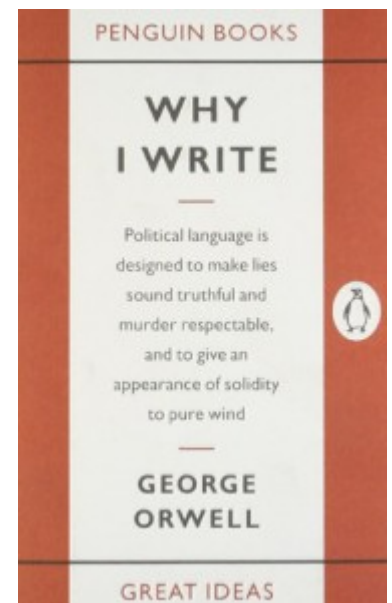


Review: George Orwell's *Why I Write*

George Orwell is a touchstone of 20th Century literature, particularly political rhetoric. There are numerous commentators who have delved into the depths of classics such as *Animal Farm*. But when I finally got to reading (for the first time!) the definitive 1984 I thought I would go to Orwell himself to reveal his whys and wherefores.



I therefore read *1984* in conjunction with a short collection of Orwell's pieces. *Why I Write* has essays, stories, and the like written in the immediate context of the Second World War. *1984* was famously written in 1948, so we have an insight into its foundations.

There's no rhyme or reason to the content. I suspect Penguin Books simply threw together some remains from a dead author.

The contents range from authorial introspection ("All writers are vain, selfish and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery." *Why I Write* p10) through to cultural and political analysis.

The cultural considerations are partly a curiosity. The second piece, *The Lion & The Unicorn*, commences with a fascinating commentary entitled "England, Your England."

Given my forthcoming relocation, I wonder if his observations hold true, even vestigially, 75 or so years on:

Here are a couple of generalizations about England that would be accepted by almost all observers. One is that the English

are not gifted artistically...the English are not intellectual... another English characteristic which is so much a part of us that we barely notice it, and that is the addiction to hobbies and spare-time occupations, the privateness of English life... The most hateful of all names in an English ear is Nosey Parker.

(The Lion & The Unicorn pp14-16)

Of particular interest is his demarcation of a “popular culture.” Is this Orwell’s English equivalent of 1984’s “proles”?

...in all societies the common people must live to some extent against the existing order. The genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface, unofficially and more or less frowned on by the authorities. One thing one notices if one looks directly at the common people, especially in the big towns, is that they are not puritanical. They are inveterate gamblers, drink as much beer as their wages will permit, are devoted to bawdy jokes, and use probably the foulest language in the world. They have to satisfy these tastes in the face of astonishing, hypocritical laws (licensing laws, lottery acts, etc., etc.) which are designed to interfere with everybody but in practice allow everything to happen. Also, the common people are without definite religious belief, and have been so for centuries. The Anglican Church never had a real hold on them, it was simply a preserve of the landed gentry, and the Nonconformist sects only influenced minorities. And yet they have retained a deep tinge of Christian feeling, while almost forgetting the name of Christ.

(The Lion & The Unicorn pp16-17)

I suspect these commonish characteristics are now much less hidden, and the “Christian feeling” is now a much fainter memory. We will see.

What is more intriguing, of course, is Orwell's political and rhetorical framework. **It's not always easy to translate Orwell into today's political world.** All "sides" of politics would love to seize 1984's polemic for themselves – to paint their enemies as "Ingsoc" and "Big Brother" and so justify their own virtue. I'm not sure whether it's Orwell's genius or simply the cataclysmic post-war changes that make this impossible. It is clear that 1984 is not written against the "left"; Orwell himself identifies as a democratic *socialist*.

Nor is it against the "right"; Orwell's caricature of capitalism ("What this war has demonstrated is that private capitalism... does not work. It cannot deliver the goods." p46) portrays it as impotent rather than evil.

Orwell's enemy is best described as *totalitarianism*. Clearly there is a correlation to the fascism of Orwell's day. But it also has a much more insidious form that is more immune to anachronism. On the one hand, Orwell recognises that there is no overt totalitarianism in his native land:

Everyone believes in his heart that the law can be, ought to be, and, on the whole, will be impartially administered. The totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there is only power, has never taken root. Even the intelligentsia have only accepted it in theory. (The Lion & The Unicorn, p 21)

But nevertheless, there is a limited form of totalitarianism, a *corruption* of sorts, that embraces injustice without cognition at the level of belief. Released of cultural inhibitions, is this not the essence of 1984's "doublethink" and its basic plot line, that dissent is not to be defeated, but *converted*?

Even among the inner clique of politicians who brought us to our present pass, it is doubtful whether there were any conscious traitors. The corruption that happens in

England is seldom of that kind. Nearly always it is more in the nature of self-deception, of the right hand not knowing what the left hand doeth.

(The Lion & The Unicorn, p29)

...the British ruling class obviously could not admit to themselves that their usefulness was at an end. Had they done that they would have had to abdicate. For it was not possible for them to turn themselves into mere bandits, like the American millionaires, consciously clinging to unjust privileges and beating down opposition by bribery and tear-gas bombs. After all, they belonged to a class with a certain tradition... They had to feel themselves true patriots, even while they plundered their countrymen. Clearly there was only one escape for them – into stupidity. They could keep society in its existing shape only by being unable to grasp that any improvement was possible.

(The Lion & The Unicorn, p33)

Unlike his novels, in which the predicament is resolved only in the negative, the unadorned Orwell in this book gives some sort of vision for the way forward. It is, indeed, why he writes.

(From 5:08)

He is, in the main, incredibly insightful. The essay "Politics and the English Language" is a delightful and fascinating read. Clearly the writers of *Yes Minister* were influenced by his satirical consideration of "Sir Humphrey" bureaucratese! Even Boris Johnson (unknowingly?) concurs with his decrying the overuse of Latin roots (p91).

He reveals the roots of our modern-day sloganeering, the soil on which cries of "Stop the Boats!" or "Bigotry!" have taken root. It is nothing short of doublethink:

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found

that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions, and not a 'party line'. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style... A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself... And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

(Politics and the English Language pp113-114)

He points us to the use of euphemism ("if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them" p115) and weasel words and the whole toolkit. Surely there is nothing new under the political sun. Surely some of the social revisionism in Tasmanian in recent years can, in this sense, rightly and precisely be called "Orwellian." Consider the following little gem. The "dishonest" use of such words is as prevalent as ever.

Other words used in variable meanings, in most cases more or less dishonestly, are: class, totalitarian, science, progressive, reactionary, bourgeois, equality.

(Politics and the English Language, p110)

Despite his insight, there is also naivete. Orwell does have a vision of an English Socialism that is not "Ingsoc." It involves good things such as educational reform and de-colonisation (which largely happened in the 1960's) but also nationalisation and income limitation (which generally failed where implemented after the war). Above all Orwell's leftwards lean appears unrealistically polite. Consider the intersection where I stand, at the corner of church and society:

It will disestablish the Church, but will not persecute

religion. It will retain a vague reverence for the Christian moral code, and from time to time will refer to England as 'a Christian country'.

(The Lion & The Unicorn, pp83-84)

I cannot yet speak to my observations of England. But in Australia, and the Western World, there have been "disestablishing" cultural trajectories (in the broad sense of the word), and churches have been able to largely "come to terms" (p83) with it. But there is no "vague reverence" and no presumption of politeness. We've gone a little bit too Ingsoc for that.

Orwell has always been a secular prophet of an imprecise and imperfect sort. As all prophets do, he challenges, and provokes, and makes you think. Orwell about Orwell is a profitable read.