

The Wilde Goose Chase

Rex Warner

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Summary

Three brothers leave their hometown, each of them intentioned to undertake a long journey beyond the frontier in chase of the Wilde Goose. Only George, the youngest brother, will return home; he is now an elderly man and no more in good psycho-physical condition. Before disappearing again, he narrates the extraordinary story of both his and his brothers' intricate adventures; and this story is then related in the simplest way by one of the inhabitants.

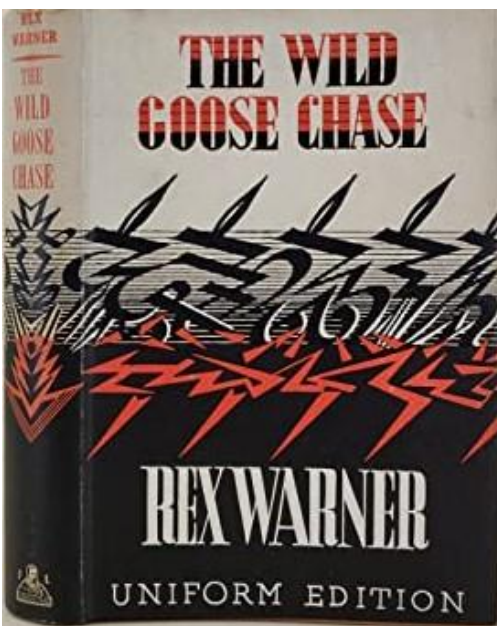
Having crossed the frontier, and after an ominous encounter with an Epicurean philosopher, George is housed in a farm, welcomed by a father and his beautiful daughter Joan. The girl makes love to George and invites him to stay with them. The other farmers of the village, savagely exploited by the city and terrified by the Police, also ask George to join them and help in organizing a revolt. But George who considers them not ready yet for revolution and who, despite the warnings Puskov the agitator gives him, is in fact attracted by the city himself, leaves them all; yet he promises to be back because it is in this very place that he, while with Joan, first heard the wild geese pass.

The city, together with the adjoining aerodrome, is an impressive miracle of engineering, completely isolated from the sky by means of a roof placed on four huge cylindrical towers. Under gigantic arc lamps, houses and streets packed with traffic and people hurrying to and fro appear shadowless and unreal. Under constant control of the police George reaches the Convent, the city scientific and intellectual core, the most celebrated quarter, inhabited by scholars and researchers, teachers and students. Here, thanks to a simple operation, everyone is turned into a

hermaphrodite and thus freed from all gender obligations and distinctions, as well as from true reality and its objective categories of time and space.

George does not submit neither to the operation nor to “the control of reality” as carried out by the Government; he is consequently doomed to the Research Department, a sort of Nazi lab. He manages to escape and reaches first the false Free Republic of Lagonda, then Joan’s village, where he commits himself to the revolutionary cause. They will conquer the city, rent the roof, overthrow the Government, destroy the Police, the heart of the Convent, and the Anserium, that is the Cathedral with its “stuffed Wilde Goose.”

He will found a new society that “shall make use once more of time and space... and particularly attached to the earth and to the sun... What our old leaders most respected we [the new leaders] chiefly despise – the frantic assertion of an ego, do-nothings, the ever-cleanly, deliberate love making, literary critics, moral philosophers, ball room dancing, pictures of sunsets, money, the police; and to what they used to despise we attach great value –to comradeship, and to profane love, to hard work, honesty, the sight of the sun, reverence for those who helped us, animals, flesh and blood.”



Analysis

Especially considered as a political period-piece, this extraordinary work has not been appreciated by critics as its rich and vital complexity would require.

It is a fantasy in the form of a naturalistic novel (like *Ninety Eighty-Four*), which combines the allegorical tradition of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and the quest romance with the satirical tradition of *The Gulliver’s Travels*: the result is a narrative structure clearly reminiscent of *Don Quixote* and as much suited to tackle the theme of the engagement towards reality.

As a political romance, *The Wild Goose Chase* voices the expectations and commitments of the so-called Auden generation, investigating the central relation between the intellectuals and the working-classes and trying to present it through the whole specter of contemporary point of views, oversimplifications, idealizations, narcissistic egoism, and bad consciousness, even of the most active Left.

As a novel, it shows an incomparable degree of realism in the rendering of the mentality and manners of the upcoming forties: that is an effect of the allegorical language used, in the manner of Kafka, to mirror both present reality and the ideal together with the quest for it; and it is because of this very effect that a sort of reluctance is aroused in the reader as he enters a narrative world dominated by so painful a sense of displacement, of uprootedness and empty automatism.

Under this perspective *The Wilde Goose Chase* is much more than a neglected predecessor of *Ninety Eighty-Four*, as also the author of *A Clockwork Orange* points out. The city is an allegory of the bourgeois system with its pretended and false hierarchy between the Mind (the Convent) and the Body (the working-class quarters); it is also a pitiless anatomy of the dominion of the Mind: it is the intellectuals who, because of their betrayal of concrete reality, their narcissism, their cowardice, are the means through which totalitarian power spreads and multiplies at the various levels of society, thus becoming *collective*.

Significantly the Head of the totalitarian power, the King, lives in Convent: he is the Great Clerk, the symbol of the intellectual power and of its ability to seduce and deceive even the rough, victorious generals of the revolution. Even more than Orwell's Party, the Convent is a satire of both the academic and political world which still retains its effectiveness untouched.

It is not by chance that the object of the chase itself takes the form of an animal. The Wilde Goose is the symbol of life and of true reality as revealed in the harmonious relationship between man and Nature.

The urge towards life is love, "not the love of a man, not of a woman, not of a class or of a society... but the love of life... and it is the rich body and the candid mind which are the lovable things."

While Warner's open critique is realized in the destruction of its targets, the wild geese are never reached as to signify that life, justice and freedom can never be permanently secured and the chase must be constantly carried on.

Bibliography

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