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Nineteen Eighty-Four: context and controversy

Nineteen Eighty-Four is misread if not read in the context of its time – around 1948: a postwar world brutally and arbitrarily divided into spheres of influence by the great powers; the atom bomb exploded; and the fictive London of Winston Smith a recognisable caricature of the actual postwar London that Orwell had walked, and that this author can vividly remember. And three common misreadings can be challenged on biographical evidence. Firstly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not his last will and testament: it was simply the last book he wrote before he happened to die. Secondly, it was not a work of unnatural intensity dashed off hastily by a man choked with a subconscious death-wish and regressing while writing the novel to childhood memories of his preparatory school (as some claim is demonstrated by his essay on school days, 'Such, Such Were the Joys' – as if the world of Stalin and Hitler did not exist). Thirdly, the book does not represent a repudiation of his democratic socialism as so many American reviewers assumed; for he continued to write for the *Tribune* and American left wing journals right up to his final illness, during the time of the composition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.[1]

Yet for someone who consciously sought to become the master of the plain style, and is famous for it, it is astonishing how many varied interpretations have been put upon *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – the most famous of his works, although I think not his best. It has been read as deterministic prophecy, as a kind of science fiction or a dystopia, as a conditional projection of the future, as a humanistic satire on contemporary events, as a total rejection of socialism of any kind, and as a libertarian socialist – almost an anarchist – protest against totalitarian tendencies and abuses of power both in his own and in other possible societies. Most bad or partial readings occur through not grasping the context of the time – the immediate postwar period.

It may help if we write it out, as it was first published in London, as indeed a title, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', and not as a date – 1984 – as it is too often rendered. For it is not a prophecy, it is plainly a satire and a satire of a

particular, even a peculiar kind – a Swiftian satire. Reading it when it first appeared, or now, we should no more expect the future to be quite like that than when reading Swift's *Gulliver* we should expect to find the islands of Lilliput or Brobdingnag – although when we look around us we see on every side little men and women pretending to be great and all powerful; and big men and women regardlessly or carelessly treading on smaller folk.

Satiric Rage

So much for generality and genre, but if we look at the time it was written we find some specific objects of satire, targets for his Swift-like rage, as well as enduring matters. He wrote to his publisher criticising a first draft of a blurb:

> It makes the book sound as though it were a thriller mixed up with a love story, and I didn't intend it to be primarily that. What it is really meant to do is to discuss the implications of dividing the world up into 'Zones of influence' (I thought of it in 1944 as a result of the Tehran Conference), and in addition by parodying them the intellectual implications of totalitarianism.[2]

This is very specific. But it is not, of course, a full statement of his intentions or targets of 'parody' or satire. A close reading of the text suggests seven broad satiric themes.

(i) The division of the world at Tehran by Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill.
(ii) The mass media and proletarisation (what we now call dumbing-down).
(iii) Power-hunger and totalitarianism – those who believe in 'power for the sake of power' are not just condemned morally by the satirist but, in the portrayal of O'Brien, shown to be driven mad by power-hunger.
(iv) The betrayal of the intellectuals: all those portrayed in the Outer Party who prostitute their talents for propaganda and are too fearful for their lives (or in reality, their jobs) to challenge the Inner Party (the boss).
(v) The debauching of language in the drive towards Newspeak so that criticism of the party would become linguistically impossible (but note from the last sentence of the Appendix on Newspeak that the project has had to be delayed until 2050: the satirist implies that demotic language and literature cannot be controlled).
(vi) The destruction by the Ministry of Truth of any objective history and truth – again a satiric exaggeration of how historical figures like Trotsky and Bukharin had simply vanished both from the Soviet historical and even photographic archives.

