

structure of types, each of them deliberately simplified lest a sense of difference and heterogeneity reduce the force of the typical. The claim a fabulist makes is that his narrative is essentially true; that the narrative truly represents the form and destiny of the world. Let us say, then, that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a political fable, projected into a near future in a mood variously to be described as one of threat, warning, despair, or rage, and incorporating historical references mainly to document a cancelled past.

If a fable is predicated upon a typology, it is likely to be written as if from a certain distance. We recognize a type of person by abstracting certain features from many people, different in other respects, who share them. But we can't retain that sense of similarity while we immerse ourselves in detail and differentiation. A fable, in this respect, asks to be compared to a caricature, not to a photograph. It follows that in a political fable there is bound to be some tension between a political sense, which deals in the multiplicity of social and personal life, and a sense of fable, which is committed to simplicity of form and feature. If the political sense were to prevail, the narrative would be drawn away from fable into the novel, at some cost to its simplicity. If the sense of fable were to prevail, the fabulist would station himself at such a distance from any imaginary conditions in the case that his narrative would appear unmediated, free or bereft of conditions. The risk in that procedure would be considerable: a reader might feel that the fabulist has lost interest in the variety of human life and fallen back upon an unconditioned sense of its types, that he has become less interested in lives than in a particular idea of life. The risk is greater still if the fabulist projects his narrative into the future: the reader can't question it by appealing to the conditions of life he already knows. He is asked to believe that the future, too, like the past in *The Go-Between*, is another country, and that in all probability they do things differently there. In a powerful fable the reader's feeling is likely to be mostly fear: he is afraid that the fabulist's vision of any life that is likely to arise may be accurate and will be verified in the event. The fabulist's feeling may be more various. Such a fable as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might arise from disgust, despair, or world-weariness induced by evidence that nothing, despite one's best efforts, has changed — and that it is too late to hope for the change one wants.

It is fairly generally agreed that Orwell's sense of the political fable as a genre was influenced, in various ways, by at least five examples of it:

from England,
Their England
by Denis Donoghue
(1988)

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR: POLITICS AND FABLE

When we are speaking casually, we call *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a novel, but in a more exacting context we call it a political fable; political because it appears to deal with human life in society. This account of it is not refuted by the fact that we recall the book as preoccupied with an individual, Winston Smith, who suffers from a varicose ulcer, and that it takes account of other individuals, including Julia, Mr. Charrington, Mrs. Parsons, Syme, and O'Brien. These figures claim our attention, but they exist mainly in their relation to the political system that determines them. It would indeed be possible to think of them as figures in a novel, though in that case they would have to be imagined in a far more diverse set of relations. They would no longer inhabit or sustain a fable, because a fable is a narrative relieved of much contingent detail so that it may stand forth in an unusual degree of clarity and simplicity. What a fable says is that the world is essentially like this image of it, even though it has many other qualities which the image ignores. The fabulist's sense of life may be as responsive as anyone else's to contingency, the clash of chances and choices, but for the sake of his fable he sacrifices this sense to another one, his presentation of life chiefly as a *type* of life. A fable is a typology, a

these, in chronological order, are *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (written in 1920 and published in English translation in 1924), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1930), and Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940). It is also agreed, but less generally, that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was more immediately influenced by James Burnham's books, especially by *The Managerial Revolution*, which was published in England in May 1942. Burnham's books are discursive, not fictional; they are concerned to say how the world will be, not to show it in that character. But in any case the books I have listed are so different from one another that in bringing them together as political fables we have to take care not to sink their differences.

At the same time, the books have certain preoccupations in common. Each imagines a form of life ordained so completely in accordance with a particular set or model that the perfection of its character is monstrous. Any principle, enforced with impeccable logic, is monstrous, as Orwell recognized in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by showing the good principle of communication carried to the mad pedantry of its conclusion, the vetoing of privacy. In each of these books, human beings who have come to value their uniqueness, their differences one from another, are forced to relinquish that conviction and to lapse into an undifferentiated state of being. In each book, history is shown as having ended by coinciding once for all with an imperative declaration of its meaning: existence has removed itself from historical process and culminated in an irresistible essence, withdrawing from every attribute but its official meaning.

