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Orwell's Efforts in (Self-)Persuasion

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FOR A PERIOD OF ABOUT THREE YEARS, between 1944 and 1946, a strand in the writing of George Orwell examines the economics of his literary world. The high point of this writing is his 1946 essay “Books v. Cigarettes.”¹ In an article in the first volume of this journal, titled “Books v. Books,” Marc Flandreau suggests that Orwell’s essay might have been an effort “in (self-) persuasion.”² Flandreau’s description could be extended to the broader tendency of Orwell’s journalism during this period. On the surface these were efforts to persuade the public about the value of reading. However, there is a resignation in the tone of this writing that could be interpreted as Orwell coming to terms with public preferences that differed from his own.

The catalyst for these efforts in (self-)persuasion was his appointment as literary editor of London’s *Tribune* magazine in late 1943. In return for his salary, Orwell would also contribute a weekly personal column entitled “As I Please” and other essays. His writings on behalf of other authors mirrored his writings on behalf of the political Left as well as his efforts on behalf of the UK war effort while working in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In “Books v. Cigarettes” he made his case for books, but in doing so he seemed to acknowledge that his efforts were likely to be futile. He acknowledged as much when, in the summer of 1946, his “Why I Write” was published.³ Here he claimed that his primary motivation was a “desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.” He claimed he had “some clarity” about a book he hoped to write (probably *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) but accepted that “it is bound to be a failure, every book is a failure.” In “Books v. Cigarettes” and elsewhere he sought to alter people’s ideas about buying books despite being resigned to his own anticipated failure. His last sentence in “Books v.

¹ Orwell, “Books v. Cigarettes,” in Carey, *George Orwell: Essays*, 1021–25.

² Flandreau, “Books v. Books.”

³ Orwell, “Why I Write,” *Gangrel* (Summer 1946), in Carey, 1079–85.

Cigarettes” is: “And if our book-consumption remains as low as it has been, at least let us admit that it is because reading is a less exciting pastime than going to the dogs, the pictures or the pub, and not because books, whether bought or borrowed, are too expensive.”

As literary editor of the *Tribune*, Orwell’s efforts in persuasion started early. In the first week of 1944, in the third part of “As I Please 6,” Orwell turned his attention to the demise of the short story.⁴ His thoughts are prompted by a short story competition advertised in the *Tribune*. His musings on the same subject extended to “As I Please 7” and “As I Please 23.”⁵ The proximate cause of the demise of the short story, according to Orwell, was the lack of space for short stories. And the cause of the cause was the lack of demand for high-quality magazines able to provide such space.

The relationship between preferences and price was something he would return to again and again. He lamented the preferences, supported by purchasing power, of a public he so dearly wanted to extol. The lack of demand for literary output applied to more than books. It applied to those magazines and newspapers that Orwell perceived as being of a higher literary quality. Because they did not sell in large enough quantities, quality magazines did “not pay” the publisher and were going out of business.⁶ Quality newspapers did sell enough to generate a profit for the publishers, but Orwell postulated an inverse relationship between his perception of the quality of these newspapers and their sales volume.⁷ The paradox here is that Orwell also argues that he knows “of no strictly literary test which could show where the superiority lies”⁸ and that it is the marketplace that ultimately decides the superiority of the literary product.⁹

The gap between what the public were willing to pay for books and what Orwell would have liked them to pay had surfaced the best part of two years before “Books v. Cigarettes.” In June 1944, the *Manchester Evening News* published his “Are Books Too Dear?” In this essay Orwell says, “It will be seen that from the author’s point of view seven and sixpence is none too high a price. It is high, however, from the point of view of the public” (emphasis in

⁴ Orwell, “As I Please 6,” *Tribune* (January 7, 1944), in Carey, 517–20.

⁵ Orwell, “As I Please 7,” *Tribune* (January 14, 1944), in Carey, 520–23; Orwell, “As I Please 23,” *Tribune* (May 5, 1944), in Carey, 595–98.

⁶ Orwell, “As I Please 27,” *Tribune* (June 2, 1944), in Carey, 663–66.

⁷ Orwell, “As I Please 62,” *Tribune* (November 22, 1946), in Carey, 1125–29.