(vii) James Burnham's once well-known thesis of convergence between communism and capitalism via managerialism – that neither capitalism nor communism would win out but that their managers would develop a common culture.[3]

Perhaps there were too many different themes to be easily contained in one narrative, which helps to account for so many varying interpretations. A multi-layered satire can stir some profound but none-the-less myopic reactions. Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet and writer, wrote in 1953 in his *Captive Mind*, having only recently defected from the Communist Party:

> Because [*Nineteen Eighty-Four*] is both difficult to obtain and dangerous to possess, it is known only to certain members of the Inner Party. Orwell fascinates them through his insight into details they know well, and through his use of Swiftian satire. Such a form of writing is forbidden by the New Faith because allegory, by nature manifold in meaning, would trespass beyond the prescriptions of socialist realism and the demands of the censor. Those who know Orwell only by hearsay are amazed that a writer who never lived in Russia should have understood the functioning of the unusually constructed machine of which they are themselves a part. Orwell's grasp of their world astounds them and argues against the 'stupidity' of the West.[4]

Few of the above viewpoints can be rejected completely, rather like those famous many causes of the French or American Revolutions over which students are invited in essays to exercise their judgement: it is a question of proportion and relative weight. There is no single message in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: it contains multiple messages. It is, after all, a *novel* not a monograph, albeit of a peculiar kind and the most complex Orwell ever attempted; and more complex in its *variety* of themes than most readers and critics appreciate. If he had wanted to write a straight or even a more or less non-fiction book, he would have done so as he had done before. But a general difficulty with satires is that they depend greatly on contemporary references which time can erode or misconceive, and warnings depend on plausibility in the circumstances of the day (now often misunderstood, underestimated or re-imagined).[5] And there is the special difficulty that satire and warning are a difficult mixture to bring off: it is difficult to judge how specific and precise the author is being. H. G. Wells wrote novels of both these kinds, but on the whole he kept them well apart. Orwell attempted something artistically very difficult. That is why in my *George Orwell: A Life* I called this extraordinarily powerful, complex and disturbing book 'a flawed masterpiece'.

As well as a satire on aspirations of totalitarianism, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is plainly a satire on hierarchical societies in general. This has created a

foolish misunderstanding. If Orwell was still a democratic socialist, it is said, where in the text does he assert his libertarian and egalitarian values? Some ask this question rhetorically and assume that somehow, because he does not mention these things explicitly, he has abandoned them, certainly that he has abandoned his egalitarianism. This view is strengthened if one 'locates', as has become a routine academic exercise, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the tradition of Huxley's *Brave New World*, Zamyatin's *We*, Jack London's *Iron Heel*, and H. G. Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes*. The issue is a complex one. Certainly there are borrowings from and echoes of all these books – and many more – in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But finally it is arbitrary and foolish to read the text in the mental straight-jacket of a course on utopian and anti-utopian literature. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* owes as much to Swift's *Gulliver* as to any of them, and, in any case, also needs locating both in the political events of the 1930s and 1940s and in Orwell's reading of non-fiction such as James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution*. However, let us play this curricular game for a moment. Compare *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to *Brave New World*. Even in the broadest features of their plots they are as chalk to cheese. Aldous Huxley was satirising equality, he disliked and feared egalitarianism, therefore a parodied equality is an explicit theme in his satire, which shows equality through enforced happiness carried rather too far. Orwell also disliked 'happiness', or rather he often railed against hedonism both as a proper motive for life and as a sufficient explanation of human conduct, although, doubtless to Huxley's horror, he professed to find a true happiness in the ordinary, decent life of a working-man in employment – the idealised 'common man' of Kant, Jefferson and William Morris, and not in the hyped-up higher moments of the literary intelligentsia. Orwell is far from satirising equality, he is satirising the pretensions of hierarchy. Good satire is neither cynical nor utterly pessimistic (which is why so much so-called satire today is simply, at best, frivolous, or, at worst, nihilistic – denying that any alternative positions are better). If mankind can never be perfect, says the satirist, he always has the capacity to be better.

Hierarchy destroys fraternity. Orwell's satire is so consistent that the dictator is actually called 'Big Brother'. 'Big Brother is watching you', but not watching over you as a brother should. Satires turn moral truths upside down. This configuration of the friendly into the threatening is a perfect piece of *double-think*. It has a touch of the Stalinist perversion of early Communism, but also has a touch of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Bruderschaft* of the Nazis, their false fraternity and contempt for individual liberty. In satire the positive values of a writer emerge as the contrary of what he or she is attacking, or of the fanatical and usually disgusting world portrayed.

