Chapter V

Coming Up for Air
Introduction

Coming Up For Air projects some of the major themes with which the novelist was occupied during the years 1937-1939. The metaphor "Coming up for air" suggests that aquatic creatures need air for their survival; hence they come up to the surface. The protagonist George Bowling's "fishing" holiday from his suburban retreat in Ellesmere Road, suggests his innate desire to have a whiff of fresh air after the stagnating and dull life. The imagery of fishing, trees and pools suggests the pristine happiness and values of the rural society. Such values were unspoilt before the onslaughts of war and industrialism, but disappeared from rural England after the war. Bowling's efforts to rediscover the idyllic past is similar to a marine creature's upward thrusts in search of fresh air. The only dangers that thwart man's links with the idyllic past are wide-spread industrialization, aerial wars and totalitarianism.

Theme And Portrayal of the Protagonist

Coming Up for Air is about an apocalyptic vision that destroys a nostalgic dream of childhood. For Bowling is in a prophetic mood in which he foresees the end of the world and can feel things cracking and collapsing under his feet. The war that will decide the destiny of Europe is due in 1941 and it seems to Bowling that he 'could see the whole of England, and all the people in it, and all the things that will happen to all of them.'

Orwell's description of Bowling guarding the tins of bully beef in Cornwall (an allusion to his father's military service in the Great War), and especially his satire on Hilda's and his own Anglo-Indian family and on Porteous, both mummified relics of the past, is artistically done.

One approach to such criticism is to consider the effect of Orwell's experiences in Spain upon his work. As he discovers his fuller and more specific political insights in Spain, politics are more consistently and successfully assimilated into the fabric of fiction. Bowling represents "a fusion of observation and imagination which in Orwell's career as a novelist is unique." ¹

Early in the novel, Orwell describes the social atmosphere of London's suburban retreat, Ellesmere Road. It smells of stagnation and seediness. The life of the menfolk revolves round their jobs; their suffocating periods in their small dingy rooms; their fear of the boss and their domestic life with their children. Bowling
reflects on the insipid life that is led by the residents of Ellesmere Road. He equates the semi-detached houses of Ellesmere Road to congested prison cells. The life in these houses has certain signs of despotism which Orwell found in common with the life in totalitarian societies. The houses of Ellesmere Road and the soulless lives in them are somewhat reminiscent of the Victorian Mansion of Nineteen Eighty-Four that exhales filth, squalor and poverty. Bowling recalls with seething flippancy his contempt for such a life:

"A line of semi-detached torture chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver, everyone of them with the Boss twisting his tail and the wife riding him like the nightmare and the kids sucking his blood like leeches."2

Coming Up for Air is peculiarly different from all novels that Orwell wrote before and the ones he wrote after as well. Its peculiarity lies in the fact that the novel is written in the first person narrative, from the beginning to the end, and the protagonist all along speaks only in monologues. The pattern, curiously enough, best suits the theme that Orwell projects. Hammond makes the following observation on Orwell's narrative art in Coming Up for Air:

"Certainly, in Coming Up for Air he brought to perfection the art of narrating memorable story in the simplest possible language and doing so captured the mood of the times in a way which no other novel of the period has equalled."3

George Bowling, the protagonist, is a middle-aged insurance inspector with a set of 'false teeth', a nagging wife and some pestering children. As he himself admits, "I'm fat, but I'm thin inside."4 This thin man in a fat covering was, in fact, greatly typical of the millions of English people between the two great wars, who hung on to a dead past sentimentally, while wishfully thinking that they were safe.

George, who is married to a lady from an Anglo-Indian community, is perpetually nagged and harassed, and finds himself at odds with her all the time. But, as usual, he is too good to break off, and thus suffers perennially. But, despite the sad circumstances in his life, he has a happy vision that cheers up his mind every now and then. It is the vision, the happy memory of his native town, Lower Binfield, where he spent his days till his youth. Lower Binfield, as such, is studded with all the bright memories for George. And in all the moments of depression, which in fact he had in wild frequency, George used to give himself over to his mental excursion into Lower Binfield,
where “it was summer all the year round.”

George, like the millions of English people during those early decades of this century, looked back on his golden past and nostalgically brooded over the endless bouts of fishing and bird nesting. George very effectively represents the sense of deep nostalgia of the English people for the unchanging rural order of their bygone adolescence:

“It was a wonderful June Morning. The butter cups were up to my knees. There was a breath of wind just stirring the tops of the elms, and the great green clouds of leaves were sort of soft and rich like silk. And it was nine in the morning and I was eight years old, and all round me it was early summer, with great tangled hedges where the wild roses were still in bloom, and bits of soft white cloud drifting overhead, and in the distance the low hills and the dim blue masses of the woods round Upper Binfield.”

