

From

The Sociology of Literature

by D. Lauranson
& A. Svingenwood

10 George Orwell, Socialism and the Novel

The work of George Orwell (1903-50) - novels, literary, and social criticism - spans the period of Hitler, appeasement, the Second World War, and the beginnings of the cold war. Orwell wrote during the era of concentration camps, secret police, 'framed' political trials, and the total mobilization of whole societies for war. It was the time of the dictator, of the ebb-tide of revolution that had started with the growth in the Soviet Union of a bureaucratic apparatus working against the genuine international revolutionary perspectives of the Bolsheviks, substituting instead the nationalistic Stalinist concept of socialism in a single country. During the 1930s, socialism in Germany and in Spain was crushed by fascist parties while in Britain the economic slumps of the 1920s, coupled with the disastrous failure of the 1926 general strike, demoralized the working class socially and politically. Orwell developed in this period of increasing totalitarianism and successive defeats for the working classes of Europe. His concept of socialism, which in a paradoxical way was to determine the greatness of *Animal Farm* (1944) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1950), was fashioned within this entirely pessimistic context.

I

Writing in 1940 on the American novelist Henry Miller, Orwell was convinced of the overpowering and irresistible development of totalitarianism; individual rights and freedoms would gradually be eroded and the individual be no more than a cipher of the total state:

Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships - an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly

sin and later on a meaningless abstraction. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence.*

Totalitarianism would signal the final death of the novel, since of all literary genres, Orwell argued, the novel could only have developed and continue to persist in an atmosphere of 'mental honesty and a minimum of censorship'. As the product of the 'free mind' and the 'autonomous individual', the novel could not exist under a totalitarian form of government, except as the conformist mouthpiece of a political orthodoxy, for 'good novels are not written by orthodoxy-sniffers, nor by people who are conscience-stricken about their own unorthodoxy', but by writers 'who are *not frightened*'.†

Thus for Orwell, looking back on the writers of the 1930s, at a literature which was mediocre precisely because it had tied itself increasingly and uncritically to the ideology of the Communist Party, Orwell concluded that in order to sustain a genuine novel form the novelist must remain outside the control and the dictates of a political party. This is not to say that he should have no political commitments; on the contrary, without some form of social or political conviction great literature cannot be written at all. In his essay on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Orwell explicitly argued against the crude Marxist view, which defined 'good' literature in terms of its politically 'progressive' nature, by pointing out that history was characterized by a continuous conflict between 'reactionary' and 'progressive', and that 'the best books of any one age have always been written from several different viewpoints, some of them more palpably more false than others'. It is not the viewpoint which matters, whether fascist, communist, or conservative, but rather the *conviction* of the writer, always providing that he is medically 'sane' and not 'crankish' (for example, a spiritualist).‡ It is clearly a questionable point on the literary viability of fascism, which in essence is wholly irrational and inhuman and hardly the basis of a genuine novel. But Orwell's point remains: no genuine (serious) writer can hope to be associated too deeply with a political party and still remain an artist.

* G. Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in *Collected Essays*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1961, p. 157.

† *ibid.*, pp. 148-9.

‡ *ibid.*, p. 398.

This attack on political attachment and the writer must be seen within its historical context. Before the First World War there had been little debate on the political commitment of the writer, and it was generally assumed that the novelist wrote of life as he experienced it, honestly, his political values constituting his own individual vision and not those of a political party. After the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, however, this question was brought sharply into focus. The existence of the first workers' state could hardly be ignored, and the fact of the apparently first successful workers' revolution entered the consciousness of writers. In general they ignored it, and wrote of pessimism and of alienation. But with economic depression the fate of capitalism seemed in the balance, and during the 1930s increasing unemployment and the menace of fascism drove many writers towards a more optimistic and socially progressive point of view - in England, Spender, Auden, Isherwood, Cornford, in France, Malraux and Aragon, in Italy, Silone, either joined or became the literary mouthpieces of the Communist Party. The writers' function became one of a non-critical acceptance of Russian communism coupled with a hatred of industrial capitalism. Art was harnessed to ideology, and socialist realism became the literary norm.*

The commitment proved unstable. For the most part writers had not grasped the real nature of the Soviet State or its cynical disregard for all socialist principles. The Moscow Trials in the late 1930s of old Bolsheviks tried as 'fascist agents', together with the Soviet-German pact (1939), broke the tenuous links which had held many writers to the Communist Party, and in their rejection of communism they tended to dismiss all varieties of socialism. Orwell stands out as an intellectual who, as a socialist, rejected Russian communism in the 1930s and after the betrayals continued to believe in a socialist perspective. He did not adopt a quietist stance, for he believed that the novelist was *involved* in the society he artistically renders; he is not a spectator, but must strive to communicate his own passion, his

* For a discussion on communism and the writer, see especially J. Ruble, *Literature and Revolution*, London, Pall Mall, 1969. Possibly the only genuine revolutionary novel to come out of Britain during the 1930s was Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Scots Quair*, set in Scotland, and depicting political activity, class conflict, exploitation both in farming and in industry portrayed through the lives of ordinary working-class people.

convictions, through his art. The paradox with Orwell is that while he attacked those writers who had involved themselves politically with the Communist Party, it was only when he himself embraced a socialist vision that he was able to create his two masterpieces.