Mutual Trust

Consider for a moment *Nineteen Eighty-Four* simply as a story of a man, Winston Smith, trying to struggle against a new despotism. The story makes clear right from the beginning that effective resistance is impossible – if things are ever allowed to come to such a pass. On one level Winston attempts to resist by activism, by rebellion, seeking out the enemies of the regime; but on another level he simply struggles to maintain his individuality (the original title was to have been *The Last Man in Europe*). In this struggle – which this unhealthy and unheroic man pursues with surprising courage and tenacity right up to the final torture – *memory* and *mutual trust* become positive themes. That he is finally defeated is inevitable in this satire of total power. A happy ending would be a satirical deflating of the pretensions of a grim satire. But Orwell believes that individuality can only be destroyed when we are utterly alone. While we have someone to trust, our individuality cannot be destroyed. For man is a social animal, our identity arising from interaction, not autonomy. 'Do thyself no harm for we are all here'.

'Mutual trust' is that virtue praised by Aristotle, asserted to be necessary to true citizens and the very thing that a tyrant must smash (he tells us in Book V of *The Politics*) if he is to perpetuate his rule successfully. Mutual trust is a component of that overworked word in Orwell, that essential concept, 'decency' (Orwell's equivalent of 'fairness' in John Rawls' moral philosophy or 'mutual respect' in Kant's). Decency is mutual trust, toleration, behaving responsibly toward other people, acting with empathy – all of these. Mutual trust is of supreme importance to a civic culture, for political action is impossible without it. Again the author is no more explicit about 'mutual trust' than he is about 'equality'. In a satire only the contrary or the negation is explicit, but then perfectly explicit. O'Brien, the interrogator, torturer of the Inner Party, tells Winston Smith: 'Already we are breaking down the habits of thought which have survived from before the Revolution. We have cut the links between child and parent, between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer'.[6]

> And a wretched old man, grieving in an air-raid shelter for someone dead, kept repeating, 'We didn't ought to 'ave trusted 'em. I said so, Ma, didn't I? That's what comes of trusting 'em. I said so all along. We didn't ought to have trusted the buggers'.[7]

And when Winston and Julia meet again after their torture, defeat and release, she says:

> 'You *want* it to happen to the other person. You don't give a damn what they suffer. All you care about is yourself'.
> 'All you care about is yourself,' he echoed.
> 'And after that you don't feel the same towards the other person any longer.'
> 'No,' he said, 'you don't feel the same'.[8]

'Mutual trust' is thus a minimum demand on us if we want to stay human, but it is also a maximum demand: there is no need to treat all one's fellow citizens with more than mutual trust, respect and decency. Certainly there is no need to love everybody equally, which is either impossible or a debasement of 'love'; but there is a categorical imperative to treat people equally, as if everyone were an end in themselves and not a means toward some other's ends. Some critics have argued that 'love' is asserted as a positive value in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and is necessary for a good society, as shown by the love affair between Winston and Julia. They then say, not surprisingly, that the portrayal of love is clumsy and shallow. But it begins simply as sexual desire, a 'love affair'; anything like real love only grows on them toward the end – their betrayal by one they trusted, and then of each other. Indeed that Julia really loves him is shown in the story to have been a mistake on Winston's part. She falls asleep when he reads Goldstein's testimony and she is bored by his tale of the photograph; and for her part promiscuity is a gesture of contempt for the regime (she boasts that she has had it off with Party members many times before, and that turns Winston on again). She is closer in her behaviour to the proles than is Winston, because she has come from the proles, but not in sympathies – she wants to get away from them. She is no intellectual, but she is shrewd, tough and courageous. But Winston is more the middle-class intellectual who is determined to find hope amid the common people. If the affair is not a love affair in a genuine sense, it is, however, exemplary of 'mutual trust' right up to the end when they are tortured. Mutual trust, fellowship, fraternity and decency are recurrent themes in all of Orwell's writings after *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*. These themes qualify his earlier individualism.