Finally, George plans to go back to his Lower Binfield and makes it at last. But all his excitement and expectation break into pieces when he reaches the Lower Binfield, the centre of his dream, the source of his inspiration all his life. Reaching there, George wonders. “But where is the Lower Binfield? Where was the town I used to know?” George finds his Lower Binfield completely swallowed up by a big modern town, where no one recognizes him, nor does he make out anything. He is deeply frustrated with his long standing dream shattered to pieces in a moment:

“You know the feeling I had. Coming Up for Air! Like the big sea-turtles...”

George hits the climax of his disillusionment when a bomb falls on Lower Binfield, by accident though, while he was in the town. It shatters all his illusions completely. The sort of incredible change, that has come over Lower Binfield, making it ugly, distorted and frightful in the process, is typical of England as well. It is not the case of Lower Binfield alone, that has grown from a beautiful little place to a frightful sprawling mechanical town, it is very much typical of the whole British Isles, the modern world for that matter, in the grip of mechanization. Orwell brings in the Italian militiaman as a symbol of human decency, liberty and equality.

The fast incredible deterioration could not possibly have been expressed better than by the symbol Orwell has chosen rightly. Elsie, the beloved of George, who was beautiful, graceful and shapely twenty years ago, and continued to inspire George as a part of Lower Binfield memory, in all his moments of despair, has now become ugly and horrible. The one time beauty, and the dream-girl of George, now looks, “exactly like
a bull dog,” and is greatly symbolic of the general deterioration in the old natural beauty in all the fast growing industrial cities.

The bomb accidentally falls on Lower Binfield from one of the British fighter planes in their routine exercise, there is a terrible commotion in the town. George suddenly notices something like a herd of pigs, but soon finds them not pigs but only the school-children in their gas masks:

“It wasn’t pigs at all, it was only the school-children in their gas masks.... But I tell you that for a moment they looked exactly like a herd of pigs.”

The beginning and ending section of the novel form a frame in which Bowling’s spatial journey is dramatically presented. But the journey also exists in time; this more significant journey, to the past, is presented in the middle, flashback chapters. Thus the present surrounds, impinges upon, and alters the past, and this is perhaps the central theme of the novel. Bowling remembers and imagines the past; but the term “now-a-days” insistently encroaches on the normatively immutable fact of history. Affected by the constant assault of the present, the recreation of the past is also denied by the future.

Bowling believes that the present can be shaped by the past; action can be continuous. A man can make a meaningful journey to that past in memory (that is, in time), and in space. George returns to his childhood town; this will establish the fact of the past; this will deny the overwhelming nature of the present. The hope is insistent; there is a will to believe. However, the result of the journey is knowing the impossibility of regaining the past, the impossibility of avoiding a vitiating present:

“Why had I bothered about the future and the past seeing that the future and the past don’t matter.”

All that exists is the present; but the present is, by its very nature, the beginning of the future. Thus Bowling’s realization is that the past is irreclaimable to the raw denial of history in 1984:

“Can we get back to the life we used to live, or is it gone forever? Well, I had my answer. The old life’s finished and to go about looking for it is just a waste of time. There is no way back to Lower Binfield, you can’t put Jonah back into the whale.”

The intensity of George Bowling’s futile search to recapture the past has been much remarked by commentators on Orwell, for it suggests a strangely
conservative political quality in a man who has become so nearly apotheosized by the Left. Isaac Rosenberg says succinctly:

"He was a radical in politics and a conservative in feeling."^{13}

Orwell felt disdain for imperialism, organized religion, or for a capitalism which perpetuates poverty among a great number of its population. He may be able to quote Dickens with approval in 1939: "If men would behave decently the world would be decent"^{14}. Is not such a platitude as it sounds?

The political norms considered have proven futile. Socialism is workable, but, unfortunately socialists are fallible humans. Personal relationships are inevitably destroyed by human solepsism or the imposition of social forms. And the traditional mode of religious faith is not possible for Orwell:

"The real problem is how to restore the religious attitude while accepting death as final."^{15}

In *Coming Up for Air* the quest, therefore, is for the stability and continuity of moral values.

