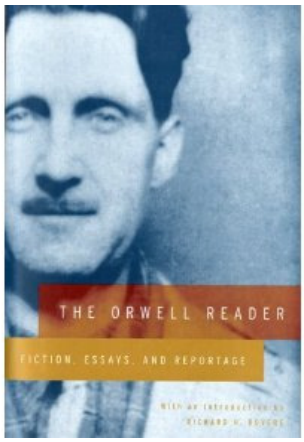

Book Review

Orwell, George. (1956). *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage*.
Hartcourt. 480 p.
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By Rick Whisenand*

Brush Up Your Orwell: A review of *The Orwell Reader*

In spite of my intention to write a review of this book that would send everyone to the bookstore to buy it and everything else by George Orwell, I unfortunately have to report that, in *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays, and Reportage*, although a reader who is paying attention will appreciate the simple, clean beauty of his writing and the enviable clarity and depth in his thinking and his perceptions of the world he lived in, and even though it has everything a one-volume anthology needs except *Animal Farm*, there is almost nothing that will provide reassurance or comfort for the opinions of most readers—except those who are already convinced of the decline of civilization and the English language. But "Orwell still matters," according to many critics, and this review takes a look at what *The Orwell Reader* offers.

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Orwell was among the witnesses to the sprouting of the vices of the modern age, when numbers and money started to become more important than people, and lies were being repeated often enough that they started to sound like the truth. It is true that society is neither as bad nor as good as anyone says it is, and has always been that way, yet if we want to understand how the worst aspects of modern society got their start—if we don't want to get fooled again—Orwell's novels and essays are among the best places to look, because it was back in the 1930s and '40s when the leaders were learning their trade and grooming their successors. We can see that in his novel *1984*, which is excerpted in this anthology, and even in *Coming Up for Air*, published 10 years earlier, in 1939.

1984 is considered almost a prophecy (maybe even a handbook) of government control over people's thinking. This anthology includes the first chapter, where Orwell introduces Winston Smith and the society of Oceania, with Big Brother, the Thought Police, and the daily Two Minutes Hate in front of large "telescreens"; and the appendix, where we learn every detail about Newspeak, a perversion of English that allows, or forces, people to speak only socially acceptable sentences, thus making their thoughts socially acceptable, too.

Coming Up for Air, though a minor novel, deserves notice. The narrator's memories of his boyhood, prior to World War I, are filled with beautiful, vivid descriptions of everything he loved about the countryside, fishing in particular, and life in a small English town, with all its peculiarities. Looking back from the 1930s, just before WW II, he can see the strange ways that Britain is changing, and the hard future for shop owners like his parents. Although he remembers how bad life could be "before the war," he admits to feeling sentimental about it:

> But it's also true that people then had something that we haven't got now.
>
> What? It was simply that they didn't think of the future as something to be terrified of.

The same social insecurity many people feel today was chilling the hearts of people almost a century ago. The narrator, George Bowling, has new fears about the direction the world is taking, personified by the police, who are becoming tools of the state, and the "streamline men," the tools of big business and big ideas, intent on remaking society in their image.

As relevant as it is, there is much more to Orwell than his view of the world. One recurring theme is the connection between language and thought, so his literary style may give us some insight into his way of thinking. It has been compared to Hemingway's, the "New Vernacular," a style with sophistication, maturity, and color, but not impressive or elegant, not polished like a diamond or swathed in silk. If he were with us today, he might support the "plain English" movement, for which he is still an inspiration. "Politics and the English Language" may be one of the most influential, or hopefully influential, essays on how our thinking habits influence the language we use—and how language influences our thinking:

> A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible.

Despite his "plain" style, he does not think simplistically. There is much solid matter in his sentences, a clear transmission of what he is seeing and thinking; the words are there because they mean something. A much more elegant style would get in the way of the subject –and his subjects in the 1930s included hospitals ("How the Poor Die"), his own poverty as a young man (*Down and Out in Paris and London*), the lives of coal miners (*The Road to Wigan Pier*), and life in colonial Burma ("Shooting an Elephant" and "A Hanging").

