it *does* make a difference how things are put. For instance, if it were even whispered that the N.I.C.E. wanted powers to experiment on criminals, you'd have all the old women of both sexes up in arms and yapping about humanity. Call it re-education of the mal-adjusted, and you have them all slobbering with delight that the brutal era of retributive punishment has at last come to an end. Odd thing it is—the word 'experiment' is unpopular, but not the word 'experimental'. You mustn't experiment on children; but offer the dear little kiddies free education in an experimental school attached to the N.I.C.E. and it's all correct!<sup>14</sup>

Studdock's role has a vastly more famous counterpart in 1940s fiction, anticipating as it does the doctoring work of Orwell's Winston Smith at the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth in a novel published four years later. In another anticipation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Studdock is charged with the task of textually rehabilitating a discredited scientist or doing in reverse what Winston must when he is required to make disappear from the documentary record 'a certain Comrade Withers' and elevate in his place a new Party hero, Comrade Ogilvy ('It was true that there was no such person as Comrade Ogilvy, but a few lines of print and a couple of faked photographs would soon bring him into existence').<sup>15</sup>

Orwell reviewed *That Hideous Strength* upon its publication, taking exception to its fantastical elements on the grounds that '[t]he whole drama of the struggle against evil lies in the fact that one does not have supernatural aid'<sup>16</sup>—and there is plenty assistance of that kind here, with the evil technocrats ultimately defeated by an alliance comprising a space-travelling philologist and the protagonist's fortuitously psychic wife, Jane, along with the wizard Merlin and a magical bear. Nonetheless, Orwell's review is surprisingly positive given that he had written scathingly only the previous year of 'Mr. C. S. Lewis and his

chummy little wireless talks' that pretend to be apolitical but are in fact 'an outflanking movement in the big counter-attack against the Left'.<sup>17</sup> He particularly admired Lewis' invention of N.I.C.E, 'with its world-wide ramifications, its private army, its secret torture chambers, and its inner ring of adepts ruled over by a mysterious personage known as The Head'.<sup>18</sup> It seems perfectly possible, in fact, that this relatively minor novel could have influenced *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Another famous respondent on the Left was the scientist J. B .S. Haldane, the Communist brother of the socialist activist and fantasy writer Naomi Mitchison. Lewis thinks that '[a]ny human attempts at a planned world are merely playing into the hands of the Devil', Haldane lamented.<sup>19</sup>

He will not have much influence on scientists, if only because he does not know enough science for this purpose. But he will influence public opinion and that of politicians, particularly in Britain . . . He will in no way discourage the more inhuman developments of science, such as the manufacture of atomic bombs. But he will make things more difficult for those who are trying to apply science to human betterment, for example to get some kind of world organization of food supplies into being, or to arrive at physiological standards for housing. In such cases we scientists are always told that we are treating human beings as animals. Of course we are. . . .

Clearly anyone who believes that he or she stands to lose by social changes will be pleased to find arguments to prove that they are impracticable or even devilish. So Mr. Lewis is a most useful prop to the existing social order.<sup>20</sup>

Haldane is, of course, entirely correct in seeing that when Lewis attacks ‘science’ in the shape of the Institute what he is really attacking is left-wing politics; the Institute is all ‘communists and materialists’, as one of Lewis’s characters puts it.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Lewis could scarcely be more tendentious than when, late in the novel, he has his remorseful protagonist come to see the struggle between good and evil as the struggle between ‘the Normal’ and ‘the scientific point of view’.<sup>22</sup>