The domestic quarrel modifies the sense of great loss Bowling has apprehended. But perhaps Orwell's most profound insight, about either politics or art, is that in the twentieth century much indeed, all depends upon the nature of society.

**Salient Features of the Novel as a Documentary**

In *Coming up for Air*, for the first time, and only time in his novel, Orwell employs the first person point of view. He was widely criticized for the change in his approach. To John Mander (1961), the novel is a failure because the insights and emotions that the narrator, George Bowling, expresses are in reality only Orwell's, indistinguishable emotions and insights. Therefore the novel has become only "a documentary."^{18} Christopher Hollis uses the same charge when he comments that the novel, "has not really the qualities of a novel one way or other."^{17} However, Frank Wadsworth remarks:

"The first person narration creates an intimacy between Bowling and the reader, whom Orwell frequently addresses, so that the typical Orwellian talkiness no longer seems instrusive but an integral part of the character of George Bowling."^{18} Bowling represents "a fusion of observations and imagination which in Orwell's career as a novelist is unique."^{19}
Laurence Brander feels that as a narrator George Bowling is slightly less complete. “The idiom and vocabulary of the insurance agent are well maintained and agreeable and if at times the dry voice of Orwell the preacher echoes, a word or a phrase is introduced which restores the convention, and George Bowling is heard again”.

While Rees regards Coming Up for Air as an “outstanding among his books in several ways”, because while Bowling is “very unlike Orwell himself”, he is a “plausible mouthpiece” for Orwell’s own opinions. Mander in his “A Note on Documentary” makes the charge more specific:

“In the novel the author is present in his creation only in veiled, indirect, immanent form; in ‘documentary’ the author is a transcendent god who may visit and visibly interfere with his own creation.”

A Self-disclosure of Orwell’s Political Sensibility in a Satirical Form

The particular narrative form of Coming Up for Air signals the effect of Spain that had educated him into the implications of his political concerns; he was now aware of the full meaning of totalitarianism, of the full ramifications of the political language; earlier themes of anti-imperialism and anti-clericalism were now realized to be merely side-effects of a much more grievously diseased body politic.

At the outset of the novel, Bowling is walking slowly up the streets of London, watching the people. There is the usual jam of traffic with the great red buses nosing their way between the cars, and the engines roaring and horns blowing. People are walking with an insane and fixed expression. This rouses prophetic feeling in Bowling which keeps coming over him “nowadays” and so he looks “forward a few years”.

I can hear the air-raid sirens blowing and the loud-speakers bellowing that our glorious troops have taken a hundred thousand prisoners. I see a top-floor-back in Birmingham and a child of five howling and howling for a bit of bread. And suddenly the mother can’t stand it any longer, and she yells at it:

“Shut your trap, you little bastard! and then she ups the child’s frock and presses its bottom hard, because there isn’t any bread and isn’t going to be any bread. I see it all.”

But Bowling himself is not very sure, he is doubtful about what kind of the world is going to come about, He says:
"Some days it's impossible to believe it. Some days I say to myself that it's just a scare got up by the newspapers. Some days I know in my bones there's no escaping."24

Bowling believes that present can he shaped by the past. A man can make a meaningful journey to the past in memory and this is confirmed in the novel. Bowling suddenly sees a newspaper headline "King Zog's WEDDING POSTPONED". A "queer thing" happens. The name "Zog" strikes a chord of memory in Bowling and he is suddenly "back in the parish church at Lower Binfield, and it was thirty-eight years ago."25

George will return to his childhood town; this will establish the fact of the past; this will deny the overwhelming nature of the present. The hope is insistent; there is a will to believe. However, it is certain that past will not come back and the present is unavoidable. All that matters is the present; but the present is the beginning of future. He admits:

"The old life's finished, and to go about looking for it is just a waste of time."26

Some of the major political issues like war and totalitarianism have been discussed in this novel. Like Gordon Comstock of Keep the Aspidistra Flying, George Bowling has premonitions of a world war. In Coming Up for Air, Bowling is always hounded by the fears of war. He is concerned not so much like Comstock with the destruction of the industrial and capitalist civilization, but he is concerned primarily with the kind of the degeneration of mankind, the emergence of totalitarianism.