Perfection, in the sense in which it is featured in these books, means the state of being complete, fully in accordance with the terms prescribed for it; as a proposition in logic might be faultless, or a theorem in mathematics. The terms of the prescription might be those of biology and genetic engineering, as in *Brave New World*; or of mathematics and mechanical engineering, as in *We*; or of the technology of omnivorous communication, as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Perfection, in any form, would be especially repugnant to Orwell, an English socialist who wanted for political life not a fixed principle but a decently mixed economy.

The plot of such a book would then suggest itself along a fairly obvious line. Suppose the perfection of a political system were endangered by some residual sentiments in one of its citizens; or, worse still, in two, who might be drawn together to make a little rival world. The perfection of the system would either be spoiled, or it would have to be enforced

upon the deviant citizens. In the major political fables the plot shows the deviants perfectly assimilated to the system at the end. But there are many cosier fables, including a TV series some years ago called *The Prisoner*, in which a determined and ingenious citizen maintains his selfhood and ties the system in knots.

Of the books I have mentioned, those which seem to have meant most to Orwell, whether he accepted their images or not, are *We* and *The Managerial Revolution*. So far as I know, Isaac Deutscher was the first to establish the bearing of *We* upon *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and to show that Orwell's book to some extent draws upon Zamyatin's for its plot. In *We* the narrator, known only as D-503, works as an engineer in a society called The One State, a marvel in the engineering of glass. All goes perfectly until D-503 is roused to imperfection by a woman known as E-330. In the end, the system wins: D-503 is carried off to Auditorium II2, where he undergoes an operation and is reconciled to the perfection of rationality.¹ Orwell read the book in a French translation in February 1944: he started working on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1945; he published a review of *We* in *Tribune* on January 4, 1946.² He finished *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1948. In the review he made the point that *Brave New World* was clearly based upon *We*. His own debt to *We* is mainly a matter of several affinities: Orwell's "Thought Police" are close to Zamyatin's "Guardians," his "Big Brother" is like Zamyatin's "Benefactor," and the particular form of imperfection is a love affair. But the crucial consideration is that Zamyatin's book showed Orwell how he might move beyond the allegory of *Animal Farm*. In the review Orwell said that "what Zamyatin seems to be aiming at is not any particular country but the implied aims of industrial civilisation." To avoid repeating *Animal Farm*, Orwell had to find a larger or, better still, universal system of reference. Zamyatin showed him how it might be done, and how features of "the novel" could be drawn into "the fable." Many details in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* clearly refer to Russia. Big Brother has the ruggedly handsome face of Stalin, given not only historical but mythological status. Emmanuel Goldstein is clearly Trotsky. But the drabness of Oceania, the rationing of chocolate, the pervasive dreariness of the place testify to Orwell's dispirited sense of English life before, during, and immediately after the war. Much of this sentiment is drawn from the experience attributed to George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air*, the colourlessness of English working-class life despite whatever good could be said of it, and the guilt

English intellectuals should bear for letting the workers sink into such drugged apathy. This part of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also issues from the failure of Artlee's government to give English society any real vitality. More particularly, the Ministry of Truth, where Winston Smith works, comes from Orwell's experience of the British Ministry of Information during the war, and the lies purveyed in the evening news by the BBC's assurance, following bombing raids on German cities, that "all our aircraft returned home safely." The shifting alliances between the three powers, Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia, are based in the first instance on those between Russia and Germany, and, I think, on the postwar arrangements between the great powers as recorded in a famous photograph of Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at Yalta.

Zamyatin's book showed Orwell that he could go beyond *Animal Farm* by moving freely between local reference and wider, more diffuse implication: the ideal form would be a series of short, brittle chapters illustrating various aspects of the system while discounting any possibility of a development within it. Each chapter would be an illustration, controlled by the idea governing the whole book. The form, like the system, would be entirely closed. Oceania lives only by repeating itself. The same applies, indeed, to any corporation—hence the fear provoked by a collectivity. Much of the power of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* arises from the reader's sense of a system which perpetuates itself without human intervention.

In practice, most political theorists have distinguished between three entities: the individual person, the society in which he lives, and the state. It is also normal to begin with the individual person and then to consider society as the embodiment of his nature as a social being, the relations he makes, his participation in personal and social experience. The state would then be a more distant entity, engaged in such matters as legislation, taxation, foreign relations, alliances, war, and peace. But suppose this division of purposes were to be perverted: suppose the state were to become an oligarchy so omnivorous that it swallowed up society and made the individual person a mere function of itself. That supposition is Orwell's vision, but it came to him nearly ready-made, complete in every respect except a fictional form, from Burnham's books, and from three in particular, *The Managerial Revolution*, *The Machiavellians*, and *The Struggle for the World*.