While such dichotomising works to generate a degree of historical abstraction familiar in dystopian fiction in particular and in the novel of ideas more broadly *That Hideous Strength* is nonetheless emphatically the work of its wartime moment. It is especially important that the novel was written in 1943 and so coincided with the high point of pro-Soviet feeling in Britain. Writing of London in the summer of 1943 in her war novel *The Heat of the Day* (1949), Elizabeth Bowen describes even women’s fashion as affecting Soviet chic in this period ‘when the idealization of Russia was at its height’.<sup>23</sup> Also set in 1943, Patrick Hamilton’s novel *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) likewise documents the fact that ‘the resistance and victories of the Russian people’ have made it socially taboo not to speak warmly of the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup> Orwell’s essays of this time could not be more explicit about the prevalence of the ‘Russian mythos’, the ‘uncritical admiration of Soviet Russia’, ‘the current Russomania’; this, he believed, was what made *Animal Farm* un-publishable in 1943.<sup>25</sup> The widespread pro-Soviet feeling explains why Lewis felt compelled in *The Abolition of Man*, also from 1943, to argue that the world’s enemy is made up not only of fascists—‘those who are our public enemies at the moment’—but of Communists and progressive democrats:

The process which, if not checked, will abolish Man goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than among Fascists. The methods may

(at first) differ in brutality. But many a mild-eyed scientist in pince-nez, many a popular dramatist, many an amateur philosopher in our midst, means in the long run just the same as the Nazi rulers of Germany. Traditional values are to be ‘debunked’ and mankind to be cut out into some fresh shape at the will (which must, by hypothesis, be an arbitrary will) of some few lucky people in one lucky generation that has learned to do it.<sup>26</sup>

‘The human race is to become all Technocracy’, proclaims a character in *That Hideous Strength*.<sup>27</sup> Anticipating a related argument in *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man* that the conquest of nature is really ‘the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men’ and that ‘the man-moulders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omniscient state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut all posterity in what shape they please’.<sup>28</sup> As the villainous Feverstone tells Studdock: ‘[i]f Science is really given a free hand it can now take over the human race and re-condition it: make man a really efficient animal’.<sup>29</sup>

When Lewis lumps democrats and Communists together as among those embarked upon a dangerous programme, it becomes clear that the emergent welfare state is among the targets of his attack. This is why it is significant that the declared purpose of N.I.C.E. is to extend into the post-war period the centralised planning that had helped to determine the outcome of the war, as of course happened historically in the late 1940s to the extent that the hamstrung Attlee government could manage in a financially depleted country. This 1945–51 period Evelyn Waugh wrote of as ‘the Cripps-Attlee terror’—Sir Stafford Cripps was Chancellor of the Exchequer in the late 1940s—or ‘the Attlee-Cripps regime when the kingdom seemed to be under enemy occupation’.<sup>30</sup> Characteristic comic inflation on Waugh’s part this rhetoric surely was but it speaks pointedly to the ways in which the early

post-war period was being imagined at the time as continuous with the war and, importantly, as if it were a war lost at that. We see something of this mood in the review of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the *Illustrated London News*. No less depressing to this reviewer than the imminence of Winston Smith's liquidation was 'the daily texture of existence' in the austerity world Orwell imagined: 'Oh, what a world. And how insidiously like our own'.<sup>31</sup> In Lewis's novel, the grim continuity between war and postwar is indicated by the postwar recurrence of warlike scenes, from the scarcity and the overcrowding of the town to the streams of refugees blocking the road out of Edgestow with their overloaded carts and prams; the narrator tells us that if Mark Studdock had ever seen war, he 'would have read clearly the message, "Enemy behind"'.<sup>32</sup> Signs of occupation are everywhere: '[s]omething like a terror appeared to have been established in the town', with hundreds of arrests every day, the Institute's armed police patrolling the town and 'notices everywhere . . . headed *Emergency Regulations*'.<sup>33</sup> Driving the point home, one character likens their formerly sedate university town to 'a conquered and occupied city'.<sup>34</sup>