Memory and History

The second positive and major theme, *memory*, is explicit in the satire, and links *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with *Coming Up for Air* and with Orwell's general view of morality. He held (rightly or wrongly, but so he did) that a good and decent way of life already existed in tradition: an egalitarian or genuine post-revolutionary society would not transfigure values or expect them to be different (his anti-Marxism comes out here) but would simply end

exploitation and draw on the best of the past. Quite simply, Orwell did not believe that poverty and class oppression (which he fiercely believed were real forces in the history of the West) had dehumanised people completely. Rather these forces had created a genuine fellowship and fraternity in the common people that the middle classes, wracked by competitive individualism, lacked. Hence the importance of the proles in the story, much more positively characterised (if perhaps too briefly for emphasis) than is always noticed. Winston Smith observed when he walked among the proles:

> What mattered were individual relationships, and the completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself. [The proles] . . . it suddenly occurred to him, had remained in this condition. They were not loyal to a party or to a country or to an idea, they were loyal to one another. For the first time in his life he did not despise the proles or think of them as merely an inert force which would one day spring to life and regenerate the world. The proles had stayed human. They had not become hardened inside. They had held on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to relearn by conscious effort.[9]

This is a crucial passage in the book, completely consistent with Orwell's moral and social perspectives elsewhere. Thus the authenticity of memory, thus the diary: the attempt to write the diary begins the main thread of the plot in which private memory is defended against the official attempts to rewrite history; and these become parallel themes.

My suggestion is that the themes of the importance of memory, of mutual trust and of plain language work together as a satire on modern mass-produced writing. Orwell sees even the nominally nonpolitical writings of prolefeed and prolecult as having a political, deadening, perverting, and pacifying effect generally. If we read them primarily as part of a future totalitarian society, then we actually distance the thrust at ourselves. Consider this passage from his essay of 1946, 'The Prevention of Literature':

> It would probably not be beyond human ingenuity to write books by machinery. But a sort of mechanising process can already be seen at work in film and radio, in publicity and propaganda, and in the lower reaches of journalism. The Disney films, for instance, are produced by what is essentially a factory process, the work being done partly mechanically and partly by means of artists who have to subordinate their individual style. Radio features are commonly written by tired hacks to whom the subject and the manner of treatment are dictated beforehand. Even so, what they write is merely a kind of raw material to be chopped into shape by producers and censors. So also with the innumerable books and pamphlets commissioned by government departments.[10]

One of the satiric rages that moved Orwell was plainly a result of bitter disappointment that almost a hundred years of the democratic franchise and of compulsory secondary education had not realised the liberal dream of an educated, active and politically literate citizenry, but that industrial society had turned people into proles: '. . . films, football, beer and, above all, gambling filled the horizon of their minds. To keep them in control was not difficult'. Several of his essays bristle with contempt for what he still called 'the yellow press' and, as a working journalist, he had obviously believed that through writing plain English one could, if not prevented or edited out, reach ordinary people with important issues. He implied that most intellectuals now lived off the backs of a debased populace by supplying prolefeed, no longer trying to 'educate and agitate' – that fine old British radical slogan.

He only erred in his satire on two-way television by seeing its development primarily as a device of surveillance; but, even so, these other things had so debased the proles that 'the great majority of the proles did not even have telescreens in their homes'. They did not need watching, they were so debased as to be no political threat. The actual development of mass television today would have been added grist to Orwell's satiric mill, prolefeed indeed.

Seen as a projective model of actual or would-be 'totalitarian' societies, the narrative text of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* works badly. The proles are left passive, they are not mobilised systematically as nearly every social scientist or contemporary historian who used the term *totalitarian* thought was the essence of the concept – including Orwell himself in a whole group of wartime and postwar essays. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not a precise model of actual totalitarian society, as he was well aware, simply because the demands of the specific satiric targets in his own society make the proles debased by the state rather than fit human material for political mobilisation towards revolutionary transformation. Of course, the details of the Ingsoc regime cannot be viewed as a precise model but only as parts of a satiric story. It is almost as absurd to object to Orwell that the class structure in Oceania is obscure or contradictory as to tell Swift that the babies of the Irish poor would have been too emaciated to serve as food for the starving.

