

CRAIG NOVA

The Discreet Charm of George Orwell

The first item to consider, or so it seems to me, when thinking about George Orwell, is what should be called Orwell's Law, which might be put this way. People do not look at the facts and then make a decision about a subject. Instead, they make up their minds and then look for facts that fit what they already think.

One of the delights of this discovery or this law is to see that it applies not only to politics, but to almost all human activities where decisions are made. For a writer, one of the most perfect examples is book reviewing. The decision to give a book a good or bad review is often made before the first word is read, and this is so because the editor of a book page has made up his or her mind about just what's what where books are reviewed.

But I am intrigued and charmed by another aspect of George Orwell, and it is one that is more or less constant in the books I read from time to time. These are the four volumes of the Collected Essays Journalism & Letters of George Orwell. You would think that a man like Orwell, so consumed with politics and the darkness of them, would be constantly gloomy, blind to almost everything but the latest conspiracies in various parts of the world.

In fact, another Orwell emerges from these books, and this one is charming, and, as a sort of multiplier of charm, all the more so because this is so unexpected. For instance, he wrote a piece about Woolworth's roses, and what a good thing it is to plant them when you can. He did so at a house where he was living and years later came back to find an

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enormous bush, filled with blooms. Or, he wrote another piece about the English Toad, which, in its sincerity and subdued delight leaves me with a fondness for the man. Another example is his description of what an English pub should be.

One of the most charming aspects of this writing is Orwell's lovely belief that ordinary life could be improved. In an age before the dishwasher, a device, I'm sure, that he would have applauded, he thought that there had to be some way to get around the drudgery of doing the dishes. Here's the scheme he came up with. He thought that a business should be started that did the dishes for you, and the model for this was the delivery of milk. In the evening, after you had had dinner, you would put the dishes in a wooden box and leave it on the doorstep. A man, in a van, would come by, pick up the box of dirty dishes and leave a box of clean ones. Then the dirty dishes would be taken to a sort of central factory, where they could be washed more efficiently than at home.

In these concerns, roses, toads, washing dishes, what a good pub should be I find another aspect of a man whom almost all writers respect, and this other aspect is friendly, charming, and it leaves me with the feeling that Orwell, in the right circumstance, would be glad to sit down and have a pint of beer with the reader.