Bowling's imagination paints fears as he conjures up a vision of a post War Europe. It will be a "hate-world"27 in which the things that will impinge upon man's consciousness are the barbed wires, rubber truncheons and coloured shirts. The detectives will watch the people even in their sleep. Bowling expresses with seething flippancy his contempt for the vulgar mass and their false show of leader-worship:

"And the processions and the posters with enormous faces, and the crowds of a million people all cheering for the leader till they deafen themselves into thinking that they really worship him, and all the time underneath, they hate him so that they want to puke."28

The totalitarian society of 1984 is only an improved and advanced version
of the totalitarian society which is visualised in *Coming Up for Air*. From the start the marriage of George and Hilda is a failure, largely because Hilda quickly settles into the joylessness characteristic of her decayed middle class: 'The essential fact about them is that all their vitality has been drained away by lack of money'.

George returns to the red-brick prison, to a Hilda who will not believe that he hasn’t been off with some woman. The whole escapade becomes meaningless in an atmosphere where nothing is real except gas bills, school fees, boiled cabbage and the office on Monday morning. Everything fades out until there is nothing left but a vulgar row in the smell of old mackintoshes.

**As a War Novel and Orwell's Pastoral Nostalgia**

It is wartime. Life has become harsher. People on the whole are working harder, living here comfortably and dying more painfully. The farmers work for frightful hours for fourteen shilling a week. Past was better; at least people had a feeling of security and continuity. Lower Binfield has changed into a modern gross industrialized suburb from a small pastoral village. Only one vestige of his childhood world remains, the small woods George used to play in. Now it has become a "sacrosanct" copse, set aside for children only-called "The Pixy Glen". 29

There are two primary symbols in *Coming Up for Air*: fish, general and specific, and the bomb, general and specific. Fish and fishing represent the past, the former days in Lower Binfield in George's childhood and more specifically that part of the childhood, which was an escape from the hardness of life even at the turn of the century. The pressure of his father's diminishing business, the grossness of his stupid brother, even the reality of World War, all will vanish in the context of fishing. Bowling does not evade the reality of life in 1909:

"It isn't that life was softer then than now. Actually it was harsher. People on the whole worked harder, lived less comfortably and died more painfully." 30

The attempt to relive the past is, of course, doomed to failure. For the fish symbol and the images suggest a mythical Eden—a dream world which actually never was, a private, perfect world which time is stayed: The fish—a conventional symbol of fertility—has been "waiting" for Bowling. The novel specifically demonstrates that this is a delusion.

In contrast to the fish, the bomb logically serves a conflicting set of
references. It primarily represents the future as the image of impending bombing that pervades Bowling's mind. Further Bowling is riding the train to work in London, a bombing plane flying low overhead. For a minute or two it seemed to be keeping pace with the train. The expected fear is audible merely through words:

"The train was running along an embankment. A little below us you could see the roofs of the houses stretching on and on, the little red roofs where the bombs are going to drop, a bit lighted up at this moment because a ray of sunshine was catching them. Funny how we keep on thinking about bombs. Of course, there's no question that it's coming soon. You can tell how close it is by the cheer-up stuff they're talking about newspapers. I was reading a piece in the News Chronicle the other day where it said that bombing planes can't do any damage nowadays. The anti-aircraft guns have got so good that the bomber has to stay at twenty thousand feet. The chap thinks, you notice, that if an aeroplane's high enough the bombs don't reach the ground."31

The imminent future becomes the immediate present in the course of the novel, however, as a British plane accidentally drops a bomb on Lower Binfield, at the moment when Bowling is strolling in the market place.

"A noise like the Day of Judgement, and then a noise like a ton of coal falling onto a sheet of tin. That was falling bricks. It seemed to kind of melt into the pavement. "It's started", I thought. "I know it, Old Hitler didn't wait. Just sent his bombers across without warning."32

The future has become reality, has become the present; the bomb has replaced and denied possibility of the fish, of the past.

Bowling can see in a retrospective mood the life of Lower Binfield of 1900. His eye catches all the glimpses of the place. Reminiscences of persons and places have a particular charm for him. He is able to see in his mind's eye the horse trough in the market. Mother Wheeler is busy buying sweets from a sweet shop. Lady Rampling's carriage is moving slowly and uncle Ezekiel is cursing Joe Chamberlain in a high pitched voice. Every little detail of Lower Binfield is clear to him as though he were present there.

Orwell shares not only the fear of a war but also the fear of a possible emergence of both Fascism and totalitarianism: Bowling has premonitions of a collapse of Europe. Everybody seems to him to be rudely shaken with fright. Hitler's motive of
aggrandisement has generated lawlessness and violence among the people. People condemn Hitler but praise Stalin. But to Bowling, there is little difference between the two. The little fellow in the meeting who supports Stalin and condemns Hitler may also equate the two:

"But it might just as well be the other way about, because in the little chap's mind both Hitler and Stalin are the same. Both mean spanners and smashed faces."