Burnham changed his mind on points of detail, large and small, between one book and the next, mainly because—as Orwell pointed

out—he thought that what was happening at each moment was decisive and that it would persist. But his general sense of the form political and administrative power would take didn't move far from the version of it he gave in *The Managerial Revolution*. In that book he predicted that the weakness of capitalism would continue to show itself; mainly because capitalism couldn't cope with mass unemployment, couldn't deal with public debts, or resuscitate a dying agriculture, couldn't handle its own resources, or do anything with an impotent bourgeois ideology. However, the downfall of capitalism would not mean the victory of the proletariat or any Marxist paradise. Capitalism would not be replaced by any form of socialism: autocracy was even more extreme in Stalin's Russia than in Hitler's Germany. This would not mean that states nominally socialist would revert to capitalism: instead, they would move toward a managerial form. Burnham's idea of managers was simple: they are the people who direct the process of production. A managerial state is based upon state ownership of the major instruments of production; more and more government control of the economy. Such a state would be the "property" not of rich men or capitalists but of managers: the managers would be the ruling class.

Burnham argued that the countries which had already gone furthest toward the managerial revolution were in fact the totalitarian dictatorships. What distinguished totalitarian dictatorship was "the number of facets of life subject to the impact of the dictatorial rule":

It is not merely political actions, in the narrower sense, that are involved; nearly every side of life, business and art and science and education and religion and recreation and morality are not merely influenced by but directly subjected to the totalitarian regime.³

But the managerial state, Burnham supposed, would be an oligarchy in possession of an exploiting economy. Managers would control the instruments of production in their own corporate favour: sovereignty would be located in various administrative bureaux which would displace parliament and issue decrees. An economy of state ownership would provide the basis for domination and exploitation "by a ruling class of an extremity and absoluteness never before known." The masses would be curbed or constantly diverted so that they would, as we say, go along with the managerial arrangements.

Zamyatin envisaged one world-state, but Burnham allowed for three. Three super-states would divide the world between them and would enter into shifting alliances with one another. In 1941 Burnham thought the three would be the United States, Europe (meaning Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, northern France, and England), and "the Japanese islands together with parts of eastern China." The superpowers would wage war over marginal territory. "Ostensibly," Burnham said, "these wars will be directed from each base for conquest of the other bases. But it does not seem possible for any one of these to conquer the others; and even two of them in coalition could not win a decisive and lasting victory over the third." Or, as Orwell wrote in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "None of the three super-states could be definitively conquered even by the other two in combination."

Orwell published two important essays on Burnham in May 1946 and March 1947.⁴ In the first, he gave a severe account of *The Managerial Revolution* and *The Machiavellians*, partly because several of Burnham's predictions had already been disproved. But Orwell was also irritated by Burnham's habit of thinking that because something was the case, it must continue to be the case. Orwell argued that "the real question is not whether the people who wipe their boots on us during the next fifty years are to be called managers, bureaucrats, or politicians: the question is whether capitalism, now obviously doomed, is to give way to oligarchy or to true democracy." He also maintained that Burnham, while attacking totalitarianism in all its forms and especially in its Russian form, was infatuated by its images: he was fascinated by the power he attacked and despised the democracy he should have defended. Indeed, Orwell accused Burnham of voicing the secret desire of the English intelligentsia, the desire "to destroy the old, equalitarian version of Socialism and usher in a hierarchical society where the intellectual can at last get his hands on the whip." At the end of the essay, Orwell offered his own prediction:

If I had to make a prophecy, I should say that a continuation of the Russian policies of the last fifteen years . . . can only lead to a war conducted with atomic bombs, which will make Hitler's invasion look like a tea-party. But at any rate, the Russian regime will either democratise itself, or it will perish. The huge, invincible, everlasting slave empire of which Burnham appears to dream will not be estab-

lished, or, if established, will not endure, because slavery is no longer a stable basis for human society.

Nonetheless, in May 1946, Orwell found Burnham's general thesis of a managerial revolution plausible. A few months later he reviewed *The Struggle for the World*: by March 1947 America, but not Russia, had the atomic bomb. Burnham now took the view that the three superpowers envisaged in *The Managerial Revolution* were not, after all, morally much of a muchness. There were now, in any event, only two such powers, and one of them, the United States, was morally vastly superior to the other. Logic would suggest a preventive war against Russia, since Russia was clearly preparing to destroy the Western democracies. At the very least, the United States should immediately draw Britain and as much of Europe as possible into an anti-Communist crusade.

