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# Report. Rethinking Orwell: *Coming Up for Air* Today and a Round Table on Author and Authorship

*Caterina Begliorgio; Letizia Dolcini*

Università degli Studi di Trento

(<caterina.begliorgio@unitn.it>; <letizia.dolcini@unitn.it>)

Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude. (Orwell, "Why I Write" 1946)

At the University of Trento, on the 22nd and 23rd of September, a further step was taken toward fully appreciating the literary and human significance of one of the greatest British writers of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> During two days entirely devoted to exploring the life and work of Eric Arthur Blair – better known by his pen name, George Orwell – Andrea Binelli (University of Trento) presented his recently published Italian translation of *Coming Up for Air* (*Una boccata d'aria*, 2025), in conversation with Richard Horatio Blair, Orwell's son and Patron of the Orwell Foundation, and Jeremy Wikeley, the Foundation's Communications Manager. A diverse and engaged audience comprising students, academics, teachers, journalists, and "common readers" animated the discussion, which moved fluidly between personal recollection and critical reflection. Blair's memories of his father as a family man offered an intimate counterpoint to broader considerations of Orwell's shifting reputation, his moral authority, and his enduring relevance in contemporary culture. On the following day, the conversation widened its scope: Anita Pietra, general editor of *Universale Economica Feltrinelli*, contributed a thoughtful perspective on the role of publishing houses and cultural insti-

<sup>1</sup> This report is the result of joint research and shared discussion. The introduction and "Day 1" sections were written by Caterina Begliorgio; "Day 2" and conclusions by Letizia Dolcini; the final revision was jointly authored.

tutions in shaping the modern literary landscape, where editorial choices and institutional frameworks continue to determine how writers are read, remembered, and reinterpreted.

*Day 1 – Knowing Orwell as a Writer and a Human Being*

Interestingly, the story began not with George Orwell or Richard Blair himself, but with the figure they shared: Eileen O'Shaughnessy, wife and mother, but above all a revolutionary, a feminist, a writer, and Orwell's closest literary advisor. Through photographs and excerpts from Eileen's letters, the audience was drawn into the intimacy of Orwell's private world. Richard Blair's voice – in close dialogue with Andrea Binelli's questions and remarks – sketched a tender yet compelling portrait of Eric Arthur Blair, the man who lingered behind the writer we know as George Orwell. As Binelli observes in the preface to his Italian translation of *Coming Up for Air*, the encounter with the love of his life and the experience of the Spanish Civil War were two defining forces that shaped Orwell's identity as both a man and an author.

At that time, of course, Richard Blair was not yet part of the story: being born in 1944, his recollections concern mainly the years following Eileen's death in 1945. Listening to his words was like opening a window onto another life, in another age. The audience suddenly found themselves transported to Orwell's secluded and self-sufficient home on Jura, sitting in his living room and smoking beside his three-year-old son; the next moment, they were out on a small boat, watching Eric and Richard fishing, sharing in the adventures and mishaps that punctuated their quiet island days.

Just as Richard Blair journeyed back into his own childhood, George Bowling, the protagonist of *Coming Up for Air*, seeks to escape a world marked by conflict and violence by returning to the memories of his youth. Yet, as Binelli observes,

[...] l'aria che il protagonista scopre di voler tornare a respirare assieme ai lettori partecipi della sua sensazione di soffocamento è tanto necessaria e normale quanto introvabile nel contesto asfissiante della modernità raccontata con tragicomica ironia nelle pagine del libro. (2025, 8)

Reconnecting with the present, Andrea Binelli invited Richard Blair and Jeremy Wikeley to reflect on what George Bowling might represent for contemporary readers in our complex historical moment. As Blair and Wikeley noted, the very mission of the Orwell Foundation is to keep alive the conversation about what George Orwell continues to say to his audiences today. The Foundation also supports writers from all backgrounds who engage with Orwell's spirit of truth and integrity, affirming its intercultural and international vocation as a space for dialogue across nations and perspectives. Complementing this mission, the Orwell Society promotes public and scholarly engagement with Orwell's life and writings through events, publications, and scholarships.

The discussion prompted a lively response from the audience, who sought deeper insights into Richard Blair's relationship with his father and raised thoughtful questions about the role of politics in shaping today's interpretations of Orwell's work, as well as about Eileen's contribution to his writing.