If Not Prophecy Yet Warning

However, both the intensity of the writing and his immediate reactions to reviewers must convince us that, even if it is not a prophecy of totalitarianism (still less neither timetable nor precise model), the book is certainly in part a warning that 'something like this could happen even here'. Orwell was disturbed when a first wave of American reviewers (notably from the

Time-Life Corporation's journals) hailed *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as, first and last, an explicit attack on socialism. Not unexpectedly, Communists took exactly the same line. So Orwell dictated two sets of notes for a press release:

> It has been suggested by some of the reviewers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that it is the author's view that this, or something like this, is what will happen inside the next forty years in the Western World. This is not correct. I think that, allowing for the book being after all a parody, something like *Nineteen Eighty-Four could* happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time, and the trend lies deep in the political, social and economic foundations of the contemporary world situation.
>
> Specifically the danger lies in the structure imposed on Socialist and on Liberal capitalist communities by the necessity to prepare for total war with the USSR and the new weapons, of which of course the atomic bomb is the most powerful and the most publicised. But danger lies also in the acceptance of a totalitarian outlook by intellectuals of all colours.
>
> The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: *Don't let it happen. It depends on you.*[11]
>
> George Orwell assumes that if such societies as he describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* come into being there will be several super-states. This is fully dealt with in the relevant chapters of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is also discussed from a different angle by James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution*. These super states will naturally be in opposition to each other or (a novel point) will pretend to be much more in opposition than in fact they are. Two of the principal super states will obviously be the Anglo-American world and Eurasia. If these two great blocs line up as mortal enemies it is obvious that the Anglo-Americans will not take the name of their opponents and will not dramatise themselves on the scene of history as Communists. Thus they will have to find a new name for themselves. The name suggested in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is of course Ingsoc, but in practice a wide range of choices is open. In the USA the phrase 'Americanism' or 'hundred percent Americanism' is suitable and the qualifying adjective is as totalitarian as anyone could wish.
>
> If there is a failure of nerve and the Labour Party breaks down in its attempt to deal with the hard problems with which it will be faced, tougher types than the present Labour leaders will inevitably take over, drawn probably from the ranks of the Left, but not sharing the liberal aspirations of those now in power. Members of the present British government, from Mr. Attlee and Sir Stafford Cripps down to Aneurin Bevan, will *never* willingly sell the pass to the enemy, and in general the older men, nurtured in a liberal tradition, are safe, but the younger generation is suspect and the seeds of totalitarian thought are probably widespread among them.[12]

So Orwell thought that something like it *could* happen, but notice how contemporary (the division of the world between the great powers and his

fears for the Labour Party) the specific elements of the satire become, and notice his use of the phrase that it was 'after all a parody'. The problem still remains, a parody of what? Here the book as a plain text perhaps ceases to speak directly to the modern reader without some editorial note. For a major theme is a parody of James Burnham's thesis in particular and of the power-hunger of intellectuals (an old Orwell theme) in general. 'Who was James Burnham?' many readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may well ask.

Burnham had a double thesis: that the two great ideologies of the superpowers would one day converge, neither the commissars nor the congressmen winning; and that the state would be taken over not by politicians or party men (of whatever ideology) but by technocrats. They were developing a common culture and common interests. Orwell was fascinated by both views. He wrote two major essays on Burnham, as if to think it out; although in the end he rejected both views. Nonetheless, if one saw intellectuals as a sub-class of managers, as Orwell seems to do, he had considerable ambivalence about them. While he defends intellectual liberties, he seems to distrust intellectuals as a class and suspect most of them as coming to be more interested in power and place than in free thought. He fears, impressed by his wartime experience in the BBC, that intellectuals sell out to the machine all too easily: 'the motives of those English intellectuals who support the Russian dictatorship are, I think, different from what they publicly admit, but it is logical to condone tyranny and massacre if one assumes that progress is inevitable'.[13] Orwell packed a lot into that cheery little aside, not merely his continual polemic against the Fellow Travellers of Communism, but a Karl Popper-like philosophical position: that belief in theories of historical inevitability or prophecy inevitably become excuses for the tyranny needed to try to make them come true. 'The fallacy is to believe that under a dictatorial government you can be free inside. Quite a number of people console themselves with this thought now that totalitarianism in one form or another is visibly on the upgrade in every part of the world'.[14]