In his early novels, especially *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1934) and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936), Orwell had portrayed life from the standpoint of the middle class. In a sense these novels anticipate the bleakness of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but they fail to function as integrated wholes, as aesthetic unities. Orwell himself was highly critical of them,* and with justification. In *A Clergyman's Daughter* the various episodes through which the sexless Dorothy passes - the hop-picking in Kent, the vigil with the homeless in Trafalgar Square, the private school, with its fee-conscious headmistress and efficiency ritual which defines the secret of success as efficiency and the test of efficiency as success - are never successfully welded together as a unity. The ostensible theme of the novel, Dorothy's loss of religious faith, is not integrated into the main body of the novel, but merely suggested as a necessary consequence of her picaresque wanderings. Like *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*, *A Clergyman's Daughter* functions essentially as social comment, as a document of the harsh realities of lower middle-class life in England during the 1930s and of the generally depressing nature of life.† Their message is that money defines one's social status; character virtually revolves around this theme in a forced way, with genuine human relations a virtually hopeless possibility. The subjective experiences of the characters are subordinated to Orwell's social intent: Dorothy accepted her loss of faith but

* In a letter to George Woodcock, Orwell wrote that he was 'ashamed' of both *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*, the former 'an exercise... I oughtn't to have published...' and the latter because 'I was desperate for money' (G. Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus, London, Secker & Warburg, 1968, vol. 4, pp. 205-6).

† *A Clergyman's Daughter* contains Orwell's first nightmare vision and it has not changed radically by 1984... Both worlds are "desolate", "dark", "windless", "bleak", "colourless", "grey". The "slummy wilderness" of capitalist civilization is succeeded by the slummiest wilderness of totalitarianism... the later world is only a political transposition of the earlier' (P. Rieff, *George Orwell and the Post-Liberal Imagination*, in I. Howe (ed.), *Orwell's 1984*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1963, p. 229).

continues to work for the Church since she cannot imagine another alternative, while the struggling poet, Comstock, the hero of *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*, abandons art for a safe comfortable life in advertising. In these novels Orwell has no political perspective: there is clearly something seriously wrong with industrial capitalism and with middle-class life and its values, but as yet there is no awareness of any alternative. His characters simply submit. In *Coming Up for Air* (1939) this sense of futility fuses with a pessimistic political element. In this transitional novel the pessimism is becoming total; the cheerful cynicism of his middle-aged insurance agent contrasts sharply with the overpowering sense of hopelessness, with political solutions: the war is coming, capitalism is finished, socialism is a middle-class sham - these are George Bowling's thoughts as he returns to the village where he was born, hoping to fish and be free of his wife and two children for a few days. *Coming Up for Air* has a more integrated structure precisely because Orwell is not subordinating his characters to his desire for reportage. The sterility of lower middle-class life is communicated naturally through Bowling's cynicism and awareness that there is neither an alternative for him nor any point in struggling against the system. Through Bowling, Orwell is anticipating an era of totalitarianism. In these novels, then, a political vision of the world is largely absent. In this Orwell is the reverse of Malraux, for although the early novels indicate a talented writer in themselves they would not suggest the greatness of *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In 1936 Orwell became a convinced socialist, a belief which survived his experience in the Spanish Civil War of being hounded from Spain as a 'Trotskyite-Fascist' * by the communists for whose cause he had fought. Orwell's refusal to reject his socialist vision, his awareness of the counter-revolutionary tendencies of Russian communism, combined with his overall social pessimism, constitute the basic elements of his creative genius.

* Orwell clearly understood the distinction between Stalinism and Trotskyism, in that the latter was a political tendency which based itself on revolutionary Marxism, on world revolution, while Stalinism represented a conservative denial of world revolution, substituting instead the theory of 'socialism in one country'. In Stalin's struggle for power, Trotsky and his theory of permanent revolution became the chief obstacle, and during the 1930s Trotskyism was hounded unmercifully by the Communist Party.

tellectual worshipped power, 'the new religion of Europe', and accepted totalitarianism.

But the middle class of Orwell's early novels is, in any case, 'done for' since 'capitalism is finished'.* The middle classes function as 'shock absorbers' between the ruling classes and the working class. They are doomed, Orwell says, but they resist their seemingly anachronistic situation with an exaggerated sense of status:

Practically the whole family income goes in keeping up appearances. It is obvious that people of this kind are in an anomalous position, and one might be tempted to write them off as mere exceptions. . . . Actually, however, they are or were fairly numerous. Most clergyman and schoolmasters, for instance, nearly all Anglo-Indian officials, a sprinkling of soldiers and sailors and a fair number of professional men and artists fall into this category.†