**Coming Up for Air** (1939), Orwell's central transitional work, is at once synthetic and seminal, gathering the themes that had been explored in the poverty books of the thirties and anticipating the cultural essays and political satires of the next decade. This novel satirizes the drab and soulless estate housing, mild and mindless socialists and the difficulty of finding unpolluted streams with live fish in them. Bowling craves for the pristine pleasures of nature missing forever:

"Where are the English coarse fish now? When I was a kid every pond and stream had fish in it. Now all the ponds are drained, and when the streams aren't poisoned with chemicals from factories they're full of rusty tins and motor bike tyres."

**Impact of War and Industrialization on Society**

Orwell in a powerful satirical form explores the devastation of the post World War era, which disrupted the quintessence of agriculture. He looks at the sombre post-World War era and finds that mushrooming of industries and growing intellectual ambition have set the world at the brink of confusion and disaster. Orwell feels that mechanization is essentially the result of progress. But when it becomes an end in itself, it turns callous and heartless. Socialism then does not serve man, rather it is the man who becomes slave of the socialistic pattern of society. He perceives clearly that the function of mechanical devices is "to frustrate the human need for effort and creation". Like D.H. Lawrence's *Rainbow*, Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* attempts to explore the vanishing pre-industrial world. In order to search for his identity, George Bowling, goes to Lower Binfield, but strangely enough, he no longer finds it existent. He comes to see Lower Binfield:

"But where was Lower Binfield? Where was the town I used to know?.... All I know was that it was buried somewhere in the middle of that sea of bricks."

There is a touch of nostalgia for the lost Utopia—a pastoral world of piety
and fulfilment. Like Orwell, D.H. Lawrence revolts against the "old skin", exposes the wretched and "tragic" state of the world after the evanescence of the pre-World War era. Lawrence in Lady Chatterley's Lover writes:

"Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has fallen, we were got used to the ruins, and we start to build up new little habitats, new little hopes. If we can't make a road through the obstacles, we go round, or climb over the top. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen. Having tragically wrung our heads, we now proceed to peel potatoes, or to put on the wireless." 36

Further Orwell's Coming Up for Air echoes a deep-seated fear, a sense of panic, bewilderment and despair in the gloomy and gruesome atmosphere of the war. "A noise like Day of Judgment, and then a noise of a sheet of tin. That was falling bricks. It seemed a kind of melt into the payement. It's started..." 37

The vision of seeing a fellow human being in the enemy soldier is the highest point in the thinking of the writer Orwell. In these lines written in the memory of the Italian militiaman he says:

"But luck is not for the brave;
What would the world give back to you?
Always less than you gave.
Your name and your deeds were forgotten
Before your bones were dry,
And the lie that slew you buried
Under a deeper lie;
But the thing I saw in your face
No power can disinherit:
No bomb that ever burst
Shatters the crystal spirit". 38

George Orwell seriously ponders over the tattered, beleaguered and disfigured state of man and wants to rescue him from the endless sufferings and annihilation:

"Shall people like that Italian soldier be allowed to live the decent, fully human life, which is now technically achievable, or shan't they? Shall the common man be pushed back into the mud, or shall he not"? 39

George Orwell, neither believes in communism nor in catholicism but like William Golding hates brutality of the war. Golding powerfully writes:
"Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood! The sticks fell and the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the centre, its arms folded over its face."\textsuperscript{40}

Orwell diagnoses the loss of social credibility and the general nihilistic attitude of all thinking individuals on the war:

"It would be an exaggeration to say that the war turned people into highbrows, but it did turn them into nihilists for the time being. People who in a normal way would have gone through life with about as much tendency to think for themselves as a suet pudding were turned into Bolshies just by the war."\textsuperscript{41}

Orwell goes on to prove that the war knocked out man's basic belief in the existence of the society. "After that unspeakable idiotic mess you couldn't go on regarding society as something eternal and unquestionable, like a pyramid. You knew it was just a balls-up."\textsuperscript{42}

Orwell is astute enough to judge that war is primarily a game of war-mongers. The common man does not gain anything by it. There is an addition of want, suffering and misery to the common man. This is evident when Bowling speaks of the scarcity of jobs and the failure of the capitalist government of Lloyd George to provide adequate employment to the teeming millions.