Orwell's response to Burnham's arguments was fairly mild. He thought an anti-Communist crusade would probably come about, but he hoped that it might be possible to establish democratic socialism over an area of the globe as large as, say, western Europe and Africa. "If one could somewhere present the spectacle of economic security without concentration camps, the pretext for the Russian dictatorship would disappear and Communism would lose much of its appeal." If that were out of the question, then only two possibilities would remain. Russia might become more liberal and less dangerous over a period of a generation or so, if war could be avoided in the meantime. The other possibility, Orwell said, "is that the great powers will be simply too frightened of the effects of atomic weapons ever to make use of them." In either case, Orwell cheered himself up by thinking that history would not be as melodramatic as Burnham's predictions.

But it is clear that while Orwell rejected many of Burnham's arguments, he found the plot and indeed some of the imagery of *The Managerial Revolution* highly persuasive. The book was a good description, he said in 1947, of "what is actually happening in various parts of the world, i.e. the growth of societies neither capitalist nor Socialist, and organised more or less on the lines of a caste system." He couldn't refute Burnham's arguments; all he could do was find them distastefully extreme and hope for a political future somewhat quieter and more tolerant than anything Burnham envisaged. He wanted a world in which states would

indeed exist, but in which decent societies would be allowed to thrive. The source of his most acute anxiety in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the fate of self, individuality, and mind in a system that reduces them to mere repetitions of the same. What he most fears in the technology of communication is the loss of privacy, the fact that O'Brien knows what Winston Smith is thinking even before Smith has articulated it for himself. "They can't get inside you," Julia said. "But they could get inside you," Winston learns. Orwell rebuked Burnham for not asking himself what power is for: power to do what? But in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* power is for the sake of power. Winston and Julia are forced to betray each other because the Party wants to exercise its power.

Nineteen Eighty-Four doesn't even try to refute Burnham on his own terms: it doesn't offer the world a more accommodating destiny. But it shifts the terms of discourse to discourse itself: the fate of the world is to be represented by analogy with the fate of language, and specifically of the English language. The main reason for this shift is that while it is reasonable to feel that the English language is being corrupted, it is also reasonable to feel—what few of us can claim in politics—that we can still take action to save it.

I have mentioned Orwell's experience of the BBC and the Ministry of Information during the war. I think he felt misgiving, at least, about the daily work of propaganda, even in a cause he believed to be just. In an essay, "Writers and Leviathan," which he wrote in March 1948, he distinguished between the citizen and the writer: when they are one and the same person, the citizen should do nearly any work for his political party, but he should not write for it or engage in propaganda in its behalf. A man's work for a cause should be the rough-and-ready thing it usually is, but his writings should always be "the product of the saner self that stands aside, records the things that are done and admits their necessity, but refuses to be deceived as to their true nature." I think Orwell also felt that this saner self was particularly available to an Englishman because of the splendour of the English language. He felt that English, if we treat it decently, is an instrument of unique capacity. Indeed, he shared this sentiment with men as different in other respects as Herbert Read, Robert Graves, and—his colleague in wartime propaganda—William Empson. Empson has an early essay in which he maintains that a decent English style "gives great resilience to the thinker, never blurs a point by too wide a focus, is itself a confession of how much always must be left undealt

with, and is beautifully free from verbiage. To an enemy it looks like sheer cheating." Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words*, Herbert Read's *English Prose Style*, and Graves's book, written with Alan Hodge, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* issue from much the same experience as Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language."

"Politics and the English Language" is closer to the interests of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* than to anything else Orwell wrote: it is the essay to read when the theme is his ideology of "the plain style" and the political attitudes it supports. Orwell's sense of language could not have been simpler. He was indifferent to philosophical issues, and most of all to issues in the philosophy of language. He would certainly have despised our current preoccupation with questions of indeterminacy, logocentrism, and the like. He regarded a language—the English language, for instance—as an instrument in the furtherance of thought. If the instrument is in good order, the mind can work well with it: if it is blunt, sloppy, or otherwise decayed, the mind is disabled. The English language, he said, "becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." If thought corrupts language, "language can also corrupt thought." A writer writes well when he picks out words for the sake of their meaning and invents images to make his meaning clearer. Orwell also assumed that we can do our thinking without recourse to words, and that we go to words only to convey our meaning; he didn't advert to the notion that our thinking is already inscribed in the language native to us, and may be partly determined by its syntax.

