

George Orwell: Some Thoughts on the Common Toad by Isaac Yuen

As an aspiring essayist, it shames me to admit that I have only recently become familiar with the narrative and critical essays of George Orwell. While I have read his manifesto on clear writing, Politics and the English Language, I remained ignorant on the bulk of his work until a chance meeting with a shelf in a very comfortable section of the library.

It was a joy to discover for the first time, Orwell's quietly devastating account of time spent at a London workhouse in *The Spike*, his reflections on the ugly facets of colonialism in *Shooting an Elephant*, and his comment on the futility of vengeance, distilled into one waxy yellow face, in *Revenge is Sour*. Whatever the subject matter, Orwell had a knack for getting to its root with a concrete metaphor or an unforgettable statement. As an essayist, there is no greater skill than to be able to convey exactly what one intends, vividly and without doubt. For this is the writer's truth, and Orwell spoke it as well as anyone.

Nature appreciation was not something I associated with Orwell, yet the more of his essays I read, the more I got the sense that the man, especially in his later years, harboured a profound fondness for not only his fellow men, but for other living things. In *Some Thoughts on the Common Toad*, he managed to weave urban wildlife, politics, and personal post-war reflections together so seamlessly that I felt compelled to explore it as an Ekostory. The following entry looks not only at the ideas contained within the short piece, but also the skill in its construction. The entire essay, about 1,600 words in length, can be read [HERE](#).

Orwell's Praise of the Neglected

Eyes akin to chrysoberyl. From wikimedia commons, by Joxerra aihartza.

Orwell begins the essay by selecting the common toad as his personal herald of spring's arrival. The prose in the introduction is exquisite, gains power when read aloud. I found myself mouthing each line as David Attenborough would narrate the script of a nature documentary:

"At this period, after his long fast, the toad has a very spiritual look, like a strict Anglo-Catholic towards the end of Lent. His movements are languid but purposeful, his body is shrunken, and by contrast his eyes look abnormally large."

- Facing Unpleasant Facts, p. 214

It's a lovely and intensely evocative passage. Orwell then proceeds to place the toad on a pedestal usually reserved for birds and flowers with a provocative statement:

"This allows on to notice, what one might not at another time, that a toad has about the most beautiful eye of any living creature."

- Facing Unpleasant Facts, p. 214

Normally driven to write about societal injustices, Orwell speaks here in praise of a neglected denizen of the earth. His keen eye, usually used to detect and expose lies, reveals beauty in a creature generally detested and vilified. Nature is easy to love when it takes the form of a blushing rose or a soaring hawk. But here Orwell demonstrates that its ephemeral wonders exist all around us, even in a lowly denizen of the earth.

The Miracle of Spring

A trillium, a herald of spring introduced to me by one who was dear to my heart. From wikimedia commons, by Paul Johnston.

After describing the toad's mating habits ("intense sexiness" is a phrase I hope to work into my writing), Orwell returns to the arrival of spring in a post-war London and conveys its significance in one line:

"Every February since 1940 I have found myself thinking that this time Winter is going to be permanent."

- Facing Unpleasant Facts, p. 216

The sentence's simplicity belies its emotional and temporal heft. By capitalizing Winter, Orwell reinforces the image of an eternal season, unbroken, everlasting, a rigid time existing without possibility, freedom, and choice. His sentiment undoubtedly reflects the thoughts of many who lived through the war in constant fear and uncertainty.

It is in this context that Orwell describes the spring of 1946, the first post-war Spring, as a miracle. Release comes in the form of Nature, caring not of confident ideologies, exploding bombs, or the hopes of men. Spring arrives as it always does, free to all, and brings about change not only for the hibernating toad, but also to London after half a decade of darkness and despair.

Spring on Prince George Ave, London. From wikimedia commons, by Christine Matthews.

The section ends with a glowing account (by Orwellian standards) of the season's transformative powers on the people and creatures of the city: Thickening leaves of chestnut trees; Brighter blues of policemen uniforms; new hues on nervous sparrows; a smile on the face of the fishmonger. The descriptions are uncomplicated, without flourish,

but together they leave upon the mind an indelible impression of urban renewal and hope.

Going Against the Grain

Orwell proceeds to mount a defense for the inevitable backlash surrounding his praise of spring and the toad. The fact that he had to justify his foray into the softer side of life provides deep insight into the psyche of post-WWII culture. Fondness for nature was dismissed as antiquated and sentimental. To waste energy on the natural world and its small joys at the beginnings of the Atomic Age, critics contended, was at best backwards thinking, and at worst dangerous in its promotion of political quietism and inaction.

Orwell counters both claims. He rejects the idea that a love for Nature only surfaces in those removed from it, citing that humans have always valued it throughout history and continue to do so in cultures with strong agricultural roots. He approaches the second critique slant, suggesting that a utopia achieved through technological and social perfection in which one cannot stop to literally smell the roses is perhaps not one worth living in. In the climax of the entire piece, Orwell pens a statement that is as relevant today as it was the day he inscribed it to paper:

“I think that by retaining one’s childhood love of such things as trees, fishes, butterflies and — to return to my first instance — toads, one makes a peaceful and decent future a little more probable, and that by preaching the doctrine that nothing is to be admired except steel and concrete, one merely makes it a little surer that human beings will have no outlet for their surplus energy except in hatred and leader worship.”

- Facing Unpleasant Facts, p. 218

In this passage, I get a glimpse of the man behind the persona of George Orwell, and I cannot help but admire him. In 1946, Eric Blair was in declining health, physically and mentally worn by first-hand experiences with colonialism, poverty, and war. Yet through this slew of self-imposed and circumstantial challenges, he managed to preserve the sensitivity of a child. In *Why I Write* (a piece I urge every writer to read), he speaks of his inability and unwillingness to abandon the worldview he acquired in childhood. “Only child life,” he writes in *Such, Such were the Joys*, the last essay before his death, “is real life.” This undiminished capacity for wonder and empathy established Blair’s humanity, provided grounding for his moral authority, and helped forge his enduring legacy as one of 20th century’s greatest writers.

The Quiet Power of Orwell

Hypnotoad from Futurama. Orwell’s not quite that good.

Few essayists can match Orwell’s muted gravitas and persuasive power. George Packer, the author of the foreword and editor of the two volume Orwell essay collection, *Facing Unpleasant Facts and All Art is Propaganda*, comments that “he is emphatic, but he is rarely didactic; a characteristic tone of the Orwell essay is its lack of expressed outrage. Again, he is saying: ‘This is how things are - like it or not.’” (p. xxiv) It is with this quiet power that Orwell ends *Some Thoughts of the Common Toad*. It is a plainly-worded

tour-de-force, packed with inevitable evils and sad truths, but tempered with unassailable defiance and warmth:

“The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process are able to prevent it.”

- Facing Unpleasant Facts, p. 218

I hope one day I can write something as quietly powerful. Until next time.

Related Ekostories

- A Boy and His Plants: The Curious Garden
- Journey to the Far Side: There's a Hair in My Dirt!

Reference

Orwell, George., ed. George Packer. Facing Unpleasant Facts: Narrative Essays. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2008. Print.