Politics and the Imagination: Reflections on George Orwell's 'Inside the Whale'

Ian McEwan
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I'll start with a place - a Paris apartment in Montparnasse, and a date, the 23rd of December 1936 and a gift from one writer to another of his corduroy jacket which, from the point of view of the recipient, may have had a few traces of whale blubber attached to its lapels. The generous donor was the American writer, Henry Miller. He thought his visitor, George Orwell, on his way to Spain to fight in the civil war, would benefit from its warmth through the Spanish winter, though he pointed out that it was not bullet - proof. The present, Miller said, was his contribution to the loyalist anti-fascist cause.

The encounter between the two men (the American was almost 45, the Englishman 33) had been well smoothed in advance by Orwell's positive review of Miller's novel, Tropic of Cancer, and that was followed by a collegiate exchange of letters. The meeting presents us with a tableau vivant and source for the heart of Orwell's celebrated essay, Inside the Whale, published in book form just over three years later in 1940 by Gollancz. Despite a fair degree of mutual admiration, these two writers had much to disagree about. Henry Miller, self-exiled, strenuously bohemian, a cultural pessimist, hedonist, tirelessly sexually active - or tiresomely, as second wave feminists would point out through the 70s. He had a profound disregard for politics and political activism of any kind. As a writer, he was, by Orwell's definition, 'inside the whale'. Such political views as Miller had were naive and self-regarding and light-hearted. In a letter to Lawrence Durrell he wrote that he knew he could head off the rise of Nazism and the threat of war if he could just get 5 minutes alone with Adolf Hitler and make him laugh.

Our source for Miller's side of the meeting is the Austrian-British writer and life-long friend, Alfred Perlès, whose memoir of Miller was published in 1955. Orwell's brief account comes from Inside the Whale. Aesthetically, politically, the two men were remote from one another. Orwell was, of course, by this time well outside the whale - deeply engaged in the anti-fascist cause, and with social injustice in his own country. 'He merely told me,' Orwell recalled, 'in forcible terms that to go to Spain at that moment was the act of an idiot…my ideas about combating fascism, defending democracy, etc., etc., were all baloney."

Miller did not try for long to talk Orwell out of going to Spain. Miller believed that modern civilization was doomed and he didn't give a damn. According to the Perlès memoir, Orwell told Miller he felt guilty about his years working in the British Imperial Police in Burma. Miller thought his visitor had done enough to expiate his guilt, living the life of the down and out, and writing The Road to Wigan Pier. Orwell said that in Spain a vital struggle for human rights was taking place and he could not stand aside. Liberty and democracy protected the freedom of the artist - implicitly, Miller's freedom too. Orwell insisted, wrote Perlès 'that where the rights and very existence of a whole people are at stake, there could be no thought of avoiding self-sacrifice. He spoke his convictions so earnestly and humbly that Miller desisted from further argument and promptly gave him his blessing.' At some point after that he offered the jacket - far more practical, he thought, than the nifty blue suit Orwell was wearing at the time.

It seems that the writers parted on good terms. In Inside the Whale, Orwell would go on to defend Miller's aesthetic liberty to refuse political engagement. And Miller, for his part, at least, according to Perlès, would have donated the jacket even if Orwell had been going to Spain to fight for the fascist cause.

I've looked at various pictures of Orwell among the recruits by their Barcelona barracks, or on the Aragon front that winter, but I have not been able to spot any warm, non-bullet-proof corduroy. We know from Homage to Catalonia that Orwell wore his smart blue suit on the train that night. As it approached the border the next day, a fellow passenger advised him to remove his collar and tie in case the Anarchist frontier guards thought he looked too bourgeois and turned him back. It's possible that Miller's jacket found a home the previous evening on the shoulders of a passing tramp or was tossed by Orwell into a Montparnasse dustbin. Such was the writer's inalienable freedom, he might have said.