As a projection of the postwar future, Lewis's scene appears almost uniquely overblown and exaggerated. Nonetheless, Edgestow under the Occupation is a police state of the kind Churchill injudiciously predicted in his notorious General Election broadcast in the summer of 1945 when he told the people that 'no Socialist system can be established without a political police . . . . No Socialist government conducting the entire life and industry of the country could afford to allow free, sharp, or violently-worded expressions of public discontent. They would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo'.<sup>35</sup> 'There's no distinction in the long run between police work and sociology', according to Lewis's inaptly named character, Fairy; one of the novel's more lurid inventions, Fairy is the sadistic and stereotypically 'butch' lesbian who manages the N.I.C.E. police.<sup>36</sup> She engineers disturbances as a pretext to hand over social control to the N.I.C.E. and Studdock's task is to

report upon them before they happen in order to justify the tougher hand of the Institute's police—no longer called police but the 'Sanitary Executive'.<sup>37</sup> What Studdock produces is on Lewis's part a convincing parody of, instructively enough, the jaunty populism of the war's utopian planning discourses, when the language of 'what we are fighting for' strategically presented the war as an opportunity for domestic transformation:

The Institute which has settled at Edgestow is a *National* Institute. That means it is yours and mine. We are not scientists and we do not pretend to know what the master-brains of the Institute are thinking. We do know what each man or woman expects of it. We expect a solution of the unemployment problem, the cancer problem, the housing problem, the problem of currency, of war, of education. We expect from it a brighter, cleaner and fuller life for our children, in which we and they can march ever onward and onward and develop to the full urge of life which God has given each one of us. The N.I.C.E. is the people's instrument for bringing about all the things we fought for.<sup>38</sup>

Lewis's symptomatic fear is that the culture the war is being fought to defend is being lost through the very means of its defence: the saturating wartime rhetoric of national rebuilding. Major social planning for the post-war future had commenced long before the war looked even winnable.

### **III. 'It's Almost as if We'd Lost the War'**

This sense that the war has, ironically, endangered the civilisation it was fought to protect appears elsewhere in the fiction of the period; there is, for example, a textbook instance in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), when, in the novel's wartime prologue, the narrator is

dismayed to see Brideshead Castle at the mercy of a soldiery, supposed guarantors of the nation's survival, to whom the estate's history and grandeur mean nothing, its beautiful baroque fountain choked with the troops' discarded rubbish. Definitively in that novel but even more extravagantly in Lewis's, social planning is cast as the sheer uglification of Britain through the destruction of its landscape and architectural heritage, perhaps caricaturing the mid-century state sponsorship of modernist architecture as a means of expediting social progress by transforming the conditions and environment of everyday life.<sup>39</sup> In *That Hideous Strength*, the pretty river on which the university is set is diverted, Norman churches are pulled down, a quaint village is placed on the demolition list on the grounds that '[i]f it's a beauty spot, you can bet it's insanitary' and no one can stop 'the conversion of an ancient woodland into an inferno of mud and noise and steel and concrete'.<sup>40</sup> The dictator character of the Air Vice-Marshal in Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941) says outright that the culture that is being fought for is being obliterated in that very fight; in a sinister replay of propagandistic renderings of the Second World War as an opportunity for domestic reform, he announces that 'You will discover in course of time that we aim not entirely to defend it, but also to transform it'.<sup>41</sup>

Warner's *The Aerodrome* was the work of an author who had been strongly associated with the left-wing Auden circle in the 1930s but who made a final break with existing forms of Communism after the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact of August 1939. This profoundly disillusioning moment of the novel's production is important because it helps to explain why *The Aerodrome* never specifies the variety of totalitarianism with which it is concerned, as if there were ultimately no meaningful difference between the Nazi enemy and what had always been viewed, right up until the decade's end, as its ideological antithesis: if Warner's fictional regime shares with fascism is elitism and masculinist militarism, it shares with communism its rejection of traditional forms of belief and affiliation as merely manifestations of

