

# *Orwell in Tribune: 'As I Please' and Other Writings 1943-7*

by George Orwell (Compiled and edited by Paul Anderson),  
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## Nick Cohen

In 1946, George Orwell described a man who is

...thirty-five, but looks fifty. He is bald, has varicose veins and wears spectacles, or would wear them if his only pair were not chronically lost. If things are normal with him, he will be suffering from malnutrition, but if he has recently had a lucky streak he will be suffering from a hangover. At present it is half past eleven in the morning, and according to his schedule he should have started work two hours ago; but even if he had made any serious effort to start he would have been frustrated by the almost continuous ringing of the telephone bell, the yells of the baby, the rattle of an electric drill out in the street, and the heavy boots of his creditors clumping up and down the stairs. The most recent interruption was the arrival of the second post, which brought him two circulars and an income-tax demand printed in red.

Needless to say, this person is a writer. He might be a poet, a novelist, or a writer of film scripts or radio features, for all literary people are very much alike, but let us say that he is a book reviewer. Half hidden among the pile of papers is a bulky parcel containing five volumes which his editor has sent with a note suggesting that they 'ought to go well together.' They arrived four days ago, but for forty-eight hours the reviewer was prevented by moral paralysis from opening the parcel. Yesterday in a resolute moment he ripped the string off it and found the five volumes to be *Palestine at the Cross Roads*, *Scientific Dairy Farming*, *A Short History of European Democracy* (this one 680 pages and weighs four pounds), *Tribal Customs in Portuguese East Africa*, and a novel, *It's Nicer Lying Down*, probably included by mistake. His review – 800 words, say – has got to be 'in' by midday tomorrow.

This was self-portrait, but only a partial one. Orwell could invoke the wretchedness of the jobbing writer because he was churning out an astonishing amount of

journalism for poor-paying magazines in the Forties. But, and to an equally astonishingly degree, he wasn't producing hack work but essays on a vast range of subjects at a literary and intellectual level so consistently high no one who writes for a living can look on them without a spasm of envy. Peter Davison's *The Complete Works of George Orwell* runs to 20 volumes. While Orwell was writing his pieces for *Tribune*, he was also finishing *Animal Farm*, starting to think about *1984*, handing in arguments and reviews for British and American papers – and coping with a dying wife, an adopted son and his own TB while he was about it. [1]

Printing a writer's every word isn't always a kindness, and not all Orwell pieces stand the test of time – or even the test of his own time. But to read the *Tribune* articles in sequence, and see him taking up points from previous columns, arguing with correspondents and expanding on dozens of subjects is to raise him from the dead, as it were, and have him talking in your living room or – as Orwell would prefer – your local.

The easy explanation for the success of Paul Anderson's intelligently edited and beautifully presented collection is that Orwell was a great writer. The Canadian anarchist George Woodcock, an occasional adversary but firm friend, said that 'he could always find a subject on which there is something fresh to say in a prose that, for all its ease and apparent casualness, was penetrating and direct.' Anderson adds that 'it is difficult to think of a writer before or since' who could move from toads spawning in spring to lonely hearts ads via the decline of English murder from the days of Crippen.

Yet Orwell's talent flourished in a particular setting, that of a small journal with a tight group of readers. Little magazines usually appear and vanish without anyone beyond their unpaid contributors caring. The few whose names still reverberate captured a spirit of their time and stood for something bigger than their tiny circulations. *Tribune* was a magazine of the Labour left that for a few years in the Forties broke the arguments that were to dominate British political life. (I say '*Tribune* was' as if it were dead. The paper survives, but only in the sense that a geriatric in a coma survives.) Along with far more leftists than sympathetic historians like to remember, it went along with the Nazi-Soviet pact. When the Second World War began, it was effectively on Germany's side and endorsed Communist Party line that the real enemies were Winston Churchill and the Labour Party rather than Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. The board purged the fellow travellers in 1940, and for the rest of the decade *Tribune* was free to discuss the radical ideas that

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would make up a part of the programme of the 1945 Labour government, while, unusually for mid-20th century socialists, retaining a well-warranted suspicion of Stalin and his apologists. Orwell had a natural home.

Conservative-minded readers attracted to this book by Orwell's celebrations of Englishness or attacks on communism will learn that, despite everything, he was a man of the Left, who believed that British socialism was desirable and inevitable. The idea that the world would turn against central planning and nationalisation was as beyond him as the idea that it would turn back to them is beyond us. The only definition of a great writer that makes sense is that readers of all temperaments can appreciate his or her work, so the admiration of conservatives is a compliment to Orwell. But however many multitudes he contained, and however loudly the *Tribune* circulation manager protested about the left-wing readers who cancelled their subscriptions in disgust, Orwell remained close to his audience. He shared their broad principles and they understood his references.

The common bonds of a small world helped Orwell. Writers and broadcasters in the mass media can never match his fluency, even if they had his talent, because they have to write at the pace of the slowest reader and break up their arguments with clunking explanations. (I fully expect to one day have an editor tell me that I can't say 'Shakespeare' but must add in parenthesis 'the famous 16th and 17th century playwright and poet for Stratford-upon-Avon near Coventry in Warwickshire' in case someone somewhere doesn't grasp the reference.) By contrast, writers tied to a small group of readers are like old friends, or at least old acquaintances, and can dispense with the formalities and get down to business, as Orwell did with relish.

The *Tribune* columns show that 'St George,' the patron saint of English decency, was nowhere near as saintly as John Major and Simon Schama like to imagine. He conducted a running row with the readers about their humanitarian objections to the RAF killing women and children in bombing campaign against German cities. 'Why is it worse to kill civilians than soldiers?' he asked.