Controlling past and future?

Certainly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the Ministry of Truth is doing more than debasing the masses, it is rewriting history: he who controls the present controls the past and the future. On one level, the satire is fairly obvious: anyone at the time who cared to know would have followed the gallows-humour of successive editions of *The Soviet Encyclopaedia* which first had Trotsky as a hero of the Civil War, then condemned him as an agent of the Mensheviks and British Intelligence, then dealt with him in the simplest and sweetest way by removing him entirely from historical record,

making him an un-person. That is Winston Smith's daily work in the ministry.

However, Orwell on a deeper level tries to wrestle with the epistemological problem as to whether it is *possible* so to control the past, to destroy or distort both record and memory. Although Winston strives to authenticate vague memories, what he finds among the proles is extremely disturbing: their memories are short, random, wandering and often ridiculous; it needs a trained mind to have a trained memory in oppressive circumstances. It emerges from some of Orwell's earlier essays that (a) he fears that totalitarian regimes believe their own propaganda and can create a coherent and viable false reality, and (b) a contradictory theme, that totalitarian regimes could not possibly function if some of their leaders or functionaries, scientists or bureaucrats, did not know what was really happening. Orwell never resolved this profound and difficult epistemological dilemma.

Nor did he fully resolve whether he was satirising Burnham's view of the primacy of pure power as an impossibility: 'It is curious that in all his talk about the struggle for power, Burnham never stops to ask *why* people want power' ('Second Thoughts on James Burnham', 1946); or whether he thinks it all too possible that party leaders and civil servants who begin as civilised men end up simply as a regime of office-holders, brutally interested in nothing but power for the sake of power. O'Brien gives the nihilistic reply to Winston Smith when he allows Winston to ask him what it is all for: 'If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face forever'.

Could there be such a thing as power devoid of ideology? Can history be completely rewritten? Consider these two rather different reflections on the possibility of total thought control in the same long paragraph of his essay, 'The Prevention of Literature' (1946).

> The organised lying practised by totalitarian states is not, as is sometimes claimed, a temporary expedient of the same nature as military deception. It is something integral to totalitarianism. Among intelligent Communists there is an underground legend to the effect that although the Russian government is obliged now to deal in lying propaganda, frame-up trials, and so forth, it is secretly recording the true facts and will publish them at some future time. We can, I believe, be quite certain that this is not the case, because the mentality implied by such action is that of a liberal historian who believes that the past cannot be altered and that a correct knowledge of history is valuable as a matter of course. From the totalitarian point of view, history is something to be created rather than learned. A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible. But since, in practice, no one is infallible, it is frequently necessary

> to rearrange events in order to show that this or that mistake was not made, or that this or that imaginary triumph actually happened . . . Then, again, every major change in policy demands a corresponding change of doctrine and a revaluation of prominent historical figures. *This kind of thing happens everywhere*, but is clearly likelier to lead to outright falsification in societies where only one opinion is permissible at any given moment. Totalitarianism demands, in fact, the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence objective of truth.[15]

But then, in the same paragraph, he asserts a contradictory opinion.