oppressive and reactionary false consciousness. Like Lewis's novel, Warner's *The Aerodrome* also describes the steady takeover of the nation by a technocratic secret state. Like *That Hideous Strength*, it locates British national identity in the small, provincial community, although Warner's fictional village is more Lawrentian and rugged, less of a chocolate box pastoral than Lewis's Edgestow, its pre-existing violence a blood and soil affair that throws into relief the cold and inhuman planning of the totalitarian regime that almost destroys it. At first, Warner's airbase inserts itself almost invisibly into the deeply traditional village that hosts it: the canteen is disguised as an old barn and the arms depot as a church, a process that echoes normal practices of wartime camouflage but here serves covert political rather than military purposes. Although, ominously, the villagers are fined for minor trespasses on military regulations in this early period of the takeover, such incursions of the state machine into civilian life are largely ignored. Before they know it, however, the core of the village is destroyed: a compulsory purchase order places the village into the ownership of the aerodrome, killing the village squire—the vicar is shot by a wholly irreligious airman who is then installed in his place. And so this is what constitutes Englishness, the manor house and church cast as 'for generations the centre of a village's life'.<sup>42</sup> Warner's novel is clearly not Christian in Lewis's insistent style but it seems significant that at the end of the novel the main marker of the villainous Flight-Lieutenant's re-humanisation is his embrace of his new role as a padre, reinstating traditional forms of worship in the church against the wishes of the aerodrome, which has rejected what its leader calls 'the stupidity, the ugliness, and the servility of historical tradition'.<sup>43</sup> The destruction of the church and then the village is cast as occupation—the phrase 'the occupation of the village' is repeatedly used<sup>44</sup>—and, as in *That Hideous Strength*, all the traditional hallmarks of occupation are in evidence: the Air Force flag flies over the public buildings; there are marching detachments of troops; civilians are tried under military law; a ruthless police force liquidates attempted defectors. 'Oh, yes',

a character says in *That Hideous Strength*, ‘it’s almost as if we’d lost the war’.<sup>45</sup> The same might be said of the environment of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—a book that reminded one of its first reviewers, P. H. Newby, of *The Aerodrome*<sup>46</sup>—and like Orwell’s novel, as well as Lewis’s, *The Aerodrome* is not an allegory of occupation but of domestic national planning: agriculture comes to an end and is replaced with ‘building and mechanical engineering’ and the aerodrome extends out from its usual specialised role into all forms of planning, from economics to factories.<sup>47</sup>

In a 1950 BBC talk, the novelist Angus Wilson spoke of the difficulty of coming to grips with post-war culture as a middle-aged writer, singling out the welfare state as the major factor in this feeling of cultural discontinuity and unfamiliarity:

The new ruling class—that strange mixture of business experts, bureaucrats, social scientists, and the rest of the Welfare set-up—are firmly in the saddle . . . . It is a world which cannot inform the creations of those of us who were born before it came into being. . . . But a new generation is arising from the new ruling class who will accept the world they dominate, for whom it will be so much a background that it shapes their art as it does their morality without their being conscious of it.<sup>48</sup>

Wilson was describing here conventional literary-historical phenomena such as generational change and the difficulties of being a realist novelist in a moment of complex social transition but, more interestingly, his wording implies an analogy between Wilson’s new position as an English writer and that now-familiar feeling of the nation seeming to have lost the war: ‘the *new ruling class* who will accept *the world they dominate*’. This is Waugh’s notorious ‘Age of Hooper’ come to life, with technocracy as totalitarianism and a social environment proving

incomprehensible to the generation it succeeds. Waugh played this for laughs in his story 'Love Among the Ruins: A Romance of the Near Future' (1953) in which the country has turned so un-liveably far to the left that even the characters parodically based on the left-wing writers of the 1930s—'Parsnip' and 'Pimpernell' are W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood—show up at a state-run euthanasia centre in order to have themselves put out of their misery.