These differences between Miller and Orwell represent the north and south, the axis of orientation that writers confront, now in our troubled times as in 1936 or, most especially, 1940. It's an axis along which writers might move back and forth according to their needs across a writing lifetime. There is no avoiding it - or rather, avoiding it is precisely the freedom that Orwell wished to grant in his essay. Given his own position as one of the most politically and effectively engaged writers of our age, Inside the Whale is a gift, another gift - of writerly generosity. This is the core of his essay. This is what grants its curious title, which came to him via Miller, from Anais Nin out of Goya by way of Aldous Huxley.

'There you are,' wrote Orwell, 'in the dark cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens. A storm that would sink all the battleships in the world would hardly reach you as an echo... Short of being dead, it is the final unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility... Miller is inside the whale... he feels no impulse to alter or control the process that he is undergoing...'

You would reasonably suppose that the author of The Road to Wigan Pier and Homage to Catalonia, with Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-four ahead of him, would have disapproved of such irresponsible quietism. Generosity is not quite the whole story. With Inside the Whale we catch him at a moment of profound disappointment famously

expressed by Auden as 'The clever hopes expire/Of a low dishonest decade'. Orwell's pessimism and disillusionment after the fascist triumph in Spain far exceeded Miller's careless formulations and was far better informed. Orwell had witnessed on his own side of the struggle the cruelty and cynicism of the Stalinists. By the end of the 30s, most people wearily accepted that another big war was coming - so soon after the last.

By 1940, Orwell expected Great Britain would be invaded by Germany. Political engagement for writers of the left - which meant most writers, entailed holding fast to the Soviet dream, despite the evidence of the first 5 Year Plan, the Ukrainian famine, the Purges and Show Trials and, most recently, the German-Russian Pact. That kind of political engagement, as Orwell saw it, was an overheated, suffocating space of lies. In a 1940 review of Malcolm Muggeridge's instant historical survey, The Thirties, Orwell wrote, 'Every positive attitude, has turned out a failure. Creeds, parties, programmes of every description have simply flopped.' At the end of Inside the Whale he wrote, 'Almost certainly, we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships - an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later a meaningless abstraction.' Here, an essential theme, the re-shaping of concepts and of minds by the state, appears several years before its extended expression in Nineteen Eighty-four. As a form, the novel was pluralist, inclusive, tolerant and liberal by instinct and, Orwell suggested, that liberal tendency was dying, the writer is 'sitting on a melting iceberg'. So, he advises, hardly credibly, stop fighting or pretending to control the world process. '...accept it, endure it, record it.' In profound reaction at the end of the 30s to the intrusion of ideology, of 'correct' thinking into private thought and public discourse, and full of contempt for what he called 'orthodoxy sniffing', alarmed by the totalitarian states of Germany, Russia and Italy, Orwell saw himself in a civilizational struggle. The great literatures of Europe for 400 years were built, despite the supremacy of Christianity, on the idea of an autonomous individual, on intellectual honesty. Hence the much quoted, 'The first thing that we ask of a writer is that he shan't tell lies, that he shall say what he really thinks, what he really feels.'

If the struggle was set in the grandest terms, the aesthetic outcome in Orwell's essays is expressed as an appreciation of an honest recording of the ordinary things in life, of dealing with 'facts well known to everybody but never mentioned in print' - so he wrote to Henry Miller in August 1936, a few months before their meeting. The comic example he cites appreciatively is from Tropic of Cancer - 'e.g. when the chap is supposed to be making love to the woman but is dying for a piss all the while.'

These days, Miller's name is rarely coupled with that of James Joyce, but Orwell saw in both writers the poetry of the everyday. I'm reminded of John Updike's expression of his writerly intention - 'to give the mundane its beautiful due.' In Inside the Whale, Orwell did not doubt that Joyce inhabited a far loftier realm than Miller and if his remarks about the celebration of the ordinary hardly seem worth making now, it is because the influence of Joyce has been so pervasive.

