

Eternal vigilance: The Road to Airstrip One

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Throughout the 1940s, George Orwell was formulating the ideas about language and politics that found their ultimate expression in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. His essays from this period are a plain-spoken pleasure, despite their contradictions

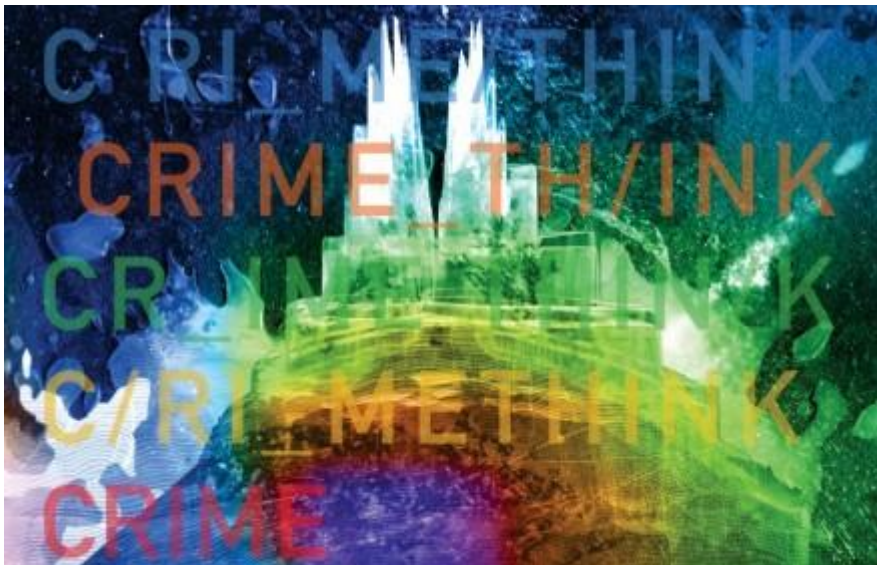


Illustration by Stanley Donwood

By 1940, George Orwell had behind him four conventional “social” novels and, more significantly, three books of documentary reportage, each one better than the last, culminating in his classic account of the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*.

Gradually in the others but culminating in *Homage*, Orwell perfected his signature “plain” style, which so resembles someone speaking honestly and without pretence directly to you, and he had more or less settled on his political opinions: “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.” So he said in 1946.

But while this may have been settled, there were other matters Orwell was still working out in his mind. The subjects of the essays Orwell wrote in the 1940s are almost all, in one way or another, things Orwell doesn’t like. The essays are incessantly self-contradicting. First, Orwell declares

that no great novel could now be written from a Catholic (or communist) perspective; later he allows that a novel could be written from such a perspective, in a pinch; and then, in his essay on Graham Greene, he comes very near to suggesting that only Catholics can now write novels.

In his essay on T S Eliot, he writes that it is “fashionable to say that in verse only the words count and ‘meaning’ is irrelevant, but in fact every poem contains a prose-meaning, and when the poem is any good it is a meaning which the poet urgently wishes to express. All art is to some extent propaganda.” Several years later, in “The Prevention of Literature”, in arguing for the idea that poetry might survive totalitarianism while prose would not, he writes that “what the poet is saying – that is, what his poem ‘means’ if translated into prose – is relatively unimportant even to himself”.

What is particularly frustrating about these contradictions is that at each successive moment Orwell presents them in his great style, his wonderful sharp-edged plain-spoken style, which makes you feel that there is no way on earth you could possibly disagree with him, unless you’re part of the pansy left, or a sandal-wearer and fruit-juice drinker, or maybe just a crank.

In a way I’m exaggerating, because the rightness of Orwell on a number of topics has been an albatross around his neck for 60 years. In truth, Orwell was wrong about all sorts of things, not least the inner logic of totalitarianism: he thought a mature totalitarian system would so deform its citizenry that they would not be able to overthrow it. This was the nightmare vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In fact, as it turned out in Russia, even the ruling elite was not willing to maintain mature totalitarianism after Stalin’s death.

