

Orwell's Prose Clear as Glass

By David Woods

"At 50, everyone has the face he deserves," said George Orwell, who, alas, was never able to see if that held true for himself – having died of tuberculosis at 47.



George Orwell

This year marks the centenary of Orwell's birth. In his all-too-brief life he produced a prolific output of novels and essays. The most notable of the novels were *Animal Farm*, a prophetic and witty satire about the failure of communism; and *1984*, a chilling portrayal of the dehumanizing effects of totalitarian society.

Born Eric Arthur Blair, the Eton-educated Orwell changed his name in order to sound less patrician, more the common man. Several of his lucid, brilliant essays still have resonance for us today. For example, in *My Country Right or Left*, he wrote in 1940 that "the coming war was a nightmare to me, and at times I even made speeches and wrote pamphlets against it {but} I was patriotic at heart, would not sabotage or act against my own side, would support the war, would fight in it if possible."

Small wonder that Orwell's legacy has been coopted by both the Left and the Right. Perhaps this is epitomized by the line in *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others," or, from *1984*, the famous "Big Brother is Watching You."

"Good prose is like a window pane," Orwell wrote in his essay, *Why I Write*. And his attention to clarity of prose is an enduring lesson for those who aspire to express their thoughts clearly. Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg calls Orwell's classic *Politics and the English Language* the most widely-cited of all 20th century essays on the language. In it, Orwell refers to the mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence that is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose ... which he says consists less and less of words chosen for their meaning, and more and more of phrases "tacked together like sections of a prefabricated hen house." He warns against worn out metaphors like having no axe to grind, or mixed metaphors such as the Fascist octopus has sung its swan song.

Above all, Orwell called for sincerity, simplicity, and concreteness in language. The greatest enemy, he believed, was insincerity such as the example he cites in

Politics: “Defenseless villages are bombed from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets – this is called *pacification*.”

Orwell gives in that essay a wonderful example of linguistic decay. He starts by quoting the well-known verse from Ecclesiastes: “I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” This he turns into modern English as: “Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”

Orwell’s friend, the journalist and television sage Malcolm Muggeridge described Orwell as “an idealist whose hopes and dreams were so bitterly mocked by the ways of men that he turned in despair to creatures who at least had the merit, being speechless, that they could not lie, and being incapable of love, that they could not betray and deceive.” Muggeridge whimsically added that if given the opportunity Orwell would reorganize zoos so that humans were kept on exhibit in cages and animals allowed to roam free outside.

Orwell died feeling dissatisfied with his literary output, sensing that he’d wasted too much time on ephemeral journalism. But Muggeridge, who made all the arrangements for Orwell’s funeral, differed. Of the collected works gathered by Orwell’s second wife, Sonia, whom he’d married only months before his death, Muggeridge noted that that book shifted the balance away from Orwell’s uneven fictional achievement towards his uncanny ability as essayist and journalist to gauge the temperature of his time. And as another contemporary observed: “In Orwell’s hands journalism was raised to the level of literature.”

I was privileged to interview Malcolm Muggeridge when he was in his 80s. He recalled his friendship with Orwell, saying: ‘He was an extraordinary chap ... his three or four volumes of collected journalism are brilliant; they stand up today. So lucid.’

Clear. Like a pane of glass.



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