The passage in "Politics and the English Language" which makes Orwell's position entirely clear is this one:

What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them. When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualising, you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning. Probably it is better to

put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations. Afterwards one can choose — not simply accept — the phrases that will best cover the meaning, and then switch round and decide what impression one's words are likely to make on another person.

Virtually every sentence in that passage is questionable: but that doesn't mean that it's demonstrably wrong. Most philosophers of language would maintain that the relation between mind and language is far more complex than Orwell implies. To what extent wordless thinking is possible is also a contentious matter. It is not clear what would be entailed in "letting the meaning choose the words": the phrase is culpably vague, since the meaning doesn't choose anything, it is the mind that chooses. Orwell's linguistics doesn't amount to more than the assertion that a pudding is a pudding, and that good plain cooking is the best.

But the aspect of the passage I want to look at more closely is its assumption that good plain writing is an ethical choice. Orwell believed that a writer who tries to write well takes the language — the English language, if that is the case — as the custodian of his best and sanest self. Part of the writer's concern is to rid himself of dying metaphors, pretentious diction, meaningless expressions. Another part is his effort to think of vivid images to make his meaning clearer. Now these concerns correspond, I think, to a writer's scruple: a good sentence issues from one's best self and from a language responsive to ethical choices. The effort of writing well is the writer's version of conscientiousness: a decent English prose is decent in an ethical sense, too, and not because it observes any official form of decorum.

Orwell doesn't say precisely how a language exerts this ethical authority. It doesn't, indeed, unless we let it. But *Nineteen Eighty-Four* makes it clear that the ethical authority of a language comes not only from the fact that we can say of some sentences that they are decent and of other sentences that they are corrupt: it comes more specifically, I think, from the history of the words in a language and from our respect for that history. The sense of the past is most acute in Orwell when it appears as respect for the associations of words; not casual or impressionistic associations but those which tell of all they have come through, their historical weight and density. Newspeak is the linguistic form of brain-washing. It is worth mentioning, too, that Empson's *The Structure of*

Complex Words is based on the assumption that most of our feeling and sentiment is located in certain rich adhering words. Newspeak nullifies this accretion of feeling by disengaging words from their history; it is mostly a matter of abbreviating them. As Orwell says in the appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "It was perceived that in thus abbreviating a name one narrowed and subtly altered its meaning, by cutting out most of the associations that would otherwise cling to it."⁶ The words "Communist International," for instance, "call up a composite picture of universal human brotherhood, red flags, barricades, Karl Marx, and the Paris Commune." But the word "Comintern" "suggests merely a tightly knit organization and a well-defined body of doctrine." "Comintern" "is a word that can be uttered almost without taking thought, whereas Communist International is a phrase over which one is obliged to linger at least momentarily." What Orwell means by that lingering is one's response not only to the immediate meaning of a word but to the historical and moral experience it enacts. Newspeak, incidentally, may also have issued from Orwell's misgiving about such artifices as Esperanto and the Basic English of C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards — products of good intention but, like "universal education," a far poorer thing in event and consequence than in anticipation.

It follows that two major concerns in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are so close as to be nearly one: the murability of history and the elimination, in Newspeak, of heretical words and the sentiments they embody. Orwell's understanding of history is nearly as unquestioning as his sense of language. He did not confront, as in our own time, the widespread disaffection from history, and scepticism about historical knowledge. Orwell took it for granted that historical events were recoverable and that a decent, scrupulous mind, by taking thought, could make sense of them and offer that sense as their meaning. The mutability of history, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is an outrage to Orwell because it mocks the efforts men have made to produce from historical events a privileged meaning; privileged in the sense of being self-evidently cogent and persuasive. In Oceania, the past, too, can be brainwashed.