I once asked my friend, Christopher Hitchens, who usefully lived a writing life under Orwell's spell, if he had ever thought of writing a novel. His reply was telling and one that Orwell might have liked. Hitchens told me he could never write a novel because he could never stop thinking politically. But he could have taken a lesson from his master: on the 3rd of September 1939, on a Sunday morning at 11.15, the Prime Minister,

Neville Chamberlain announced to the nation on the wireless that the country was now at war with Germany. Soon after, later, Orwell wrote in his diary, 'On returning to Wallington after 10 days absence find weeds are terrible. Turnips good and some carrots have now reached a very large size. Runner beans fairly good. The last lot of peas did not come to much. A number of marrows. One pumpkin the size of a billiard ball. Apples on the grenadier almost ripe... early potatoes rather poor etc.'

There was just enough space inside the whale for a vegetable garden. But these notes, of course, are from the domestic diaries. In his war diaries, which he kept in parallel, he writes, 'We have apparently been in a state of war since 11 am this morning... The Germans have taken Danzig and are attacking the corridor from 4 points north and south... Gasmasks being handed out free, & the public appears to take them seriously... No panic, on the other hand no enthusiasm.'

These two diary entries represent one measure of Orwell's achievement - to live and flourish both in and out of the whale. They display a generosity of attention to detail - as in that celebrated passage in his essay, A Hanging. Orwell recounted following close behind a condemned man on his way to the gallows and observing how the prisoner, with only minutes to live, took care to step round a puddle. In my experience, these luminous moments of perception are what novelists tend to fix on when celebrating in conversation a particular novel. Nabokov instructed his first-year undergraduates at Cornell in how to read and write about fiction. He advised them to forget about themes and 'the moonshine of generalisation', and instead, 'fondle the details'.

When we think of Orwell writing Nineteen Eighty-four at Barnhill on Jura, we might summon the man with a perpetual cigarette, a tall figure stooped over his typewriter as if chained to it, utterly dedicated and driven, working against time, trying to ignore his failing lungs. But in those months, he was also rowing, fishing, digging, sawing, chopping, fixing his motorbike, repairing whatever was broken. In Wallington, long before he tended a fictional animal farm, he had kept a goat and hens. He had also worked a lathe, and with his wife Eileen run a grocery shop. He knew how to strip down a rifle and drill a platoon. He knew his turnips and runner beans. He would become an attentive father to a toddler. Half his life, the non-writing part, was in a world of solid things that resisted abstraction. I like to think that this kind of practical engagement with the material world came from the same source that informed the empirical, clear-headed and factual quality of his prose. The physical tasks he set himself, even at periods of the most intense compositional bouts, were both distractions from mental effort and full immersion in ordinary every-day matters - both in the whale and out of it and so defied his own useful metaphor.

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In February 1945, Orwell, dressed in British army officer's unform - standard issue for war correspondents - sat at a table in the Deux Magots brasserie in the Place St. Germain des Prés - in expectation of an encounter with another writer. It was a meeting that never happened, for Albert Camus, suffering tb like Orwell, was too ill that day to attend. A pity, for they would almost certainly have had a deeper exchange than Orwell's with Miller, and both would likely have reported back to their notebooks. There was much to discuss. Apart from tb and deep nicotine addiction, powerful

Gauloises for Camus, equally powerful hand-rolled 'shag' for Orwell, the two writers had Spain in common. Camus' mother was Spanish. His lover had been and soon would be again the actress Maria Casares, the daughter of Santiago Casares y Quiroga, who was briefly Prime Minister at the time of the fascist insurrection. Camus was ten years younger than Orwell and already famous. Orwell was well-known, but Animal Farm, which would make him internationally renowned, had been turned down by various publishers and would not appear until August that year. Anti-Stalinist, anti-totalitarian, anti-Russian, Orwell and Camus had placed themselves outside the general current of left-wing orthodoxy. Above all, Camus, like Orwell, spent a writing lifetime considering the relationship between his political thinking and his fiction.

A year ago, while I was writing a vaguely political novel, a writer colleague sent me Camus' essay, Create Dangerously. It was delivered as a lecture in Sweden in 1957 at the time of his Nobel Prize. Camus is particularly good on the desire of a writer to speak out, and the aesthetic compromise or damage that a political conscience can inflict on a novel. Writing 12 years after the end of the war, Camus was as alive as Orwell had been to the failures of the great Soviet experiment. In 1953, the East German Uprising had been violently put down. In 1956, the Hungarian revolution was murderously suppressed by Soviet forces. By the mid 50s, the full horror of the Holocaust was beginning to be evident. The Nazi state had been a nightmare beyond the worst imagining. The war had been worth winning and was not, or not only, an imperialist cause, as many socialists, including Orwell, had been arguing in the thirties. But in France especially, commitment to the Russian version of the totalitarian state was still generally evoked as an artistic duty. It was important to hold the line.