Although his fiction is not much read any longer, Wilson himself was widely considered one of the best early post-war novelists and he is particularly relevant in the context of political fantasy because he tried his hand at the dystopian novel in 1961 with *The Old Men at the Zoo*, a novel Waugh noted at the time was best read not as the futuristic fiction it purported to be but as a novel about Britain's previous engagement of totalitarianism in the era of appeasement.<sup>49</sup> It is also inevitably a Cold War novel, a systematic interrogation of the questionable covert workings of national institutions in times of crisis, a subject Wilson knew much about because he had spent the Second World War engaged in secret work at the famous code-breaking centre at Bletchley Park. It is surely because institutions are ideal sites for assessing the national condition that they are everywhere in Britain's mid-century fiction: the university and government institute in Lewis, the aerodrome in Warner, the zoo in Wilson, as well as, perhaps more famously still, the many institutional settings in the work of their contemporary C. P. Snow, ranging from the Oxbridge college (*The Masters* [1951]) to Whitehall (*Corridors of Power* [1964]). What goes wrong in *The Old Men at the Zoo* is that characters are blinded to a totalitarian invasion abetted from within by their retreat into preparations for so-called 'British Day', a kitschy celebration of the zoo's Victorian golden age and the nation's imperial one. Wilson is essentially taking the opposite path from Lewis, who is emphatic on the national heritage as a saving power; among the good characters in *That Hideous Strength* are those with such

names as Hingest—as in the Anglo-Saxon heroes Hengist and Horsa—and Tudor. This fantasy of a resistant national identity could serve extremely authoritarian political ends, as Emma Robinson has recently pointed out in her discussion of Orwell’s silence on internment in wartime Britain, a silence at odds with his outspokenness on the human rights abuses of the Spanish Civil War, such as incarceration without charge, legal representation or trial.<sup>50</sup> For Orwell, she argues, Britain’s liberal-democratic traditions would ensure proportionality and the minimising of such abuses. Fantasies of Britain as traditionally and essentially a free and democratic nation, then, could be used to dispel anxieties about what were manifestly totalitarian-style incursions of the state. The conservative Lewis goes further in that he also imagines an idealised national tradition as the force that saves the day and, in addition, as a sharply critical point of contrast with the planned future.

Fictive projections of the future are inevitably tied to fictive projections of the past: the exactly contemporary *Brideshead Revisited* comes again to mind for its use of an idealised past as a stick to beat the present and the future. But conservative dystopian fantasies of the planned future were mockable enough even in their own day. In the left-liberal J. B. Priestley’s novel *Three Men in New Suits*, also from 1945, a comedy snob predicts the future. ‘I feel sorry for you,’ he says to an aristocratic nephew whose political views have moved steadily leftwards as a result of wartime service alongside men of other social classes:

To go and drudge in some hell-hole of an office or factory so that you can come home to some numbered cubbyhole at night, gobble some mess out of tins, and either go to the moving pictures to see how pins are made or sit listening to some government bully on the wireless telling you to hurry up and fill in *form nine-thousand-and-thirty-eight*. Once a year you and your wife,

who'll be as plain as a suet pudding, and all your brats, who'll have been vaccinated against everything but stupidity and dreariness, will be given a ticket to a holiday camp, along with five thousand other clerks and mechanics and their women and kids, and there you'll have physical drill, stew and rice pudding, round games, and evening talks on tropical diseases and aeroplane engines. And I'll be dead—and delighted.<sup>51</sup>

An aesthete in Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* (1942) thinks along similar lines as he contemplates 'the coming Workers' State': 'a paradise which will be absolutely uninhabitable for anyone of civilized taste'.<sup>52</sup> What he and Priestley's characters imagine is the comic version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, suggesting that the fear of a totalitarian Britain was so prevalent in the mid-1940s that novelists could parody it in full confidence that readers would get the joke. Of course, the democratic socialist Priestley casts this 'Communist' Britain as an absurd reactionary fantasy: as much a fantasy, we might say, as a novel in which the Communist takeover of England begins at Durham and is defeated only by the intervention of the wizard Merlin.