> The friends of totalitarianism in this country usually tend to argue that since absolute truth is not attainable, a big lie is no worse than a little lie. It is pointed out to us that all historical records are biased and inaccurate or, on the other hand, that modern physics has proved that what seems to us the real world is an illusion, so that to believe in the evidence of ones senses is simply vulgar philistinism. A totalitarian society which succeeds in perpetuating itself would probably set up a schizophrenic system of thought, in which laws of commonsense held good in everyday life and in certain exact sciences, but could be disregarded by the politician, the historian and the sociologist. Already there are countless people who would think it scandalous to falsify a scientific text-book, but would see nothing wrong in falsifying an historical fact. It is at the point where literature and politics cross that totalitarianism exerts its greatest pressure on the intellectual.[16]

He appears to – or does – contradict himself because now he assumes not a total system of false thought but a schizophrenic one. The speculative essayist sees the plausibility of both points of view. The schizophrenic or two-truth theory is perhaps the most plausible and the mildly less nightmarish. Orwell simply was not sure on both these big issues: could there be a total divorce of power from morality and of history and ideology from truth? Few people were sure at the time he wrote, when Soviet power, if containable, seemed impregnable, and Nazi power was a very recent memory and many feared its recurrence. Now we have only North Korea that raises this dilemma. Orwell felt the dilemma acutely. Perhaps he had not got the philosophical ability to resolve the question of whether or not all truths are socially conditioned, but he had the literary genius to go right to the heart of the problem. Because they were open-ended dilemmas, he chose to write a novel, not a tract, even though so many people now read it out of context as if it were a tract for all times, to be judged as literally true or not in every detail, rather than a grim satirical caricature of the conditions of his time.

But the essay 'The Prevention of Literature' does reach out in some respects to chasten and worry us, as all great satire can.

> Let me repeat what I said at the beginning of this essay: that in England the immediate enemies of truthfulness, and hence of freedom of thought, are the Press lords, the film magnates and the bureaucrats, but that on a long view the weakening of the desire for liberty among the intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all.[17]

Orwell radiates mistrust for the debasing effect of the press and he feared that intellectuals were betraying their principles. These two satiric thrusts are the enduringly topical relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But after all the dark pessimism of the narrative, the book ends on an optimistic note – not Winston loving Big Brother under which it says 'The End', but the end paragraph of the Appendix, 'The Principles of Newspeak'. That is the real end of the text. And it tells us that translations into Newspeak of 'Various writers, such as Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Byron, Dickens . . '. (Orwell's pantheon) was an unexpectedly 'slow and difficult business'; and therefore the 'final adoption of Newspeak had been fixed for late a date as 2050. If we read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Swiftian satire, this is as good as to say 'this year, next year, sometimes, never'. Colloquial language, the common people and common-sense will survive the most resolute attempts at total control.

NOTES

1. See Crick, B. (ed.), *George Orwell: Nineteen Eighty-Four, with a critical introduction and annotations*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), and Crick. B., *George Orwell: A Life*, rev. ed., (London: Secker & Warburg, 1981); and 'Reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Satire' in Crick, B., *Essays on Politics and Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), from which some passages in this chapter are drawn. So I disagree with William Steinhoff, in his otherwise masterly book, when he sees *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 'as a culminating work which expresses, almost epitomizes, a lifetime's ideas, attitudes, events, and reading'. *George Orwell and the Origins of 1984* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1975).
2. Davison P. (ed.), *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, *Nineteen* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1998), p. 487.
3. Crick, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 55–84.
4. Milosz, C., *The Captive Mind*, trans. Zielonko (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 40.
5. When the poet William Empson wrote to thank Orwell for *Animal Farm*, he pointed out that his precocious son of ten had read it as 'Tory propaganda', whereas Empson knew that Orwell *intended* it as a socialist lament for revolution betrayed by the power-hungry. (Letter of 24 August 1945, quoted in Crick, *Orwell*, 340.)
6. Davison, *Nine*, 280.
7. Davison, *Nine*, 36.
8. Davison, *Nine*, 305–6.
9. Davison, *Nine*, 172.

10. 'The Prevention of Literature', Davison, *Seventeen*, 378.
11. Crick, *Orwell*, 395.
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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO GEORGE ORWELL

EDITED BY
JOHN RODDEN

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521675079

First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-85842-7 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-67507-9 paperback