There was much a writer like Camus wanted to say, for he valued what he called 'divine liberty' - it was what could be lost in the face of 'constant obligation' To his mind, the artist that supremely embodied divine liberty was Mozart. (A Marxist might have reasonably objected that such heavenly freedom was much compromised by aristocratic patronage.) But I think that in the music itself, we catch Camus' drift.

The tension between political engagement and aesthetic integrity, he conceded, was not easy to resolve. 'On the poop deck of slave galleys it is possible, at any time and place, as we know, to sing of the constellations while the convicts bend over the oars and exhaust themselves in the hold; it is always possible to record the social conversation that takes place on the benches of the amphitheatre while the lion is crunching the victim.' But ultimately, tortuously, Camus doesn't quite reach Orwell's conclusion in defence of the stargazer and the gossip on the amphitheatre benches, even as he acknowledges that 'divine liberty' was all. Reluctantly, Camus makes the case for engagement He wrote, 'It is easy to see all that art can lose from such a constant obligation.' However, the times were making pressing demands. In Camus' opinion, it was better "to give the era its due, since it demands this so vigorously, and calmly admit that the period of the revered master, of the artist with a camellia in his buttonhole, of the armchair genius is over.' But still, Camus agonised. It was precisely the freedom of great art that challenged the autocratic state. He wrote, ''Tyrants know there is in the work of art an emancipatory force. And then: 'Every great work makes the human face more admirable and richer...'

At the conclusion of his essay, Camus made a point that will resonate with all who admire the clarity of Orwell's prose style. Camus quotes André Gide - "Art lives on

constraint and dies of freedom.' The sentiment is easy to misunderstand. The constraint Gide refers to does not come from the outside, from government censors or compliant editors. 'Art, Camus wrote, 'lives only on the constraints it imposes on itself'. Other forms of constraint kill it. However, 'if art does not constrain itself, it indulges in ravings and becomes a slave to mere shadows. The freest art and the most rebellious will therefore be the most classical.' The possibilities of art in turbulent, dangerous times, Camus writes, lies 'in our courage and our will to be lucid.' The more chaotic and threatening the world, the more disordered his material, Camus insists, so greater order is needed in the art - 'the stricter will be his rule and the more he will assert his freedom.' This was a conservative view, but a bold one. The spectrum conservative to radical in the arts is misleadingly paralleled in politics. Bach, for example, could be considered a conservative artist if his music did not render the term meaningless. In the 1970s, in the music of the concert hall, in the classical tradition, the outer extremes of atonality rapidly ossified into an academic orthodoxy - until it was challenged by a new generation of artists resurrecting melody. Camus would argue that a writer could be radical in intent, and conservative in means. Clarity is all.

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Where Camus evoked the artist with the camelia in his buttonhole, the genius in his armchair, I think immediately of Henry James. The Master was not famous for being troubled by the tensions between political engagement and artistic freedom. But my guess is that Orwell and Camus would have felt immediate sympathy for his version of divine liberty in his great essay of 1884, The Art of Fiction. But it contains some practical advice that our two novelists of the mid-twentieth century would have found difficult to take. 'Don't think too much about optimism and pessimism,' James urged. 'Try and catch the colour of life itself.' But elsewhere there are passages that could have been written by Orwell: ' the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. It lives upon exercise, and the very meaning of exercise is freedom.' This is echoed by certain passages from Orwell's essay, The Prevention of Literature: 'Unless spontaneity enters at some point or another, literary creation is impossible.' And later, 'At present we know only that the imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity.'