The middle period of the war, the period that produced Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* and *The Abolition of Man*, is key to understanding why British anti-Statism and anti-Communism could take exactly the same forms in conservative thought. The ubiquitous mid-war public debate on Britain's future, a debate of which the 1942 Beveridge Report was both prompt and symptom, made it hard to doubt that the Britain emerging out of the war would be significantly to the left of the nation that went to war in 1939. Meanwhile, the strong popular feeling for the suffering and tenacity of the Red Army at this stage in the war seemed to have instilled a degree of obliviousness to the disparity between these powerful traditional values and the wholesale destruction of tradition Lewis identified with the regime that sent

those Soviet soldiers into battle in the first place. I think it unlikely that Lewis truly believed any more than Churchill did—for all their shared rhetoric of secret police and one-party governance in perpetuity—that a socialist Britain would essentially be voting for its own abolition. But Lewis was ultimately probably correct to perceive that an increasingly mainstream progressive rhetoric would successfully normalise a radical discontinuity between the national past and its post-war future.

Inevitably, writers wondered what the seemingly unstoppable encroachment of state power would mean for literature itself. Orwell famously speculated in ‘Inside the Whale’ that the era of totalitarianism would kill the novel: ‘[t]he literature of liberalism is coming to an end and the literature of totalitarianism has not yet appeared and is barely imaginable’; most famously of all, the novelist is ‘merely an anachronism, a hangover from the bourgeois age, as surely doomed as the hippopotamus’.<sup>53</sup> But what we also see at mid-century is the extent to which fears about a coming totalitarianism, in particular a totalitarianism of the left, lent creative energy to the 1940s novel as writers speculated on life under the new conditions of citizenship implied by the subordination of the citizen to the state: anti-Communism, then, could be a generative imaginative force in this period and is not only the negative political position the term implies. For example, Vladimir Nabokov alluded to the specifically creative novelty of modern totalitarianisms when he wrote in the introduction to his prickly anti-Communist fantasy *Bend Sinister* (1947) that ‘[w]hile the system of holding people hostage is as old as the oldest war, a fresher note is introduced when a tyrannic state is at war with its own subjects and may hold any citizen in hostage with no law to restrain it’.<sup>54</sup> Other novelists clearly shared his view. In a 1950 review essay in the *Times Literary Supplement* on the fiction of recent years, Anthony Powell wrote that it was difficult to identify a distinctive new ‘school’ but among the ‘certain general tendencies’ was ‘political fantasy’, incorporating as a subset what he novels ‘dealing with Communist dictatorships and power politics’.<sup>55</sup> At the

end of the review he concluded that ‘the novelists of this country are, from different points of view, again showing their ingrained love of fantasy and satire . . . a national tradition’.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps it is too much to call this kind of fantasy a ‘national tradition’; as the example of Nabokov attests, anti-Communist allegory was an international form. Nonetheless, it had a distinctive historical significance in mid-century Britain, for the possibility of a new and more equitable post-war order made this a period of political fantasy too: a period of speculative planning for Britain’s domestic future in the era of the centralised state.

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: Volume II: Their Finest Hour* (New York, 1985), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> ‘All Resources for Victory’, *The Times* (23 May 1940), 3.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Quick Law-Making’, *The Times* (23 May 1940), 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Hansard*, HC, 22 May 1940, vol. 361, col. 169.

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1940/may/22/emergency-powers-defence-bill>

<sup>5</sup> E. M. Forster, ‘Post-Munich’, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York, 1977), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Magna Carta, 1215–1940’, *Listener* (13 June 1940), 1120.

<sup>7</sup> Clement Attlee, ‘Each Must Make His Contribution: C. R. Attlee’s Broadcast (May 22) on the Emergency Powers Bill’, *Listener* (30 May 1940), 1036.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in ‘Magna Carta’, p. 1120.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Hugh I’Anson Fausset, ‘Novels of the Week: Myth Making’, *Times Literary Supplement* (25 August 1945), 401.

