

WHY ORWELL WROTE

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I recently re-read George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* a book, where, to understand his subject matter – Northern England coal miners —Orwell followed the miners deep into the mines. I read this book years ago, borrowed from the Dhaka British Council. I remembered the coalmines, the feeling of grit under my fingernails; the crick in my spine as I had pictured Orwell's six foot four frame bowed, his back bent, fathoming as he did, how grown men spent fourteen hours shifts in those hellish mines, deep inside the earth. The men are permanently soot-covered and steel-muscled, Orwell notes with admiration; they appear to be an extension of the greasy assembly-line machines they work alongside. They are Atlas's bastard children continuing to hold up the world's industry, emerging from the mines at daybreak; to finally die prematurely, of black-lung and cancer, in their pre-war wooden row-houses. Reading Orwell in 2014, it is hard to not see the parallels with workers of our Dhaka city, also caught up in the throes of industrializa-

tion; often dying as they work to clothe the world.

Roused by the book, I picked up a book of George Orwell's narrative essays called "Facing Unpleasant Facts" and found myself reading Orwell's famous essay, titled quite simply, 'Why I write'. In no uncertain terms, Orwell posits the four reasons writers write – and while the reasons may not be complete, they are pretty hard to deny.

Reason 1 is a frank indictment — 'Sheer egotism: Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood.'

I can't deny the push of vanity behind my own writing endeavors. I daresay, many of us write to be relevant, to be understood, to be loved for our exquisite pains; for revenge - to somehow prevail against history, by hanging on as some sort of footnote at the bottom of the page, hoping to shift the trajectory of history by millimeters. To Orwell, this is the easiest reason to write and thus suspect. Reading between the lines, this is a good

reason to begin, but a good writer needs to rise above this one.

Reason 2 is a little softer around the edges. 'Aesthetic enthusiasm' he declares rather enthusiastically - the sheer selfish pleasure derived from the 'impact of one word on another' or the 'firmness of good prose'. But this is a 'very feeble' motive in a lot of writers, Orwell declares. Who doesn't love a good sentence? But is it enough?

It is really his third, and the logically related, fourth reason that begins to make you think. Writers

have a need to capture some sense of 'truth' for historical judgment, the writing serves as a way for men and women to pass on truths, whether empirical or emotional, to time-stamp the world as they once saw it.

Look at how exquisite we once were! How we had lived then...

But often the world the writer sees is not the world they *want* to see, and it is this motive that leads to the fourth and what I think underlies Orwell's own art – the political novel. He didn't invent the political form and neither, arguably, was Orwell the greatest practitioner of it; yet his influence on modern writing is undeniable. While most readers today are familiar with his most famous political novels – *Animal Farm* and *1984*, they are of course only his most ostensible political works. But almost everything Orwell wrote starting with his (somewhat purple-prose filled), *Burmese Days*, to later works such as *Coming Up For Air* are, in varying degrees, damning indictments of the post-industrial revolution condition.