Writing well became even more important to him in the mid-1930s. When he fought in the Spanish Civil War against the Fascists, he realized that politics was at the center of what was going on everywhere. This is when he wrote *Homage to Catalonia*, and when his writing started to blend politics with life and aesthetics. The essay "Why I Write" (1947) is where Orwell explains the change:

> The Spanish war and other events in 1936-7 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. 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. . . . What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. . . .But I could not do the work of writing a book, or even a long magazine article, if it were not also an aesthetic experience . . . . So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take a pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information.

His skill at getting to the heart and bones of a subject carries on into his literary and social criticism from the 1940s. His background knowledge is extensive and relevant, and this is also one of the areas where readers will not find much comfort. Anyone who has a soft spot for Kipling, Swift, or Tolstoy will have it roughly jabbed here, but with insights grounded in serious thinking, not fashionable opinions. He even takes a hard look at Gandhi—"Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent"—and concludes that, on balance, he was only barely a saint, and was lucky that his opponents were the relatively decent British: "It is difficult to see how Gandhi's methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the régime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard of again."

One of the articles, "Second Thoughts on James Burnham," might at first seem unnecessary today, more appropriate to the 1950s, when *The Orwell Reader* first came out, because Burnham is no longer well-known. But I want to give some space to it because his ideas have not gone away, and Orwell's objections still matter. In the 1940s, he wrote some best-sellers on "managerialism," a form of government that would place "managers" at the top of society and everyone else far below—Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union were his shining examples. Orwell carefully takes apart Burnham's assumptions and exposes a system whose only concern is for power. His closing judgment of Burnham and his type ("streamline men," it would seem, who are still with us, even if some do not operate their countries or their businesses in an overtly totalitarian manner) illustrates Orwell's constant belief in basic morality. It is a reminder that our innate moral sense should guide us, not our so-called brilliance:

> And to refrain from admiring Hitler or Stalin—that, too, should not require an enormous intellectual effort. But it is partly a moral effort. That a man of Burnham's gifts should have been able for a while to think of Nazism as something rather admirable, something that could and probably would build up a workable and durable social order, shows what damage can be done to the sense of reality by the cultivation of what is now called "realism."

His ethics and his style have had an influence on writers, particularly journalists, and he is given credit for setting a standard of honesty and factuality in journalism that. . . .well, that not enough journalists are holding to. But when we see the occasional article or news report that is on the side of the *reader*—not the writer himself, not the political party, not the celebrity, not the corporation, and not even the under-privileged (because the underdog can also be in the wrong, and everyone needs to know that, too)—when we see something written so that all of us might understand more than before, Orwell had a part in it.

In spite of the bleak nature and harshness of some of the topics he deals with, Orwell's talent for looking beneath the surface of what is happening brings life to every page. And more importantly, in spite of his strongly held views and his deep feelings about what was right and wrong with the world, I do not get the impression anywhere that he manipulated readers or deceived them just to get them on his side. He admitted to being wrong or not knowing enough sometimes, but he worked to present the world as clearly and honestly as possible, bringing out what was right and wrong wherever he saw it, in friends and enemies, even his own shortcomings.

He was more than merely "objective" or "balanced"; he took sides but did his best to know what lies all sides were telling, and as far as possible took the side of humanity and morality, even if he was the only one there. This is one of the most important reasons for keeping Orwell alive, so that we can read solidly built sentences with clean thoughts, even if the thoughts are not socially acceptable, and with any luck we might keep our minds free of "smelly little orthodoxies."

I have tried to explain why Orwell's work is still interesting and even "good for you," but a picture may help. There is a moment in *Coming Up for Air* (in a passage not in the anthology) that has an image of the ideal his writing might be trying for. One day, driving in the country, George stops by a fence and notices the glowing embers of a small fire a hobo had lit that morning, and he marvels at the beauty of something so simple:

> Curiously enough, the thing that had suddenly convinced me that life was worth living, more than the primroses or the young buds on the hedge, was that bit of fire near the gate. . . . It's curious that a red ember looks more alive, gives you more of a feeling of life, than any living thing. There's something about it, a kind of intensity, a vibration—I can't think of the exact words. But it lets

you know that you're alive yourself. . . .And I was alive that moment when I stood looking at the primroses and the red embers under the hedge. It's a feeling inside you, a kind of peaceful feeling, and yet it's like a flame.

An ember that burns with a living, intense, vibrating feeling of peace—and honesty. No one said that writing well was easy.