Other totalitarian regimes have repeated the pattern. Orwell was wrong and Orwell contradicted himself. He was more insightful about the distant dangers of communist thought-control, in the Soviet Union, than the more pressing thought-control of western consumerism. Nor did he see the sexual revolution coming, not by a long shot; one wonders what the too-frequent taunter of the “pansy left” would have made of the fact that the gay movement was one of the most successful, because most militant, of the post-1960s liberation struggles.

But there is a deeper logic in Orwell’s essays, beneath the contradictions and inevitable oversights. The crisis that he was writing himself through in the 1940s was the crisis of the war and, even more confusingly, the post-war. It involved a kind of projection into the future of certain tendencies latent in the present. Orwell worries about the potential Sovietisation of Europe, but also the infection by totalitarian thinking of life outside the Soviet sphere – not just specific threats to specific

freedoms, but to deeper structures of feeling. As the philologist Syme says to Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? . . . Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness is smaller.”

If Orwell was wrong in some sense about the long-term development of totalitarianism, he was right about its deepest intellectual intentions, about the rot it wished to create at the centre of thinking itself. And he was right that this rot could spread.

One solution would be to cordon off literature from life and politics entirely: this was, in some sense, the solution adopted by the writers of the previous generation – Eliot, James Joyce, D H Lawrence and Ezra Pound – whom Orwell calls the writers of the 1920s and we now call the high modernists. And yet he did not want to make a special plea for literature; in fact, of all the writers of his time, Orwell was constitutionally the least capable of making this separation. His own writing and politics were the fruit of his specific experience – of imperialism in Burma, of the conditions in the English coal mines, of the war in Spain. He insists on several occasions that “all art is propaganda” – the expression of a particular world-view. In Dickens’s case, for example, this is the world-view of a classic 19th-century bourgeois liberal, a world-view Orwell admires even as he sees its limitations.

For the Orwell of the early essays, the case of Henry Miller is the tough one. Because while Dickens’s politics are in the end congenial enough, Miller’s quietism is less so. “I first met Miller at the end of 1936, when I was passing through Paris on my way to Spain,” writes Orwell. “What most intrigued me about him was to find that he felt no interest in the Spanish war whatever. He merely told me in forcible terms that to go to Spain at that moment was the act of an idiot.” Orwell nonetheless went to Spain, and fought there. He was a writer who felt it was vital to let politics animate his work; Miller was the opposite.

And yet Orwell contrasts Miller favourably to W H Auden, who at this time in the poem “Spain” was miming the thoughts of the good party man about the “necessary murder”. Miller is so far removed from this sort of sentiment, so profound is his individualism and his conviction that Orwell comes close to endorsing it: “Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale – or rather, admit that you are inside the whale (for you are, of course).” Except Orwell doesn’t really mean this. He may be inside the whale but he does not intend to stop disturbing its digestion, he does not intend to be any more quietistic.

What he admired above all in Miller was his willingness to go against the grain of the time. While all art is propaganda, it needn’t necessarily

propagandise something correct. The important thing is that the writer himself believes it.

But there are certain things that you simply can't believe. "No one ever wrote a great novel in praise of the Inquisition," he asserts. Is that true? At almost the exact same moment, Jean-Paul Sartre (a writer who, Orwell thought, incorrectly, was "full of air") was writing in *What Is Literature?*: "Nobody can suppose for a moment that it is possible to write a good novel in praise of anti-Semitism." Is that true? It seems to have been a problem that leftist writers of the 1940s were going to face by sheer bluff assertion.

For Orwell the number of beliefs hostile to literary production seemed to expand and expand. Eliot's "Four Quartets" is labelled "Pétainist" – a fairly strong term to hurl at a long experimental poem that doesn't even rhyme. And Salvador Dalí, in "Benefit of Clergy", is a "rat".

As the war goes on, then ends, Orwell's sense of peril grows sharper, and he looks at literature in a different way. He comes to think that no matter who wins, the world will find itself split again into armed camps, each of them threatening the others, none of them truly free – and literature will simply not survive. This is the landscape of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and it is also the landscape of his later essays – "The Prevention of Literature", "Politics and the English Language", "Writers and Leviathan".