And in a particularly sensitive passage from James's essay, Camus would have recognised his own ambivalence over how political engagement or telling a reader what to think, could so easily destroy the delicate fabric of a fiction: 'Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative--much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius--it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.' It is easy to imagine how these suspended finest silken threads would be disturbed if not destroyed by the tedious schedule Auden evoked in his poem, Spain, which Orwell quoted in Inside the Whale:

> *Today the expending of powers*
> *On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.*

Camus spoke and wrote often of the need to engage - the era demanded its due - while being alive to the ease with which strong ideals could ruin a fiction. Orwell, deeply engaged politically from the mid-thirties on, was the more declarative in stating time and again through the 40s how important it was for novelists not to tell their readers what to think. The imagination must be free. And yet he was the one who wrote the defining political novel of his, or of our, time. When in January 2017, Kellyanne Conway, the US Counselor to President Trump, referred to 'alternative facts', there was a rush to the bookshops for a copy of Nineteen Eighty-four. It has shaped our language, and our thoughts with useful concepts such as 'thought-police' and 'double think'. The fiction flourished intact outside the whale. In the days of the cold war, it was the banned novel that so many Russians, Czechs and Poles most wanted to read. It penetrated and altered everyday language. How did he manage this without destroying the delicate web of fiction with his own political certainties? I would say that he succeeded in keeping intact what Henry James called the 'felt life' - the grime, the banality, the cabbage smells - of the novel by abandoning himself to and freeing himself completely within an all-encompassing pessimism. Within its sphere, ordinary life, so important to Orwell, could unfold. I would disagree with my friend Salman Rushdie, who once argued that the novel is defeatist in showing us that, as Winston Smith is crushed, struggle is useless. But consider - if a band of heroic, right-minded rebels led by Winston Smith rose up against the superstate of Oceania and replaced it with Orwell's favoured mode of open, humane, democratic socialism, Nineteen Eighty-four would lose its hypnotic power. The novelist's imagination would have become hostage to a scheme. Animal Farm is similarly liberated by its pessimism to make its point about revolution and human nature. Realism is tossed to the winds in favour of allegory. Against the immense scale of its influence, it is a very short book. But with farm animals speaking English, Orwell was wise to submit to Samuel Johnson's dictum, pronounced after reading Tristram Shandy, that 'nothing odd will do long'.

Both novella and novel are minatory, illuminated beware signs, glowing within the boundless limits of a dark foretelling. No way out for the reader. If one is looking for optimism, it lies, in the case of Nineteen Eighty-four, beyond the novel in our contemplation of a dying man, escaping literary London to inhabit the whale known as the Island of Jura, fighting a debilitating disease to deliver his warning about the totalitarian state. And there is another optimistic message, and a simpler one: whatever the dangers, the good or effective political novel is possible.

What then of an example? One obvious candidate is Aldous Huxley’s dystopia, Brave New World. Instead of intimidation, force and torture, the autocratic state uses drugs both to mould and placate its citizens. But the example of an outstanding political novel I'd like to recommend is comparatively obscure. Published in Italy in 1963 as La giornata d'uno scrutatore, and in English in 1971 as The Watcher, it was out of print for a long while, but it's now available. It's by Italo Calvino - not the Calvino of the delightful, intellectually sparkling fantasies of Cosmicomics, but by the Calvino who was brought up as an atheist, read widely in physics as well as in literature, and remained sceptical of, though not hostile towards the established Catholic church. He fought with an antifascist group during the war, joined the Communist party then left it in 1957 in protest at the Hungarian invasion and the exposure of Stalinist outrages. Like Orwell and Camus, he lived between fascism and communism. Like them, he knew well those borders between political engagement and creative freedom.

The Watcher is a short novel whose central figure, Amerigo, is an official Communist observer of the voting procedures in a Turin Catholic institution for 'incurables' where the polling apparatus is carried to the 'unfortunates, the afflicted, the mentally deficient, the deformed, even creatures who are hidden, whom no one can see.' It's 1953, the year of an Italian general election. It is acknowledged that convents, asylums, hospitals, all run by the Catholic church, traditionally serve as 'a great reservoir of votes for the Christian Democrat party.' At this institute, the Cottolengo, Amerigo must ensure that patients are able to vote on their own and are mentally capable. The Christian Democrats must not get votes on a fraudulent basis. He knows he is in for a 'sad and nervous day'. The voting apparatus is carried around the wards and set up round bed after bed. The nuns, who are the nursing staff, are sympathetically observed. There is a chairman and watchers from other parties.

