



ORWELL AS COMIC WRITER

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Some years ago when working on my biography of Orwell I had a largely useless interview with Malcolm Muggeridge, the famous television personality, once a socialist and friend of Orwell's, by then a self-promoting right-wing Christian convert and commentator. He seized the initiative with a malicious provocation, "Gloomy bugger wasn't he? Don't you agree?" "No, I don't." He was being deliberately perverse because he knew Orwell as a major English essayist and a good minor novelist long before reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Nearly all Orwell's essays use humour to make serious points. This prompted me to offer talks on Orwell as a comic writer, but what most tempted me to write up my notes was, a few years ago, going into Saughton prison, Edinburgh, to give that talk as part of a prison education programme – young offenders working for A levels or Scottish Highers. The lads seemed to like the talk but told me that the real "Orwell buff" hadn't come because he was desperately finishing a painting of Orwell that he wanted to give me. As I was about to leave, he appeared with a truly striking face of Orwell, stern, sad and terrible, painted all in gloomy blacks and greys. It is on my wall as I work but I wish he had come to the talk instead – ah, but then he might not have finished it.

Most people throughout the world, indeed, have read Orwell backwards, if they read back beyond *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* at all. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* creates the grim preconception of "Orwellian", rather than the "Orwell-like" image of the discursive and great humanistic essays of which not all, by any means, exist in translation. Some dedicated pessimist readers even seem to miss the humour in *Animal Farm*. One of the difficulties with multi-faceted satires is that we only see what appeals directly to our own experience. In lecturing in Poland and Czechoslovakia shortly after the fall of the Wall I found audiences quite angry at the idea that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* referred to anything other than Communism, or contained anything to laugh about. I tried to remind them of what was dear Julia's job:

“She had... been picked out to work in Pornosec, the sub-section of the Fiction department which turned out cheap pornography for distribution among the proles. It was nick-named Muck House by the people who worked in it, she remarked. There she had remained for a year, helping to produce booklets in sealed packets with titles like *Spanking Stories* or *One Night in a Girls' School*, to be bought furtively by proletarian youths who were under the impression that they were buying something illegal. “What are these books like?” said Winston curiously. “Oh ghastly rubbish. They’re boring, really. They only have six plots, but they swap them round a bit. Of course I was only on the kaleidoscopes. I was never in the Rewrite Squad. I’m not literary dear, not even enough for that”....

“There was a whole chain of separate departments dealing with proletarian literature, music, drama and entertainment generally. Here were produced rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means on a special kind of kaleidoscope called a versificator.”

Well, of course it was to be called a synthesizer not a versificator. But the Poles got quite cross when I pointed out that the puritanical Stalin or Gomulka would not have stood for any of that Pornosoc filth, as Orwell knew quite well – and Hitler neither. He could only have been satirising elements of the *British* press and publishing. And if I hadn’t been losing my audience rapidly I would have pontificated, as I now do, that this was a typical Orwell-like device, not “Orwellian”: to wrap up a profound theoretical point in broad humour – here a black humour, or what Germans call “gallows humour”. For he really did believe that capitalism controls the “proles”, the common people, not by physical oppression, but by bread and circuses, as it were, by cultural debasement, “dumbing down” as we now say of our press, even of the BBC.

Orwell was full of rage, a Swiftian satiric rage, that four generations of compulsory secondary education had led to the rise of what his generation still called the Yellow Press and a steady decline in the quality press, both in numbers and quality – even back then. Anthony Burgess called *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “a comic novel”. Well, that’s going too far, meant to shock us into thought; but I have long argued that the book is to be read as Swiftian satire, black humour, just like *Gulliver’s Travels*. Orwell used much the same device to talk about the great difficult subject of Britain in the 1930s. No, not sex: class.

“Many people, however, imagine that they can abolish class-distinctions without making any uncomfortable change in their own habits and 'ideology'. Hence the eager class-breaking

activities which one can see in progress on all sides. Everywhere there are people of good will who quite honestly believe that they are working for the overthrow of class-distinctions. The middle-class Socialist enthuses over the proletariat and runs "summer schools" where the proletariat and the repentant bourgeois are supposed to fall upon one another's necks and be brothers for ever; and the bourgeois visitors come away saying how wonderful and inspiring it has all been (the proletariat ones come away saying something different). And there is the outer-suburban creeping Jesus, a hangover from the William Morris period, but still surprisingly common, who goes about saying 'Why must we level down?' 'Why not level up?' and proposes to level the working class "up" (up to his own standard) by means of hygiene, fruit-juice, birth-control, poetry, etc. Even the Duke of York... runs a yearly camp where public school boys and boys from the slums are supposed to mix on equal terms and do mix for the time being, rather like the animals in one of those 'Happy Family' cages where a dog, a cat, two ferrets, a rabbit and three canaries preserve an armed truce while the showman's eye is on them."