I have been maintaining that Orwell's distinctive intervention in the tradition of the political fable was his representation of systematic cruelty and intimidation by analogy with the deliberate degradation of language. The fact that politics and language are both systems made the analogy available. But the most questionable aspect of the analogy is Orwell's

implication, in both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "Politics and the English Language," that a decent style, specifically his own plain style, is directly sanctioned by nature. He doesn't acknowledge that writing in a plain style is just as much a rhetorical act as writing in, say, the style of Walter Pater or Sir Thomas Browne. No style arrives with the authority of nature. Orwell's plain style is not independent of rhetoric: indeed, only by a strikingly elaborate rhetoric was it possible to imply a "natural" kinship between his plain style, the truth of common sense, a politics of decency, and a notion of historical truth as self-evident. Orwell contrived to enforce the assumption that his intimacy with these values was a matter of sound instincts and that rival values were merely forms of decadence issuing from a perverse intelligentsia. Such decadence was available to intellectuals because they weren't required to carry their notions into social and political practice.

The main problem in reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1984 is that the book has so often been compromised: it has rarely been read in a disinterested spirit or, as we say, as a work of literature. Like *Animal Farm*, it has been received by readers on the political right as irrefutable evidence that they have been accurate from the start in their judgement of Communism. The evidence has been particularly welcome, coming from a man who had good reason to know the character of Communism: he had seen such men, after all, in Spain. So *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has had far greater political reverberation than, say, Constantine Fitzgibbon's *When the Kissing Had to Stop*, because Fitzgibbon was never anything but a man of the right. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have been read as tracts for the times, especially by readers who practise a rhetoric of the Cold War, McCarthyism, or the version of those sentiments which is in some vogue again.

Readers whose political attitudes coincide with liberal democracy—or whose attitudes have changed to that position—have welcomed the book as a truthful indictment of totalitarianism. I am thinking of Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, and—in his general sense of Orwell's achievement—Lionel Trilling. Trilling's essay on *Homage to Catalonia* has been extremely influential in maintaining the impression that Orwell, by being a virtuous man, was what an evil time most urgently needed. Trilling's sense of Orwell is totally free from the triumphalism of the right—he doesn't produce Orwell's evidence with a flourish as if to say, "I told you so." But his essay has had one regrettable effect: it has established too firmly the

kinship between Orwell's being a virtuous man and his endorsement of a certain set of attitudes. As a result, readers on the left have reacted, more strongly than they might otherwise have done, against the identification of virtue with the opinions Orwell held.

I am thinking of two such reactions. Isaac Deutscher's essay—which I have already mentioned—accused Orwell of indulging himself in the mysticism of cruelty. Having lost confidence in the power of intelligence, Orwell "increasingly viewed reality through the dark glasses of a quasi-mystical pessimism." Deutscher's charge against Orwell is the same as Orwell's against Burnham; that in the end, finding that plain open-air thinking hadn't transformed the world, he abandoned it in favor of fanaticism and hysteria. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, according to Deutscher, has frightened millions of people, "but it has not helped them to see more clearly the issues with which the world is grappling . . . it has only increased and intensified the waves of panic and hate that run through the world and obfuscate innocent minds."⁷

The second critic on the left I want to invoke is Raymond Williams. A socialist with occasional connections of discourse with Communists, Williams has often written about Orwell, sometimes with reluctant sympathy and respect, as in his "Modern Masters" book on him. But he now finds Orwell's books intolerable. In *Politics and Letters* (1979) he discussed Orwell with the editors of the *New Left Review*, who were hostile to Orwell in every particular. They asserted that: (1) Orwell didn't produce any new theoretical knowledge about society or history, and "1984 will be a curio in 1984"; (2) his novels "range from the mediocre to the weak"; (3) his social reporting, as in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, is vitiated by suppression and manipulation of the evidence; (4) in the creation of a character called "Orwell," he indulged himself in masquerade "in the sense that under the guise of frankness and directness the writing posture is more than usually dominative." Williams didn't disagree with these views. In fact, he attacked the Orwell of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in far more extreme terms. "The recruitment of very private feelings against socialism becomes intolerable," he said, "by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*":

It is profoundly offensive to state as a general truth, as Orwell does, that people will always betray each other. If human beings are like that, what could be the meaning of a democratic socialism? . . . *Animal Farm*, for all its weaknesses, still makes a point about how power can

be lost and how people can be misled: it is defeatist, but it makes certain pointed observations on the procedures of deception. As for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, its projections of ugliness and hatred, often quite arbitrarily and inconsequentially, onto the difficulties of revolution or political change seem to introduce a period of really decadent bourgeois writing in which the whole status of human beings is reduced.⁸