There is even, momentarily, a kind of hallucination, in the curious short piece "Confessions of a Book Reviewer", where some of Orwell's old interest in the starving writer crops up, now mixed with the wintry gloominess of his later years: "In a cold but stuffy bed- sitting room littered with cigarette ends and half-empty cups of tea, a man in a moth-eaten dressing gown sits at a rickety table, trying to find room for his typewriter among the piles of dusty papers that surround it . . . He is a man of 35, but looks 50. He is bald, has varicose veins and wears spectacles, or would wear them if only his pair were not chronically lost."

Who is this but Winston Smith, the failed hero of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, figured as a book reviewer? Or who, conversely, is Winston Smith, but a book reviewer figured as the prisoner of a futuristic totalitarian regime?

With great doggedness, Orwell keeps delving into the question of literature's position in society, and what might be done to keep it alive in a time of total politics. In "Writers and Leviathan", dated 1948, he argues that writers must ultimately separate themselves from their political work. It's a depressing essay and it ends – one wonders whether Orwell was aware of this – with an echo of the line of Auden's he so reviled: the writer capable of separating himself from his political activity will be the

one who “stands aside, records the things that are done and admits their necessity, but refuses to be deceived as to their true nature” .

Orwell was always a realist who knew that politics was a dirty business – but he was never quite such a realist as here. The realm of freedom had finally shrunk to a small, small point, and it had to be defended. As Winston Smith says in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull.”

It is hard not to wonder whether the pessimism of this conclusion was partly a response to the art (or propaganda) Orwell was himself creating in those years. He had published *Animal Farm* in 1945; weakened by the tuberculosis that would kill him, he was writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1947-48. After the reception of *Animal Farm*, and with the direction *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was taking, it must have been clear to him on some level that the world was going to use these books in a certain way. And it did use them that way.

The socialist critique of Orwell’s late work seems essentially correct – they were not only anti-Stalinist but anti-revolutionary, and were read as such by millions of ordinary people (a fact that Orwell, who was always curious to know what ordinary people thought, would have had to respect). Out of “necessity” he had chosen a position, and a way of stating that position, that would be used for years to come to bludgeon the anti-war, anti-imperialist left.

That he had chosen honestly what seemed to him the least bad of a set of bad political options did not make them, in the long view of history, any better.

But what a wonderful writer he had become! That voice – once you’ve heard it, how do you get it out of your head? It feels like the truth, even when it’s not telling the truth. It is clear and sharp but unhurried; Orwell is not afraid to be boring, which means that he is never boring.

His voice as a writer had been formed before Spain, but Spain gave him a jolt – not the fighting nor his injury (a sniper had shot him through the throat in 1937), though these had their effects, but the calculated campaign of deception he saw in the press when he got back, waged by people who knew better. “Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper,” Orwell recalled, “but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed . . . This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very

concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. After all, the chances are that those lies, or at any rate similar lies, will pass into history.”

This insight reverberates through Orwell’s work for the rest of his life. The answer to lies is to tell the truth. But how? How do you even know what the truth is, and how do you create a style in which to tell it? Orwell’s answer is laid out in “Politics and the English Language”: You avoid ready phrases, you purge your language of dead metaphors and you do not claim to know what you do not know. Far from being a relaxed prose (which is how it seems), Orwell’s is a supremely vigilant one.

It is interesting that Orwell did not go to university. He went to Eton, but loafed around there and, afterwards, went off to Burma as a police officer. University is where you sometimes get loaded up with fancy terms whose meaning you’re not quite sure of. Orwell was an intellectual and a highbrow who thought Joyce, Eliot and Lawrence were the greatest writers of his age, but he never uses fancy terms.

You could say that Orwell was not essentially a literary critic, or that he was the only kind of literary critic worth reading. He was most interested in the way that literature intersects with life, with the world, with groups of actual people. Some of his more enjoyable essays deal with things that a lot of people read and consume – postcards, detective fiction, “good bad books” (and poetry) – simply because a lot of people consume them.