*Day 2 – George Orwell Between Cultural Institutions and Editorial Practices*

On the second day, the focus shifted to Orwell as an author and to the impact of editorial practices on the significance of literature for the common man and woman. The conversation opened with a reflection on Orwell's notion of "decency", understood as a fundamental human

value. Binelli invited the guests, Richard Blair, Anita Pietra, and Jeremy Wikeley, to offer their own definitions of the concept and to explore how it relates to George Orwell himself, to his characters, and to ordinary people.

In Jeremy Wikeley's words, "decency has something to do with tolerance", a quality that also mirrors the translator's task of creating dialogue between cultures. Wikeley adds that the "decent man" is often "the little man", echoing what Binelli writes – someone who,

[...] per scelta opportunistica o per mancanza di capacità critica, trova normale qualunque contesto e non esita a adattarsi [...]. Ma tutta questa flessibilità e normalità non gli impedisce di conservare un proprio carattere e di essere un individuo prima di qualsiasi altra cosa. (2025, 21)

George Bowling's portrayal adds a further dimension to the image of George Orwell that, according to Anita Pietra, Italian readers commonly hold. This was precisely the aim of the new translation, made possible through the courageous support of Feltrinelli – a collaboration that, as Pietra noted, should extend beyond the boundaries of academia and traditional publishing. As she candidly admitted, it is not always easy for publishers to strike a balance between selecting a book that will sell and one that will convey something meaningful. Pietra remarked, with a touch of irony, that an editor's job is akin to that of a smuggler: her task is to persuade the editorial board that a book represents a sound economic investment, while convincing readers that the same book has the power to change their lives.

Binelli, Pietra, and Wikeley all agreed that the shared goal of cultural institutions should be to make knowledge accessible to a wider public without diminishing the richness and complexity of literary production. In this process, the reader plays a crucial role, as pleasure and enjoyment remain central to the experience of literature. Richard Blair emphasized the importance of fostering clear thought as one of the Orwell Foundation's core values – something that must be cultivated early, beginning in schools. He expressed confidence in younger generations, whom he described as "switched on" and receptive to a broad spectrum of reading experiences. George Orwell himself, a voracious reader, can serve as an example to them: that is how he became a writer. His work continues to teach valuable lessons on how to express ideas and opinions "in a way that everybody can understand".

This clarity, as Andrea Binelli demonstrates in *Una boccata d'aria*, must also be perceptible in translation. For, in the end, the two poles that sustain all writing are "l'inviolabile richiamo della libertà e l'altrettanto insopprimibile bisogno pragmatico di efficienza" ("the inviolable call of freedom and the equally irrepressible pragmatic need for effectiveness"; Binelli 2023, 29; our translation). The goal is, in Orwell's own words, to "turn political writing into an art," uniting the aesthetic pursuit of clarity with the moral imperative "to expose some lie [...] to draw attention to some fact [...] and to get a hearing" (Orwell 1994, 5).

In relation to the clarity of style in writing practices, Anita Pietra argued that the opacity of language also affects the relationship between academia and publishing houses, and consequently the cultural output offered to the general public. Acting as a bridge between the publishing industry and the university, Andrea Binelli has long supported this alliance and advocates for new contributions from younger scholars to the dissemination of knowledge through both academic and non-specialist channels. Along similar lines, Jeremy Wikeley acknowledged the need for a broader participation of literary experts in the critical circulation of literature. At the same time, Pietra remarked that the kind of critical analysis often produced by scholars tends to remain inaccessible to a wider readership, making it difficult for the public to engage meaningfully with literary works. Ultimately, all speakers agreed that Orwell's legacy remains vital in stimulating readers to reflect on the political implications of language and culture, while serving as a powerful lens through which to observe the contradictions and complexities of our own time.

What emerged from this exploration of Eric Arthur Blair's life and work is that his literary and political voice remains profoundly relevant – and, fortunately, still resonates with readers across the world. Orwell stands as a three-dimensional writer, a writer for all: for students seeking a voice to express their feelings about the world, for the ordinary men and women who feel “slightly pushed around”, in Wikeley's words, and for all who believe in the value of human individualism and common decency. The “recipe” for writing that Orwell suggests lies in a mediation between fighting for freedom and the perseverance required to achieve clarity of thought. To conclude with Binelli's assertion:

Rimodulare questa dualità e individuare punti di mediazione etici e dignitosi, ossia che non intacchino la *decency*, è forse il grande rimosso da recuperare nel messaggio di Orwell e nella progettualità politica espressa dalla sua opera così come dalla sua parabola di vita. (2023, 29)

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