Bowling ruminated over the retrenchment of millions of people from the army. He was shocked to find that they were unwanted beings in their own country. Lloyd George's government and its false assurances of giving employment could be understood by the people. There was a big scramble for jobs and ex-servicemen joined the queue for employment. Bowling described their deplorable plight thus:

"Everybody in England seemed to be screaming for jobs, myself included."\textsuperscript{43}

Orwell dwells specifically on the socio-political and economic repercussions of the war. Crick is therefore right in commenting:

"The imagery of bombing gives some measure of how much Orwell in 1935 was already penetrated by one other great political theme of his time, war as well as unemployment and poverty."\textsuperscript{44}

Orwell's mind pondered deeply on the subject of war during the years 1936-1939. His writings on topics relating to the war, show his antimilitarist outlook and
his pacifist concerns. In the second section of the essay "The Lion and the Unicorn", we find Orwell's searching analysis of the socio-economic situation arising out of the war:

"The war has demonstrated that private capitalism... does not work. It cannot deliver the goods......war is the greatest of all agents of change. It speeds up all processes, wipes out minor distinctions, brings reality to the surface. Above all it brings home to the individual that he is not altogether an individual." 45

In contrast to this society reeling under the fears of war and totalitarianism is the society of Lower Binfield. Bowling recalls in his mind's eye the rural society of Lower Binfield before the war. By describing the slow and easy-paced life of the people of Lower Binfield, Bowling is able to recreate the general atmosphere of peace and security in the rural society.

George Bowling realizes that he too is a part of the same dehumanizing force. After finding himself entrapped in the commercial world, he no longer wants to sell his conscience and morality. He becomes aware of his trivial state. He says:

"I was down among realities of modern life. The effects of commercialization and war are far reaching, the break down of the social, moral, religious barricades. In fact even the sacredness of life itself is reduced to nothing. The fear of annihilation becomes more devastating than death. And what are the realities of modern life? Well, the chief one is an everlasting, frantic struggle to sell things." 46

In Coming Up for Air, Orwell examines the outside forces which deprive man of his essential goodness. But inner forces too play a havoc with man leaving him thoughtless, callous and at the mercy of the same external forces for the society which are the agents of dehumanization.

When George Orwell puts the old life against the present, he admits that the former was "a dull, sluggish vegetable kind of life like turnips". 47

Thus, Orwell very effectively catches the mood of the time and, with his political insight and reason, analyses them threadbare, leaving no scope for illusion or any hope further. George and his wife Hilda go to attend a lecture in the Left Book Club, where a speaker hits mercilessly at the Fascists:

"Hate, hate, hate. Let's all get together and have a good hate over and over." 48
Message and Criticism of the Novel

The warning which the novel serves against totalitarian technocracy forms the basis of his fundamental ideas in Nineteen Eighty Four. In Bowling's fears of the onrush of Stalinism one can easily guess that Orwell has precisely this fear in mind in Nineteen Eighty Four. He crystallized some of his political ideas from his Coming Up for Air when he actually wrote Nineteen Eighty Four.

Bowling reflects on the near political future, and in doing so, he hints at the possibility of Stalinistic totalitarianism in Coming Up for Air:

"All the things you've got at the back of your mind, the things you're terrified of, the things that you tell yourself are just a nightmare or only happen in foreign countries. The bombs, the food-queues, the rubber truncheons, the barbed wire, the coloured shirts, the slogans, the enormous faces, the machine-guns squirting out of bedroom windows. It's all going to happen. I know it at any rate, I know it then. There's no escape".49

In this connection Robert J. Van Dellen brings out the political perspectives of Coming Up for Air.

"The political purpose of Coming Up for Air is essentially two-fold: first it is an analysis of the emergence of a totalitarian technocracy which produces Herbert Marcuse's one-dimensional man; and second, it suggests that the individual's victim of this technocracy only if he passively submits to it."50

A happy, pre-historic past, the Golden Age, is another version to escape Utopias. "The Golden Age was never the present age."51 In comparison, it is the past, or the future, which seems best. As Harry Levin puts it, citing Alice in Alice in Wonderland: "It is jam tomorrow and jam yesterday- but never jam today."52 According to Harry Levin, the Golden age is the mythical prelude to the recorded history and any version of myth is a "mutual ish-dream of the perfect community."53

He further remarks:

"The tendency to polarize the past and the present is responsible for the habitual dis-satisfaction with the present. The historical paradigm fades into the background, while the moral antithesis comes to the fore."54

Orwell was reaching to definite historical circumstances. He is combative both satirically and invectively and is explained by the fact that the terrors they depicted had very precise historical bases. Huxley also reiterates his ideal of the
wholeness of life in his satire against the split man in his work *Point Counter Point*:

"The malignant deity called the Law of Diminishing Returns does not confine himself solely to the economic sphere. The law of diminishing returns holds good in almost every part of human universe. Carried to an obsessive excess all things, activities, pleasures, pursuits indulged into excess, they become their opposites. Each particular pleasure has its corresponding particular pain.”