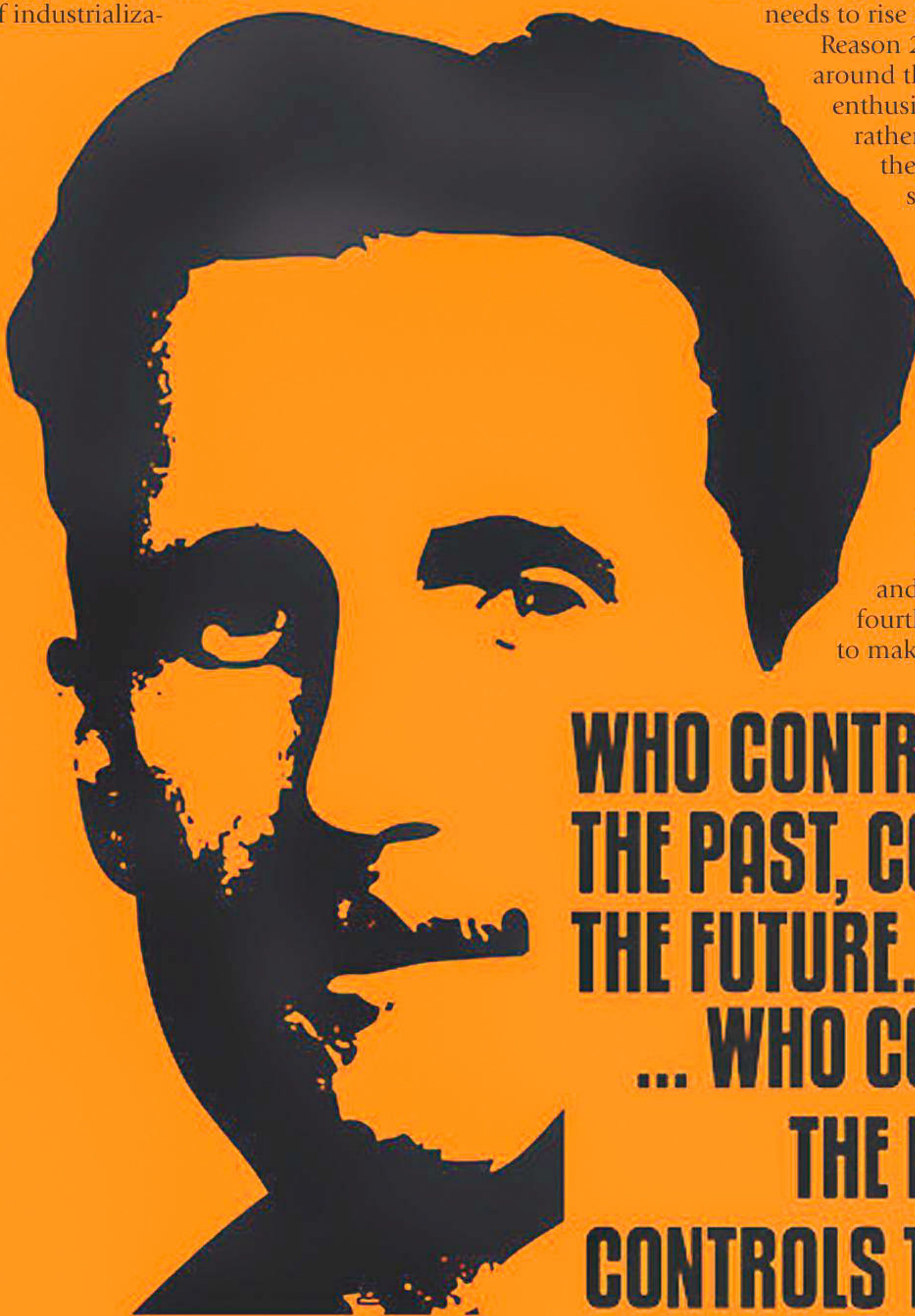
In recent years, it seems that unless the writers are Latin American or Indian Subcontinental in origin, or called David Eggers, there is little interest in the political form. Where is the modern day political novel? The twenty-first century equivalent of a *Coal Miner's Daughter*, the *Grapes of Wrath* equivalent set amongst the illegal migrant everywhere?

One wonders, where the tales of modern day Detroit or of the Muslim in the west are today? Our literary endeavors have swayed towards abstract treatises thinly disguised as stories, doing little more than be the stuff of cocktail parties. Contemporary literature as a representation of the national gestalt becomes evident and our increasing appetites for the post-comfortable suburban novel becomes unavoidable. Our instincts for escape and comfort — both sensibilities born of apathy and materialistic gluttony, blind us to the needs of the lesser amongst us.

Back in 1949, it is easy to picture old George Orwell pecking at his typewriter. The Scottish air is brisk; he will be dead soon of tuberculosis (acquired some years ago from living with the homeless), at 46, his future best seller *1984* is yet to find real critical acclaim. But he stays warm in the knowledge that after a lifetime of living with freedom fighters, the homeless, the coal-miners and others, his life's work has emerged to make "political writing into an art". He has produced works that won't hang in museums, but will be beaten into usable ploughs.

Or, swords, if the occasion calls for it. Isn't that literature's greatest purpose?

Javed Jahangir's fiction has been published in HIMAL Magazine, Smokelong Journal, LOST Magazine (picked by Peter Orner), LUMINA Literary Journal (Sarah Lawrence College), Bengal Lights Journal, The Daily Star and others. He is a founding member of Beyondthemargins.com, a website of daily literary essays. His novel "Ghost Alley" (from Bengal Publications) has been launched at Hay Festival Dhaka 2014.



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