⁸ Orwell, “Good Bad Books,” in Carey, 927–31.

⁹ A point Orwell also made in “Raffles and Miss Blandish” (Carey, 717–30) and “Politics vs. Literature” (1088–108).

original). Working with the price of a novel in peacetime, Orwell identified the author's share and then set about establishing the annual sales needed (5,000) for the author to make a living (£250).¹⁰ After this point, through "Books v. Cigarettes," his economic arithmetic is supplemented by educated guesswork before eventually, possibly reluctantly, using publicly available data. In 1944 he says that the 5,000 sales figure is likely to be achieved only by established authors. There is no analysis of the market. Instead, he argues that there is a deficiency in demand at the current price because individuals do not purchase enough books. He guesses that individuals spend about £2 on books per year (approximately six books). In February 1946, in "Books v. Cigarettes," he would half this £2 estimate to £1 by examining his own expenditure. The £1 figure would be further halved in "As I Please 65," published in December 1946, where Orwell uses available secondary data showing that just under fifty million British citizens spent a total of £23 million on books.

It was logical that Orwell saw the issue as one of demand deficiency because of the two axioms he had set out in "Are Books Too Dear?": writers must not starve; and, the more that the public reads, the better. As a result, he sought to persuade both publishers and consumers that things could be different. He sought to persuade British book publishers that they could do better. They could improve the physical quality of the book as he suggested was the case in France. They could undertake a range of pricing strategies. He illustrated his point by noting the demand for H. G. Wells's latest offering, "at the stiff price of two guineas," compared to the success of Penguin's 1935 decision to issue cheap reprints for "the very low price of sixpence."¹¹ He sought to persuade the general public that there was value in books. He ruled out an increase in supply on the part of the individual writer because he argued that a writer could only produce one book per year. He did not explicitly articulate the view that there might be too many writers of books, given the existing demand, but it is hard to imagine that the idea did not cross his mind. It is implicit in his analysis.

Orwell understood the difficulty of making a living from writing when he stated as axiomatic the proposition that writers must not starve. During

¹⁰ Orwell, "Are Books Too Dear?" in Carey, 660–63.

¹¹ Orwell's comment reflects a strategy akin to today's use of different ticket prices for entertainment products based on location within a venue or the price sensitivity of customers, e.g., adult, student, or child. Greater profits and sales may result but with a lower consumer surplus for some groups.

1944, Orwell wrote almost 100,000 words for a return of only £597 19s.¹² This included a weekly column for the *Manchester Evening News* where “Are Books Too Dear?” was published. It was a vicious circle of sorts: Because it was difficult to earn a living from writing books, authors engaged in other activities that reduced their time and mental space to engage in writing books. Orwell pondered the toll taken on the creative process by the financial need to engage in other work.¹³ He suggested that the alternative job should have nothing to do with writing and that it should not be too demanding. He illustrated the latter by reference to Trollope’s lifestyle, output, and his less-than-demanding day job at the Post Office.

One of the reasons Orwell advised creative writers to have a job outside of writing concerned the type of work available to writers at the time. He was particularly worried about the impact of writing propaganda for the state on the thinking and creativity of the writer. While writing state-sponsored propaganda might have damaged the independence of the artist, it paid and was relatively widely circulated. By contrast, writing material that was critical of the state or its allies was difficult to publish.¹⁴ Orwell experienced this firsthand. Even publishers sympathetic to his left-wing politics, those willing to publish his *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), were slow to publish either Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) because of its criticism of communist behavior in the Spanish Civil War or his *Animal Farm* manuscript for fear of upsetting the Russian allies.

Given Orwell’s volume and type of output up to 1944, it is no wonder he bristled at the suggestion that it was easy to make money from writing. In late 1944, in a series of “As I Please” contributions, he took issue with a course in freelance journalism.¹⁵ Advertisements for these courses and the advice they offered to writers did not sit well with him. Personal experience to this point provided ample evidence that the writer’s life was not an easy one. But things were about to change on that front. *Animal Farm* was eventually published in August 1945 and almost immediately eased Orwell’s financial struggles. He was an overnight financial success at the age of forty-

¹² Carey, xxix.