Every time a German submarine goes to the bottom about fifty young men of fine physique and good nerves are suffocated. Yet people who would hold up their hands at the very words 'civilian bombing' will repeat with satisfaction such phrases as 'We are winning the Battle of the Atlantic.' Heaven knows how many people our blitz on Germany and the occupied countries has killed and will kill, but you can be quite certain it will never come anywhere

near the slaughter that has happened on the Russian front.

After receiving a 'number of letters, some of them quite violent ones' he continued:

Contrary to what some of my correspondents seem to think, I have no enthusiasm for air raids, either ours or the enemy's. Like a lot of other people in this country, I am growing definitely tired of bombs. But I do object to the hypocrisy of accepting force as an instrument while squealing against this or that individual weapon, or of denouncing war while wanting to preserve the kind of society that makes war inevitable.

To which the only response is that different societies and ethical systems have usually held the deliberate targeting of civilians is a war crime. They may be hypocritical, there may be no moral difference between killing a conscripted soldier and defenceless woman, but the alternative is war without limit, which the 20th century saw enough of to know that it is worth 'squealing against.'

Even when you instinctively know Orwell is wrong, you cannot deny his strengths, the chief of which is intellectual honesty. No English writer is less concerned about giving offence, as the above passages demonstrate. Not in the showy and superficial manner of bourgeois baiting modern hack – who merely bends the knee to the new establishment when he spatters his copy with obscenities – but in the way of all true radicals who think it their job to tackle comfortable illusions, and are faintly surprised when their readers complain rather than thank them. (In his biography, DJ Taylor describes how Orwell could never understand why authors whose books he had criticised resented him thereafter.) It's not what you think but how you think, as they say, and dissidents facing systems and oppressions that Orwell never conceived have always admired his willingness to confront what he called the 'smelly little orthodoxies' of his day. If a believer in human freedom wants to make an argument that may send him to prison in a dictatorship, Orwell is on his side. If, in a democracy, a writer has an idea he knows his editors will hate, his colleagues will hate and his readers will hate, the ghost of Orwell will never urge caution.

Simultaneously opposing fascism, communism and colonialism required nerve, and although this isn't a political collection in the main there's one political essay on the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944, which I've never seen reprinted, that shows him at his anti-totalitarian best and speaking to our time.

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Whenever you protest today about the willingness of modern liberals to excuse, go along with or turn a blind eye to the Islamist far right, you are told, in outraged tones, by the BBC, *Prospect* and all the rest of them that it's only a handful of Trotskyists around the Socialist Workers Party and Livingstone who have flipped across the political spectrum. Liberal politicians and intellectuals – such as themselves – remain as virtuous as always, and to say otherwise is a gross calumny. Much the same was said in the Thirties and Forties, only then the apologists for the liberal mainstream declared that treacheries of the age were the sole responsibility of the Communist Party.

Orwell would have none of that. When the Poles rose up on the orders of the exiled government in London to throw the Germans out and stop the Soviet Union taking the city he protested 'against the mean and cowardly attitude' of the liberal press, which urged that they should be left to die.

What I am concerned with is the attitude of the British intelligentsia, who cannot raise between them one single voice to question what they believe to be Russian policy, no matter what turn it takes, and in this case have had the unheard-of meanness to hint that our bombers ought not to be sent to the aid of our comrades fighting in Warsaw. The enormous majority of left-wingers who swallow the policy put out by the News Chronicle, etc., know no more about Poland than I do. All they know is that the Russians object to the London Government and have set up a rival organization, and so far as they are concerned that settles the matter. If tomorrow Stalin were to drop the Committee of Liberation and recognize the London Government, the whole British intelligentsia would flock after him like a troop of parrots. Their attitude towards Russian foreign policy is not 'Is this policy right or wrong?' but 'This is Russian policy: how can we make it appear right?' And this attitude is defended, if at all, solely on grounds of power.

Today, you don't hear a single voice raised in protest about what al-Qaeda is doing to Iraq or against the Muslim Brotherhood anywhere in the world. If anything the duplicity is worse than during Stalinism. Then, leftish intellectuals could pretend to themselves that the Soviet Union was progressive and at some level shared their values. By contrast, Islamism makes no secret of its contempt for the Left and for liberalism or its appropriation of Nazi conspiracy theory. From the Iranian Revolution onwards, the first task of radical Islam has been to persecute Muslim socialists, liberals and freethinkers.

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History is not repeating itself therefore, but taking a turn for the worse. Nevertheless, Orwell's parting message from 1944 to English left-wing journalists and intellectuals remains as true then as now.

Do remember that dishonesty and cowardice always have to be paid for. Don't imagine that for years on end you can make yourself the boot-licking propagandist of the Soviet regime, or any other regime, and then suddenly return to mental decency. Once a whore, always a whore.'

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Nick Cohen is a columnist at *The Observer*. He is the author of *Pretty Straight Guys*, a book about Britain under New Labour. A collection of his journalism, *Cruel Britannia: Reports on the Sinister and the Preposterous*, was published by Verso in 1999. His best-seller *What's Left? How The Liberals Lost Their Way* (2007) was reviewed in *Democratiya* 8. He is an advisory editor of *Democratiya*.

### Notes

[1] In 1981, Gore Vidal began a celebrated attack on New York Jews who went along with homophobic and misogynist conservatives with 'George Orwell remarks somewhere that you cannot say anything for or against the Jews without getting into trouble.' 'What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed,' I felt when I read it, but have never been able to find the quote. (Vidal's 'George Orwell remarks somewhere' was not a help.) However, writing in *Tribune* in 1944, Orwell said: 'There are two journalistic activities that will always bring you a come-back. One is to attack the Catholics and the other is to defend the Jews,' which is also true and well put, but not a sentiment likely to appeal to Mr Vidal.