Williams accuses Orwell of capturing the role of the "frank, disinterested observer who is simply telling the truth," and then of producing as the truth a report entirely defeatist. I don't agree with Williams in this charge, but I understand his irritation—not to represent it as more than that—when he is asked, by Trilling, Howe, Kazin, and many other liberal writers, to revere Orwell as a virtuous and truth-telling man. It's like being asked to take Gandhi as a saint. In private life, Orwell seems to have been a decent man, but there is evidence of shoddy sentiments, and intermittently of cruel behaviour to rather vulnerable people. The answer to this is that he deeply regretted his offences and, when they were public acts, confessed them, as in *Burmese Days*. But I don't think he was, in fact, a particularly nice man or that a halo sits well on his head. I'm sure he tried to tell the truth as he saw it and worried a great deal when he didn't tell it. But so do most people, even when in retrospect it emerges that they deceived themselves or fell into bewilderments they could have avoided.

But Williams's account of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not valid. The book doesn't say that people will always betray each other: you could derive that grim moral from it only if you claimed that you, for instance, would hold out for ever against the most appalling torture; or that you, unlike hundreds of tortured people, could never be brainwashed. Again, Williams is inaccurate when he refers to Orwell's "extreme distrust for humanity of every kind, especially concentrated in figures of the working class." The only incident I can think of, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as at all supporting that charge is the appalling fight of the two proletarian women over the saucepan—in many ways the most dreadful episode in the book. But in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a whole the proles get a better showing than anyone else; it is not their fault that they are kept in cultural sedation, like the English working class, kept inert on drink, gambling, and the popular newspapers. But no such argument would satisfy Williams, short of representing the working class as ready and determined to fulfil

the redemptive destiny Marx prescribed for them. Orwell's relation to the working class was indeed ambivalent: his sympathy was too much an act of goodwill to be really convincing. But he wasn't, after all, a member of the working class, so it is hardly surprising or scandalous that, while making every effort to like workers, he found them extremely limited in their interests and values.

A valid reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would entail several recognitions. The book is not a documentary account of any regime; it is a fable, written in fear by a writer beset with his own illness and the illness of the world. I think Orwell was English in the sense we associate with Hardy and Elgar: the idyllic episode in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* evokes the English countryside in those terms. Experience of war and time of war—Barcelona and London—exasperated Orwell's sensibility to the point of making him, intermittently, conspire with what he feared and hated. He lent his imagination, I believe, to images and visions which did not endorse his discursive habit. Indeed, I think well of G. S. Fraser's view, outlined in a letter to *Critical Quarterly* in 1959, that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is horrible because Orwell started to write it to say "this may happen," but his imagination turned that moral impulse into one of morose delectation, as if to say "this *must* happen." I think *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should be read much as the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* is read, though Orwell's imagination is of a much inferior power to Swift's. Both books have many local references, political allusions which only the elect recognize, but beyond these allusions both are universalist in their ambition, exempting no one from their strictures. What *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes is a system. Orwell does not explain how the system came into being, unless we are to suppose one dreadful cause, the failure and treason of intellectuals. As it stands, the system is there; it is what it is; it corresponds to the exercise of power for the sake of power. René Girard has complained that the book does not show the connection between individual desire and the collective structure: "we sometimes get the impression from Orwell's books that the 'system' has been imposed from the outside on the innocent masses."⁹ But that impression is consistent with the managerial character of the system; it is an oligarchy, and it has separated its activities from the proles. But I would make more than Girard does of the doubleness he speaks of in the totalitarian structure; especially as it is given in the relation between Winston Smith and O'Brien—which is not adequately thought of as one between a victim and his

assailant. What is peculiarly insistent is the degree to which Winston feels himself drawn to speak to O'Brien and enters into extraordinary complexity with him: so far as the reader's access to it is in question, it is the most telling relation in the book. It is also the relation which underlines most compellingly the character and force of a system; its appalling capacity to operate independently of the people who compose it.

NOTES

1. Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Bernard Guibert Guernsey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972).
2. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 vols. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), IV, 75.
3. James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: Or What Is Happening in the World Now* (London: Putnam, 1942), p. 145.
4. Both essays are reprinted in Vol. IV of *The Collected Essays: In Front of Your Nose*, pp. 160-81 and 313-25.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-39.
6. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 264.
7. Isaac Deutscher, "Nineteen Eighty-Four: The Mysticism of Cruelty," in *Heretics and Renegades* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1956); reprinted in Raymond Williams (ed.), *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 132.
8. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London: NLB, 1979), pp. 384-92.
9. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), p. 226.

From *George Orwell and Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1985).