¹³ Orwell, “As I Please 44,” *Tribune* (October 13, 1944), in Carey, 760–64.

¹⁴ Orwell, “As I Please 39,” *Tribune* (August 25, 1944), in Carey, 714–17.

¹⁵ Orwell, “As I Please 43,” *Tribune* (October 6, 1944), in Carey, 756–60; Orwell, “As I Please 48,” *Tribune* (November 17, 1944), in Carey, 773–77; Orwell, “As I Please 51,” *Tribune* (December 8, 1944), in Carey, 789–92.

two, twelve years after his first book was published and five years before his death.

Did Orwell's changed circumstances influence his journalism? During 1946 there is a change in the mood and tone of his work. In early February, "Books v. Cigarettes" was published, a literary flourish that perhaps signaled a downturn in his hopes. The animated efforts of a literary editor to persuade book publishers have faded into the background. His efforts to persuade the public changed from arguments as to why people should read more to an argument seeking the public to reflect on the rationalizations offered for their behavior. Orwell himself seems to have entered more fully into a reflective stage. In September 1946, the magazine *Horizon* sent a questionnaire called "The Cost of Letters" to writers.¹⁶ Not only did Orwell answer the questionnaire, he also wrote an essay about the questionnaire and his answers. His essay was published in the same magazine and under the same "The Cost of Letters" title as the original questionnaire. The final question asked about the advice that the writer would give to those considering writing as an occupation. To this last question Orwell acknowledged his recent success after years of struggle, but he noted that potential writers should understand that they would be tolerated rather than encouraged.

"As I Please 65, published in December 1946, wrapped up Orwell's journalistic efforts in self-persuasion.¹⁷ It might be more correct to say that, at this stage, he had given up on that effort. In a short second part to "As I Please 65," Orwell briefly drew a line under his efforts. Orwell claimed that he had recently received the latest edition of Stanley Unwin's book, *The Truth about Publishing*, in which national expenditure data showed that the amount spent on books was actually half of Orwell's earlier estimate of £1 (approximately 12 shillings).¹⁸ His last sentence in "As I Please 65" was a despairing question: "Is it any wonder that when recently a questionnaire was sent out by *Horizon*, asking twenty-one poets and novelists how they thought a writer could best earn his living, not one of them said plainly that he might earn it by writing books?" Orwell was resigned to reality. The efforts in (self-)persuasion ended here.

¹⁶ Orwell, "The Cost of Letters," *Horizon* (September 1946), in Carey, 1086–88.

¹⁷ Orwell, "As I Please 65," *Tribune* (December 8, 1946), in Carey, 1142–46.

¹⁸ It seems slightly strange that Orwell was not aware of *The Truth about Publishing*. He was aware of the author, Stanley Unwin, and another book that Unwin had published called *Publishing in Peace and War*. We know this because Orwell refers to it, in "As I Please 45" (in Carey, 764–77) over a year before "Books v. Cigarettes."

Orwell surely knew from personal experience that his hopes for a society where writers could earn a living by writing books were forlorn ones. However, buoyed by his transition from producing state propaganda in the BBC to his position as literary editor for the *Tribune*, he threw himself enthusiastically into the task of persuading his readers about the value of reading. The more the campaigning editor wrote, the more he discovered the size of his task, and the more his journalism became efforts in self-persuasion. The 1944 wave of optimism broke and crashed on the cold hard reality of the book-purchasing patterns of the British public.¹⁹

Ironically, as his efforts as a journalist were failing to persuade the public to buy more books, his efforts as a novelist were succeeding to persuade the public to buy more of his own books. While it is sad that Orwell's death limited his time to savor his success, the sales of *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) might have convinced him that the preferences of the public did not need changing. As pointed out above, he claimed that there was no strictly literary test of literary superiority. For Orwell, popularity with the readers, and not the views of the literary critics, determined the superiority of books. The market decides. Maybe he eventually persuaded himself of as much when it came to the size of that same market for books.

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¹⁹ I'm grateful to Marc Flandreau for his suggestions for the imagery in these concluding paragraphs and other feedback.