As the group ascends higher through the building, the deformities become more pronounced until the mobile polling station encounters creatures that hardly resemble humans at all. They are immobile, limbless, they cannot speak. One has gills instead of a mouth and, like many others in the ward, can only squawk. The screen is going up around its bed. A caring nun will help the poor thing vote for the Christian Democratic Party. Amerigo intervenes to make his first protest. It will be duly considered. The chairman calls for adjournment in proceedings.

Running in parallel with this story is another. During the break Amerigo has a phone conversation, the first of three, with his lover, Lia. Without quite saying the words, she lets him know she is pregnant. He is furious with her, then with himself, and they are both in a state of turmoil. A termination is hinted at, but not properly discussed. What appears to be in question is the love he has previously declared for her.

Returning to his electoral duties, Amerigo's objections to this particular inmate's vote are quietly accepted. The sustaining fiction will be that the patient's condition has worsened since he voted in the last election. But Amerigo is confused. What is he preventing in angling for his child's abortion, and what is he doing when he blocks the vote of this poor creature in the ward? What difference would it make? What are the origins of his awesome powers of denial? Political and domestic responsibilities blend and are set against a more familiar background of institutional electoral fraud. Are personal and political probity separate realms? I first read this novel in the mid-seventies. What struck me was how sensitive it appeared to its characters and the way they were trapped in their differences. It persuaded me that a political novel cannot succeed without a powerful and convincing personal story.

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The critic VS Pritchett once wrote in an unfairly hostile piece about the novelist Ford Madox Ford that he fell short of a place among the first rank of novelists because he lacked the capacity for 'determined stupor'. Pritchett may have had in mind Madox Ford's taste for a good party. I think the critic greatly underestimated the novelist's achievements. But ever since I read it, that vaguely oxymoronic phrase, 'determined stupor' has haunted me. I suppose it may apply to any long-term project that needs sustained inventiveness and concentration, but I only know it from the effort over

months and years of keeping together Henry James's frail trailing threads of a novel in progress. It's a willed state, a hovering, suspended condition of hopeful openness to what might come in solitude, to the possible beneficence of a good idea, or what seems like one at first.

Many threads will be discarded, and many can be lost. A ring on the doorbell or the phone - the Person from Porlock requests your immediate attention. But in the past two decades, that Person has found more sophisticated forms of ingress. The machine most writers work on now is also a portal to a significant proportion of the world's knowledge, to its latest developments in countless fields, to political events, catastrophes, the deaths of revered figures and the roar and turbulence of social media. Even the relatively tame email programme exerts a power of intrusion that no Porlock person could have dreamed of. The demands may be decent, intelligent, and just. The river you once celebrated is being poisoned. Funding for a theatre, a dance troupe, an inspired programme for culturally deprived children is being withdrawn, another library is closing. A war has started. Whose side are you on? A Saudi teenager, imprisoned, beaten and tortured these past 3 years for a careless remark will be beheaded on Monday. Will you help?

To say yes you will have to detach yourself from the comfortable blubber around you and swim out of the whale's mouth. You may have to write a piece, leave the house and catch a train, visit a studio, address a room. When you return, some of those fine threads will have vanished and you will hardly know, because you will have forgotten them. What's already on the page may look or taste different. The next page you write will be different from the one you might have written if left undisturbed. It will probably not be better but you will never know. Your 'determined stupor' will have evaporated and may take some time to reinstate. All acts of creation have this contingent aspect. Almost a century ago, Cyril Connolly posited 'the pram in the hall'. Under modern conditions that might now read, 'the buggy in the room, right next to your desk'.