<sup>10</sup> C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York, 2003), p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 35, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Brecht’s play ends (referring to Adolf Hitler): ‘The world was almost won by such an ape! / The nations put him where his kind belong. / But don’t rejoice too soon at your escape— / The womb he crawled from is still going strong’. Bertolt Brecht, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London, 2009), p. 99. Camus’s novel ends by reminding the reader that ‘the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely, that it can remain dormant for dozens of years . . . and that perhaps the day will come when, for the instruction or misfortune of mankind, the plague will rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city’. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Robin Buss (London, 2001), pp. 237–38.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, pp. 369–70.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York, 1977), pp. 45, 46.

<sup>16</sup> George Orwell, review of *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis and *We Mixed Our Drinks* by Nerina Shute, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, vol. 17, ed. Peter Davison (London, 1998), p. 251.

<sup>17</sup> George Orwell, ‘As I Please 46’, *Complete Works*, vol. 16, p. 441.

<sup>18</sup> Orwell, review of *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis, pp. 250–51.

<sup>19</sup> J. B. S. Haldane, ‘Auld Hornie, F. R. S.’, *Everything Has a History* (London, 1951), p. 251.

<sup>20</sup> Haldane, ‘Auld Hornie, F. R. S.’, p. 252–53.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick Hamilton, *The Slaves of Solitude* (New York, 2007), p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> George Orwell, ‘London Letter, 5 June 1945’, *Complete Works*, vol. 17, p. 162; Orwell, ‘The Freedom of the Press’, *Complete Works*, vol. 17, pp. 255, 259.

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- <sup>26</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Las Vegas, 2010), p. 43.
- <sup>27</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 256.
- <sup>28</sup> Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, pp. 36, 37.
- <sup>29</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 39.
- <sup>30</sup> Evelyn Waugh, 'Manners and Morals—I', *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London, 1983), p. 589; Waugh, 'Aspirations of a Mugwump', *The Essays, Articles and Reviews*, p. 537.
- <sup>31</sup> K. John, 'Notes for the Novel-Reader', *Illustrated English News* (18 June 1949), 858.
- <sup>32</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 211.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212–13.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- <sup>35</sup> Winston S. Churchill, 'The General Election', *Listener* (7 June 1945), 632.
- <sup>36</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 68.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- <sup>39</sup> I am indebted here to Ashley Maher's discussion of how mid-century British writers engaged with the newly politicised status of modernist architecture in their fiction. Ashley Maher, "'Swastika Arms of Passage Leading Nowhere': Late Modernism and the 'New' Britain", *ELH*, 80:1 (2013), 251–85.
- <sup>40</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, pp. 83, 88.
- <sup>41</sup> Rex Warner, *The Aerodrome: A Love Story* (London, 2007), p. 179.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 139, 201.
- <sup>45</sup> Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, p. 74.
- <sup>46</sup> P. H. Newby, 'New Novels', *Listener* (16 June 1949), 1036.
- <sup>47</sup> Warner, *The Aerodrome*, p. 137.
- <sup>48</sup> Angus Wilson, 'The Future of the English Novel', *Diversity and Depth in Fiction: Selected Critical Writings of Angus Wilson*, ed. Kerry McSweeney (London, 1983), p. 127.
- <sup>49</sup> Evelyn Waugh, 'The Old Men at the Zoo', *Spectator*, 207 (13 October 1961), 501.
- <sup>50</sup> Emma Robinson, 'George Orwell, Internment and the Illusion of Liberty', *Literature & History*, 23:2 (2014), 35–50.
- <sup>51</sup> J. B. Priestley, *Three Men in New Suits* (London, 1946), p. 26.
- <sup>52</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (Boston, 2002), p. 70.
- <sup>53</sup> George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego, 1981), p. 250.
- <sup>54</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (London, 2010), p. vi.
- <sup>55</sup> Anthony Powell, 'Novels and Novelists', *Times Literary Supplement* (25 August 1950), 540.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

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