Post-war intellectuals would celebrate (or bemoan) the “rise of mass culture”. Orwell never saw it as a novel phenomenon. He was one of the first critics to take popular culture seriously because he believed it had always been around and simply wanted attention. These essays are part of a deeply democratic commitment to culture in general and reading in particular.

His reading of writers who were more traditionally “literary” is shot through with the same commitment. Orwell had read a great deal, and his favourite writers were by many standards difficult writers, but he refused to appeal to the occult mechanisms of literary theory. “One’s real reaction to a book, when one has a reaction at all, is usually ‘I like this book’ or ‘I don’t like it,’ and what follows is a rationalisation. But ‘I like this book’ is not, I think, a non-literary reaction.” And the “rationalisation”, he saw, was going to involve your background, your expectations, the historical period you’re living through.

If we compare Orwell to his near-contemporary Edmund Wilson, who was in many senses a more sensitive critic, we see Orwell’s peculiar strength. At almost the exact same moment as Orwell, in early 1940,

Wilson published a psycho biographical essay on Dickens in which he traced much of Dickens's later development to his brush with poverty as a young man.

Orwell's treatment is much more sociological and political, and in a way less dramatic than Wilson's. Yet at one point Orwell encapsulates Wilson's argument with a remarkable concision: "Dickens had grown up near enough to poverty to be terrified of it, and in spite of his generosity of mind, he is not free from the special prejudices of the shabby-genteel." This is stark, and fair, and that "terrified" is unforgettable.

You can tie yourself in knots – many leftist intellectuals have done this over the years – trying to prove that Orwell's style is a façade, an invention, a mask he put on when he changed his name from Eric Blair to "George Orwell"; that by seeming to tell the whole story in plain and honest terms, it actually makes it more difficult to see, it obfuscates, the part of the story that's necessarily left out; that ultimately it rubber-stamps the status quo.

In some sense, intellectually, all this is true enough; you can spend a day, a week, a semester proving it. There really are things in the world that Orwell's style would never be able to capture. But there are very few such things.

Orwell did not want to become a saint, but he became a saint anyway. For most of his career a struggling writer, eking out a living reviewing books at an astonishing rate, he was gradually acknowledged, especially after the appearance of *Homage to Catalonia* in 1938, to be a great practitioner of English prose. With the publication of *Animal Farm* – a book turned down by several of England's pre-eminent houses because they did not want to offend Britain's ally the Soviet Union – Orwell became a household name.

Then his influence grew and grew, so that shortly after his death he was already a phenomenon. "In the Britain of the 1950s," the great cultural critic Raymond Williams once lamented, "along every road that you moved, the figure of Orwell seemed to be waiting. If you tried to develop a new kind of popular cultural analysis, there was Orwell; if you wanted to report on work or ordinary life, there was Orwell; if you engaged in any kind of socialist argument, there was an enormously inflated statue of Orwell warning you to go back." In a way the incredible posthumous success of Orwell has seemed one of the more peculiar episodes in the cultural life of the west.

He was not, as Lionel Trilling once pointed out, a genius; he was not mysterious; he had served in Burma, washed dishes in a Parisian hotel, and fought for a few months in Spain, but this hardly added up to a life of

adventure; for the most part he lived in London and reviewed books. So odd, in fact, has the success of Orwell seemed to some that there is even a book, *George Orwell: the Politics of Literary Reputation*, devoted to getting to the bottom of it.

When you return to his essays of the 1940s, the mystery evaporates. You would probably not be able to write this way now, even if you learned the craft: the voice would seem put-on, after Orwell. But there is nothing put-on about it here, and it seems to speak, despite the specificity of the issues discussed, directly to the present. In Orwell's clear, strong voice we hear a warning. Because we, too, live in a time when truth is disappearing from the world, and doing so in just the way Orwell worried it would: through language. We move through the world by naming things in it, and we explain the world through sentences and stories. The lesson of these essays is clear: Look around you.

Describe what you see as an ordinary observer – for you are one, you know – would see them. Take things seriously.

And tell the truth. Tell the truth.

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