This is worth a whole barrel of academic sociology. But notice the deadly sociological precision, the precise observation of "summer school": that is where the classes meet at their fleeting closest in England of the 1930s, even in the socialist movement; not in the thick prose of Marxist theory or in the once-a-month local meeting of a political party. His humour lies in literal truth-telling, removing all euphemisms, a way of wrapping unpalatable deep truths in sardonic homely observations. I suspect he learnt it partly from Dickens, partly from H.G. Wells and partly from George Bernard Shaw, but also from actually talking to ordinary people during his tramping days.

Hardly has Orwell announced his conversion to socialism, when in the same work, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he attacks the image that middle class English socialists have created of themselves. And he prefaces it with a wild and provocative generalisation: "As with the Christian religion, the worst advertisement for Socialism is its adherents". Notice the lack of any qualification in this. Victor Gollancz, the socialist and indeed fellow-traveller, then his publisher, must have screamed at him either to take that out or at least to put in that sensible, hedging, temporising, politic pronoun "some of its adherents". However, that would have spoilt Orwell's intended double effect: to shock his fellow socialists into thought, but also to mitigate their anger by forcing them to laugh – not Gollancz, by the way, who had no sense of humour whatever. When Orwell went over the top, he went over the top; and, as it were, two-tongued: one tongue sticking out rudely, the other firmly tucked in his cheek. England in the 1930s was not Spain.

“The first thing that must strike any outside observer is that Socialism in its developed form is a theory confined entirely to the middle class. The typical Socialist is not, as tremulous old ladies imagine, a ferocious-looking working-man with greasy overalls and a raucous voice. He is either a youthful snob-Bolshevik who in five years' time will quite probably have made a wealthy marriage and been converted to Roman Catholicism; or, still more typically, a prim little man with a white-collar job, usually a secret teetotaler and often with vegetarian leanings, with a history of Nonconformity behind him, and, above all, with a social position which he has no intention of forfeiting. This last type is surprisingly common in Socialist parties of every shade; it has perhaps been taken over from the old Liberal Party. In addition to this there is the horrible - the really disquieting - prevalence of cranks wherever Socialists are gathered together. One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist and feminist in England. One day this summer I was riding through Letchworth [a new model town favoured by progressive intellectuals] when the bus stopped and two dreadful-looking old men got onto it. They were both about sixty, both very short, pink and chubby, and both hatless. One of them was obscenely bald, the other had long gray hair bobbed in the Lloyd George style. They were dressed in pistachio-coloured shirts and khaki shorts into which their huge bottoms were crammed so tightly that you could study every dimple. Their appearance created a mild stir of horror on top of the bus. The man next to me, a commercial traveller I should say, glanced at me, at them, and back again at me, and murmured, 'Socialists', as who should say, 'Red Indians'. He was probably right - the ILP were holding their summer school at Letchworth. But the point is that to him, as an ordinary man, a crank meant a Socialist and a Socialist meant a crank.”

I love “secret teetotaler”. Heroic exaggeration throughout, but also commonsense. Tom Paine used that word first like a sledgehammer, before Conservative politicians made it a soft rubber toy. Of course Orwell didn't mean that all British socialists were cranks, but he was saying that a few such, perhaps more than a few if never a majority, spoilt the game for all. It was a wise warning needed at the time. Perhaps there is even some self-irony in it. For what was he doing on a bus in Letchworth? That was then a new town synonymous with the ambience of seekers and alternative lifers – riddled with vegetarianism, as he provocatively added. He was attending the annual conference and summer school of the Independent Labour Party, a force – if force it was – uniquely compounded of hard anti-Stalinist marxists (whom he had joined in Catalonia) and soft sandaled groupuscules of intellectual “alternative-life” doctrinaires. Many of his friends were like those he mocked. He enjoyed the company of the free left.

In *Coming Up For Air*, a much underrated novel by the way, his humour is more gentle and elegiac. The character George Bowling, the lower-middle class commercial traveler running away from his nagging wife Hilda to recover his youth, has been denounced by critics as rotten with nostalgia. This is probably what his friend Cyril Connolly had in mind when he called Orwell “a revolutionary in love with the 1900s.” But I think a reader is pretty stupid not to see that Orwell, despite some nostalgia, is rejecting any possibility of putting the clock back. He is a shrewd proto-environmentalist who sees that the good life must embrace both town and country, agriculture and industry, or in the deeper symbolism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, both light and darkness.