Orwell’s sarcastic remarks about Koestler’s disillusionment regarding politics—another classic case of disillusionment—makes his attitude evident:

"The fugitives from radical politics turned into short-term pessimists. They would keep out of politics, cultivate their own garden, make a sort of oasis in which they and their friends could remain sane, while insanities surged outside. And hope things will be better in a hundred years.”

Politics had never been an “intellectual idyl” or a pastoral for Orwell.

The dull, shabby, dead-alive Comstock family, who depressingly dwell in an atmosphere of semi-genteel failure, resemble the decayed middle-class family of Hilda Bowling whose vitality has been sapped by poverty. Like the Oxford don Porteous, whose name suggests old wine and Latin, they live 'inside the whale', entirely in the dead world of the past. When everything else has changed for the worse, only Hilda’s fossilized Anglo-Indian family and the eternally classical Porteous have stayed the same, and their political vacuum has been filled by the hateful Left Book Club lecturer: “All the decent people are paralysed. Dead men and live gorillas.” As Yeats writes in “The Second Coming”, The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.’

*The Road to Wigan Pier* satirizes many of the same subjects as *Coming Up For Air* novel: drab and soulless estate housing, mild and mindless Socialists, the crankish fruit-juice drinker, nudist and sandal-wearer of Pixy Glen, and the difficulty of finding unpolluted streams with live fish in them. And one of the most striking images of working class life in *The Road to Wigan Pier* is repeated in *Coming Up for Air*. The decrepit woman who had “the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery” becomes Bowling’s boyhood nursemaid: 'A wrinkled—up—hag of a woman, with her hair coming down and a smoky face, looking at least fifty years old.... It was Katie, who must have been twenty-seven.'
As in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the deterioration and decay of the natural landscape is paralleled by a similar decline that Bowling observes in people. In the early twenties, Hilda Bowling was ‘pretty, delicate girl...and within only about three years she’s settled down into a depressed, lifeless, middle-aged trumpl’. When he returns to Binfield in the thirties, Elsie, his first love, ‘with her milky-white skin and red mouth and kind of dull-gold hair, had turned into this great round shouldered hag, shambling along on twisted heels.”

To emphasize the satirical and artistic effect Orwell lists the conventions of the comic postcard jokes in his essay “As I Please” – ‘all women plot marriage, which only benefits women; all husbands are henpecked; middle-aged men are drunkards; nudism is comical; Air Raid precautions are ludicrous; illegitimate babies and old maids are always funny’ and nearly every one of them appears in *Coming Up For Air*. Actually, Bowling’s colloquial humour is far superior to these conventional jokes. He ‘baptises’ his new false teeth in a pub, compares Hilda’s constriction to that of an average zenana’, says that one old lady thought the Left Book Club had to do with books left in railway carriages, and observes that he got fat ‘so suddenly that it was as if a cannon bell had hit me and got stuck inside’. Orwell’s description of Bowling guarding the tins of bully beef in Cornwall (an allusion to his father’s military service in the Great War), and especially his satire on Hilda’s (and his own) Anglo-Indian family and on Porteous, both mummified relics of the past, is well done, *Coming Up For Air*, like *Gem* and *Magnet, Raffles* (All three are mentioned in the novel), like Gem and Magnet, Raffles (all three are mentioned in the novel), comic postcards, *Helen’s Babies*, Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, and ‘Good Bad Books’, recreates a decent, stable, familiar, but non-existent world.