If a writer swims outside the whale to address one of the current radioactive topics, the biological status of transitioned men and women, the cancel culture or, not so long ago, Brexit, she is unlikely to find herself in an illuminating exchange of contrary ideas. He may find himself in one of those brief strange media storms. He, and even more likely, she, might get abuse, even rape or death threats, none of which will be conducive to the right kind of stupor. But is there any reason to listen to the special pleading of writers, of artists? Solitude is one of the great luxuries of civilisation. It has become, by our own careless volition, by our elective enslavement to the wonders of the internet - a shrinking asset. Everyone has less of it. In 1970, when I started writing, solitude was abundant and free, like water was before it was privatised. What is true for the writer is true for everyone - even inside the whale there is ultra-fast broadband. The abolition of solitude is one nightmarish feature of Orwell's dystopia, in which it is illegal to turn off the tv - which would be own my form of room 101.

In the West at least, we are not contemplating, as Orwell did, military invasion by one totalitarian experiment, or absorption by another. We are not at the beginning or on the edge, we hope, of total war. But we have other concerns. Beside them, the radioactive topics I mentioned fade into what we self-mockingly describe now as first world problems. Or they are merely local.

Today, writers have much to leave the whale for, and the same question endures: how to do it successfully. If the personal is what gives life to the political novel, consider the matter of characterisation. You have what you think is a three-dimensional figure, a young woman, let's say, well-established within a social context, convincingly sentient, patiently built up over 300 pages. A rounded character, in EM Forster's phrase. But permit her to divulge an impassioned few hundred words of political opinion close to your own, then you run the risk of a dimension dropping away as she becomes as flat and indistinguishable as a figure in a sequence of hand-holding gingerbread cut-outs.

One could start by asking questions of the 21st century. Is a Sino-American war woven into the pattern of history? Will the global rash of racist nationalism yield to something more generous, more constructive? Might we reverse the current great extinction of species? Can the open society find new and fairer ways to flourish? Will artificial intelligence make us wise or mad or irrelevant? Can we manage to traverse the 21st century without an exchange of nuclear missiles?

Or one could simply observe. There are nations run by well-dressed criminal gangs, intent on self-enrichment, kept in place by security services, by the re-writing of history and by passionate nationalism. Russia is one. The USA, in a delirium of personality cult and resurgent white supremacy, recently threatened - and still threatens - to become another. Now the technology - face recognition software and the rest - is on hand, China might perfect the Orwellian totalitarian state and offer a new model of social organization to compete with or replace liberal democracies - a dictatorship generally sustained by a reliable flow of consumer goods in place of Huxleyan drugs. Then, a matter of vital concern to writers and readers: globally, freedom of expression is becoming a diminishing privilege. In Russia and China, obviously. In India, environmental activists are suppressed with state force. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, atheists are murdered. In Saudi Arabia, religious or political dissenters are imprisoned or terminated. In the Anglo-American West, we frighten ourselves with the possibility that we have forgotten how to disagree on public issues without stooping to threats or forms of social banishment, some of it by institutions fearful of reputational damage. It is bracing to consider that freedom of expression vanished in Christian medieval Europe for a thousand years. It took even longer than that to reclaim the writings of a freethinker like Democritus.

There is much to address in fiction if one can find the way to do it, much to compel the novelist to step outside the whale. But each of these problems is also parochial, local to a mere human timescale. They shrink and tighten into a bitter kernel contained within the shell of the greater matter, the earth's heating, the disrupted interwoven systems of oceans, land, air and life, beautiful and mutually sustaining entanglements barely understood as we forced change upon them. How will civilisation - a darkly beautiful construction - fare?

The climate change novel is hard. The subject is vast and complex. Much detailed science may be involved. What should have been a practical problem has become part-obscured by vested interests. It is difficult to encompass the scale of the disaster we appear to be walking towards. That problem of the uses and counter-effects of pessimism arises. Besides, most readers of serious novels are already persuaded. Above

all, moral or political urgency can throttle the life out of a novel. However, the core of the matter is at one with the novel's traditional concern - human nature, in this case our formidable cleverness in desperate contention with our formidable stupidity. Amitav Ghosh has challenged the idea that the social realist novel, with its fascination with the everyday, the ordinary celebrated by Orwell in Joyce and Miller, is up to the task of confronting the unthinkable transformational scale of the climate emergency. Others have made the case that science fiction, with its daring imaginative reach, is best placed. Many fine contemporary writers have dashed the blubber from their shoulders and made the attempt. Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver, Kim Stanley Robinson, James Bradley, Hilary Mantel, Jeanette Winterson, Richard Powers. They and scores of others have risked a form of aesthetic ruin. But they have made a conscious, serious choice. The matter is too urgent to resist.