“I've always had that peculiar feeling for fishing. You'll think it damned silly, no doubt, but I've actually half a wish to go fishing even now, when I'm fat and forty-five and got two kids and a house in the suburbs. Why? Because in a manner of speaking I am sentimental about my childhood -- not my own particular childhood, but the civilisation which I grew up in and which is now, I suppose, just about at its last kick. And fishing is somehow typical of that civilisation. As soon as you think of fishing you think 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 airplanes, before Hitler. There's a kind of peacefulness even in the names of English coarse fish. Roach, rudd, dace, bleak, barbel, bream, gudgeon, pike, chub, carp, tench. They're solid kind of names. The people who made them up hadn't heard of machine-guns, they didn't live in terror of the sack or spend their time eating aspirins, going to the pictures and wondering how to keep out of the concentration camp.

“Does anyone go fishing nowadays, I wonder? Anywhere within a hundred miles of London there are no fish left to catch. A few dismal fishing-clubs plant themselves in rows along the banks of canals, and millionaires go trout-fishing in private waters round Scotch hotels, a sort of snobbish game of catching hand-reared fish with artificial flies. But who fishes in mill-streams or moats or cow-ponds any longer? 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 chemical from factories they're full of rusty tins and motor-bike tyres. ”

Again, heroic exaggeration; things are not quite as bad as that; but they could become so. And the unreflective, even rather stupid common man, George Bowling, yet is given by Orwell an insight into the natural beauty of things: this marvelous litany of the solid names of ordinary things. It certainly isn't pantheism, but it is a kind of naturalism and pietism – a deep respect for,

almost an attribution of sacredness to, natural objects. I think of Gustav Mahler's song from the *Knapewunderhorn* of St Francis preaching to the fishes; the same mixture of irony and love. The piece of coral, useless and beautiful, that Winston Smith finds in the junk shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will surface later, like George Bowling's fish, in Orwell's imagination. The master of plain prose used it to reach philosophical and moral depths which are closed to the common reader in works of academic philosophy. Or to put it more mundanely, had he lived long enough to get fed up with trying to fathom the compromised pseudo-philosophy of today's New Labour, he might well have joined the Greens and they would probably have found him a hell of a nuisance, for his arrows always shot inward as well as outward. Greens like making fun of their opponents, but never of themselves -- a common human failing, after all. Orwell was somewhat exceptional, and a born member of the great English radical awkward squad – expertly marching out of step. He is that voice one can still hear from the North Bank of the Arsenal stadium shouting "What a load o' rubbish. Sell 'em!" – an Arsenal supporter.

Only in the essay on dirty sea-side postcards, "The Art of Donald McGill", did he reflect on the nature of humour. Mostly he saw it simply as release, a safety valve for the common people impotent to change the structures of politics and required to conform to the moral standards of their so-called betters. "*Judge (in a divorce case)*. 'You are prevaricating, sir. Did you or did you not sleep with this woman?' *Co-respondent*. 'Not a wink, my lord!'" But he ended by raising a more profound imagery from Cervantes: the dualism of us all having inside ourselves both a bit of Don Quixote and a bit of Sancho Panza. Part of our self is lean, idealistic, austere and heroic, while the other is fat, cowardly and dedicated to surviving however dishonourably. The Don rides Rozinante, head in the air, and Sancho rides on a farting mule and is master of the deflating dirty joke.

"Whatever is funny is subversive, every joke is ultimately a custard pie, and the reason why so large a proportion of jokes centre round obscenity is simply that all societies, as the price of survival, have to insist on a fairly high standard of sexual morality. A dirty joke is not, of course, a serious attack upon morality, but it is a sort of mental rebellion, a momentary wish that things were otherwise. So also with all other jokes, which always centre round cowardice, laziness, dishonesty or some other quality which society cannot afford to encourage. Society has always to demand a little more from human beings than it will get in practice. It has to demand faultless discipline and self-sacrifice, it must expect its subjects to work hard, pay their taxes, and be faithful to their wives, it must assume that men think it glorious to die on the battlefield and women want to wear themselves out with childbearing. The whole of what one may call official literature is founded on such assumptions. I never read the proclamations of generals before

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battle, the speeches of Fuhrers and Prime Ministers, the solidarity songs of public schools and Left Wing political parties, national anthems, temperance tracts, papal encyclicals and sermons against gambling and contraception, without seeming to hear in the background a chorus of raspberries from all the millions of common men to whom these high sentiments make no appeal. Nevertheless the high sentiments always win in the end, leaders who offer “blood, toil, tears and sweat” [Churchill’s words in 1940] always get more out of their followers than those who offer safety and a good time. When it comes to the pinch, human beings are heroic. Women face childbirth and the scrubbing brush, revolutionaries keep their mouths shut in the torture chamber, battleships go down with their guns still firing when their decks are awash. It is only that the other element in man, the lazy, cowardly, debt-bilking adulterer who is inside us all, can never be suppressed altogether and needs a hearing occasionally.”

This is the true humanist who sees both the tragedy and the humour of life. Please read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* again thinking that it is a Swiftian satire on the abuse of power and not a morbid prophecy.

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