

BOOKS

AMY SILLMAN ON REBECCA SOLNIT'S *ORWELL'S ROSES*

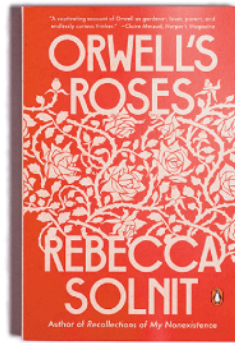


Photo: Brian J. Green.

Flowers have been a hot topic the past few years: promiscuous symbols for everything from sex to death, mourning to deceit, love to cliché to decay. So *Orwell's Roses* (Viking), Rebecca Solnit's rhizomatic rumination on pleasure and politics mapped onto the figure of George Orwell and his rosebushes, was apropos. It turns out that Orwell, one of the great heroes of political critique made into art, was also a passionate and devoted lover of flowers and gardening. He saw the English as a nation of flower lovers and hobbyists (or as he put it, "stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans") but also, dyspeptically, wrote that the English had "no aesthetic feelings whatever." Solnit makes this lover/hater Orwell the stem of her book, from which she unfolds a series of tendrils, offshoots, and curlicues into a bouquet of observations on the nature of culture and the culture of nature. She pokes into paradoxical clusters where the subject of pleasure can be an answer or a problem and brings a critical eye to places where beauty and brutality bunch up against each other, asking the eternal art-and-politics questions about how we can metabolize the coexistence of such things in the world as lilacs and Nazis. She's generous to Orwell, clearly acknowledging him as one of her writing heroes and progenitors and letting him off the hook somewhat from the potentially harsher critique that could be leveled at an old white English man from the earlier part of the twentieth century. For example, he was no feminist. But it's hard not to love the central configuration of a tweedy old mucker who still imagines a future for his rosebushes, though he is ever on the lookout for disaster and once wrote that his next book was bound to be a failure because "every book is a failure."

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