Orwell’s *Coming Up for Air* has several Joycean echoes. Bowling is Ulysses’ Leopold Bloom. That is why he describes Bowling as being, like Bloom, ‘rather thoughtful and fairly well-educated, even slightly bookish’. Though Bloom and Bowling (their names are similar though Bowling suggests the bourgeois bowler hat) are not comparable in depth of characterization (the bass and the eunuch ‘and Bowling is more brash and hardened, they both are intelligent, curious, perceptive, sympathetic, good-natured, humorous and vulgar, and both are nostalgic about a happier past, Both characters are ‘ordinary middling chaps’ and both are salesmen, though Bowling is more successful
and feels superior to the two newspaper canvassers (Bloom's job) whom he meets on the train to London. Both know many obscure 'scientific' facts; Bowing's mind, like Bloom's, 'goes in jerks'; and the thought of the Albanian King Zog 'starts memories' of King Og of Bashan and transports Bowling back to his 'incommunicable' childhood through a 'Joycean' stream of consciousness' that attempts to capture the past: 'The past is a curious thing. It's with you all the time. I suppose an hour never passes without your thinking of things that happened ten or twenty years ago....Then some chance sight or sound or smell, especially smell, sets your going, and the past doesn't merely come back to your, you're actually in the past.'

A disintegrating civilization on the verge of an annihilating war has been the subject of the greatest novels of our time—Women in Love, Remembrance of Things Past, The Magic Mountain—and Coming Up For Air belongs thematically with these books. Written a generation late, the novel conveys many of the modes of thought and feeling characteristic of Orwell's age—the uncertainty, fear and despair that are expressed in Spengler's Decline of the West and Yeats' 'The Second Coming', in Miller's Tropic of Cancer and Auden's 'September I, 1939'. As Leonard Woolf writes in his autobiography:

"In 1914 in the background of one's life and one's mind there were light and hope; by 1918 one had unconsciously accepted a perpetual public menace and darkness and had admitted in the privacy of one's mind or soul an iron fatalistic acquiescence in insecurity and barbarism."

While working on Coming Up For Air Orwell writes to Cyril Connolly in Gadarene imagery: 'Everything one writes now is overshadowed by this ghastly feeling that we are rushing towards a precipice and, though we shan't actually prevent ourselves or anyone else from going over, must put up some sort of fight'. Despite the grim prognostications, Bowling opposes the threatening cataclysm. His imaginative preservation of the past is the positive core in the novel that survives the present horrors and ultimately conveys the most powerful effect in the book. As Bowling says, 'I'm fat but I'm thin inside. Has it ever struck you that there's a thin man [the past] inside every fat man [the present]?' This preservation of the past in the free minds of helpless yet resisting men is one of Orwell's central concerns in both Animal Farm and 1984. These books grew directly out of his intensely disillusioning experiences in the Spanish Civil
War, which he recorded in *Homage to Catalonia*.

Orwell shows his faith in the traditional culture and the past, when he tries to revitalize the past in his memory, in *Coming Up for Air*. George Bowling, like Winston Smith dreams of the golden country and longs to recapture all its rich and vital associations. Unlike Winston’s dream country, Bowling’s dream country is the countryside of his boyhood—Lower Binfield. Although the associations with Lower Binfield are vivid and strong in Bowling’s mind, the most memorable impression of the place is his impression of fishing. This one-time favourite pastime of Bowling, gives him an opportunity to describe the integrated life of the organic community and his love for the general atmosphere of peace and solace, which existed in such a unified life before the onrush of private capitalism and aerial wars. Bowling’s emotional outbursts reveal the poetic sensibility of the man.

"Because in a manner of speaking I am sentimental about my childhood — not my own particular childhood, but the civilization which I grew up in and which is now, I suppose, just about its last kick. And fishing is somehow typical of that civilization. As soon as you think of fishing you thing of things that don't belong to the modern world. The very idea of sitting all day under a willow tree beside a quiet pool - and being able to find a quiet pool to sit beside – belongs to the time before the war, before the radio, before aeroplanes, before Hitler":61

**Conclusion**

Orwell’s novel seems to evoke a dominant mood of repudiation on account of intellectual’s betrayal of mankind. After the disaster and horror of the world war there was realization “that the standard values of their elders were false and disastrous and must be rejected.”62

Orwell’s contemporary novelists were aware of man’s discordant experience and that led to pretence and hollowness. In the fifties, the central tradition of Victorian and Edwardian English novelists was diverted temporarily by the experimentalists but it was beautifully restored by novelists like George Orwell, Christopher Isherwood, Green Waugh, Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson, C.P. Snow, Amis Sultote and John Wains. Thus Orwell belongs to the British tradition both in thought and technique.

Thus *Coming Up for Air* effectively brings the journey of George
Bowling, its protagonist, from London to Lower Binfield and to London again. The protagonist, after coming full circle, is now convinced that there's no way out. It's just something that's got to happen. He has no illusion anymore.

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