A climate catastrophe can become the only subject, simply because it looks like it has already begun to change our politics and culture, our flora and fauna, our sense of the seasons, our rootedness in the world, our feeling for the future, our sense of the local, of the community threatened by migration on a scale we have yet to encounter, in millions, in tens of millions fleeing uninhabitable parts of the planet. Or we will be the ones who are fleeing, and facing the hostility of new neighbours. There is a metaphysics, a zeitgeist enfolded within the climate alteration that we have hardly begun to grasp or express. Even if all CO2 and methane emissions were to cease tomorrow morning, there is inertia in the process and our natural and man-made world is going to be, has started to be, different. The ordinary, the everyday is about to be utterly changed. The realist novel will have to work hard if it wishes to avoid or deny what is real.

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When I began making notes for this talk, I wondered about a good representative piece of inside-the-whale writing. The choice, of course is vast, from Arabic poetry in celebration of wine and love, novels about childhood, ghosts, hunting, about abusive parents, marriage, love affairs and the end of love. Finally, I chose the tiniest thing, a famous haiku by the great Japanese poet of the 17th century, Matsuo Basho, a man who loved the wilderness. No politics, no social injustice, no cruelty, no threats, no danger. Here it is in a translation by Reginald Blythe:

The old pond;
A frog jumps in -
The sound of water.

There are well over 7000 known species of frogs in an extraordinary range of shapes and colours. If it doesn't sound too much like 2 + 2 = 5, some frogs are toads but all toads are frogs. Frogs have been around for 200 million years against our 200 thousand. Apart from the Sahara and Arabian deserts, the very far north and Antarctica, they populate the entire earth. With their porous skins, and occupying a mid-point in the food chain, they are exceptionally vulnerable. They are finely adapted to their environments and as such are regarded by ecologists as environmental bellwethers - that is, a decline in their populations is a reliable indicator of environmental degradation. Best estimates are that more than 2500 species of frogs are threatened with extinction. 130 species of frog have vanished since the 1980s. In Britain, the 2019

State of Nature report noted the depleted numbers and diminished biodiversity of freshwater ponds and concluded that 90% of lowland waterbodies are degraded.

One might conclude that conditions inside Orwell's whale have been radically transformed. Might we reasonably assume that there is no longer an inside to the whale, that the creature lies stranded on the beach, as whales sometimes are, that the guts and blubber and rib cage are on display, the rotting flesh is flapping open to a turbulent world of omni-present broadband and vanishing solitude, to a too-successful clever-stupid species fouling its own nest? Is inside now outside? Does there no longer exist such a place where the imagination might retreat in order to dictate its own terms and create new forms of beauty or insight or disruption?

I believe Orwell's answer would be, then as now, yes - yes, it is vitally important that there is such a place. I hear his voice - amazingly, we have no recordings, but I hear it in my thoughts - quietly, and contrary to his own practice, insisting that to take delight in the inner calm evoked by the sound of a frog leaping into a pond is not to *deny* that the frog is threatened with extinction or that the pond may vanish in the next drought or from the next onslaught of industrialised chemical farming; instead, it is to affirm, regardless of authorial intention, that frogs and natural ponds, tranquillity and solitude are worth having and are worth fighting for. All writers like Basho who choose the belly of the whale, who refuse to tell us what they think, or what we should think, who wish to celebrate or investigate love, childhood, Boys' Weeklies, frogs or the delights of close attention to one or two details - they must have their freedom to do so. The writer who denies that freedom to herself, to himself or to others is - and I quote - 'in effect, demanding his own destruction.' So, paradoxically, spoke Orwell - from outside the whale.

Ian McEwan
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