In the early novels Orwell portrayed this hopeless struggle to maintain status in a world increasingly indifferent to these groups. There is the continual worry over money. In *A Clergyman's Daughter* Dorothy feels sick at the sight of the unpaid butcher's bill, saying to her indifferent father, 'It's so dreadful to be always in debt! Even if it isn't actually wrong, it's so hateful. It makes me so ashamed.'‡ Gordon Comstock, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, finds his whole existence bound up by the 'money God'. In this novel Orwell links artistic creativity with the leisure money can buy:

Money and culture! In a country like England you can no more be cultured without money than you can join the Cavalry Club. . . . And the money that such refinement means! For after all, what is there behind it, except money? Money for the right kind of education, money for influential friends, money for leisure and peace of mind, money for trips to Italy. Money writes books, money sells them. Give me not righteousness, O Lord, give me money, only money.§

Comstock is no socialist. He desires only the time and the money to write poetry; his work experiences in advertising, in the second-hand book trade, and finally, when virtually destitute, among bug-infested lodging rooms, do not turn him against the system of industrial capitalism. Like Dorothy he accepts it,

* *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 154.

† *ibid.*, p. 156.

‡ G. Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, London, Penguin Books, 1964, p. 26.

§ G. Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, London, Penguin Books, 1962, p. 13.

and the novel ends with his suffering girl-friend made pregnant and Comstock applying for his safe middle-class advertising job again. Money dominates the structure of this novel absolutely: its only romantic moment, for example - the trip to the countryside - is ruined by Comstock's inability to pay for his girl-friend's hotel meal and for a contraceptive to consummate their love. Like Nathanael West, Orwell denies his characters their right to sexual pleasure. Comstock remarks that without money 'no decent relationship with a woman is possible', and when finally he and Rosemary make love in his dingy room it is done without 'much pleasure'.* Dorothy, too, leads a joyless life, terrified of men and the sexual act. Both these heroines are cold, sexless women, one a virgin who shudders at the 'monstrous things' which follow the kissing and the 'mauling', 'all that' as she calls the act of love; Rosemary is described as 'sexually immature', thirty years old, and frustrating poor Comstock in his simple quest for pleasure. Indeed, her ambition is that he should abandon poetry for advertising, settle down, and be *conventional*.

The atmosphere which Orwell conveys in these two early novels is of a middle-class environment, seedy, pathetic, and clearly doomed. Dorothy loses her faith and the novel ends with her desperately looking for a substitute, for a belief which will give a meaning to her life, but failing to find it. Instead she absorbs herself totally in the everyday routine of the vicarage:

The problem of faith and no faith had vanished utterly from her mind. It was beginning to get dark, but too busy to stop and light the lamp she worked on, pasting strip after strip of paper into place, with absorbed, with pious concentration, in the penetrating smell of the gluepot.†

Comstock conforms and buys the aspidistra, the symbol of respectability.‡ George Bowling, the middle-aged, overweight insurance agent of *Coming Up for Air*, has, when the novel starts, already accepted fate. In this novel, written after his experiences in Spain, Orwell communicates a less oppressive, pessimistic

* *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, p. 236.

† *A Clergyman's Daughter*, pp. 262-3.

‡ The aspidistra originates in Comstock's mind as a symbol of middle-class respectability from his reading of Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Dicks of Philanthropists*, in which a starving carpenter pawns all his possessions except his aspidistra.

atmosphere, largely through Bowling's idealized reminiscences of his life before the First World War, yet the same themes predominate: Hilda, his wife, is the sexless, 'lifeless, middle-aged frump', the daughter of two ex-colonials, concerned with status, and a 'ghastly glooming about money', indifferent to politics and culture; the middle-class milieu is conceived as wholly depressive, as *joyless*.

3

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Orwell tried unsuccessfully to enlist in the Army and found great difficulty in obtaining adequate employment. Judged medically unfit except for the Home Guard, he eventually spent four frustrating years broadcasting to India for the B.B.C. His world vision had crystallized into a complete rejection of anything other than democratic socialism, but his pessimism had grown so powerful that this perspective seemed hopeless. During the war years and those immediately following, Orwell wrote his two masterpieces within an intellectual vision which contained a number of contradictory elements. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a fictional structure dominated by these unresolved contradictions.

Firstly, Orwell retained a stubborn belief in socialism, and he saw in the war the catalyst of revolutionary change; the working class is the only class capable of effecting the transition from capitalism to socialism. Secondly, the main enemy was Russian communism whose methods of political indoctrination and control led irresistibly to totalitarianism. Shortly after the end of the war he wrote:

Exactly at the moment when wealth might be so generally diffused that no government need fear serious opposition, political liberty is declared to be impossible and half the world is ruled by secret police forces. Exactly at the moment when superstition crumbles and a rational attitude towards the universe becomes feasible, the right to think one's own thoughts is denied as never before.*

Totalitarianism was penetrating even England, with its old traditions of political liberty and freedom of expression. In 1943 *Animal Farm* was turned down by at least eight publishers on

* *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 4, p. 249.

Orwell's admiration for the spontaneous elements of working-class life extended to a belief in their superior sexuality, simple and basic with no neurotic overtones, as well as to their sheer physical qualities and inherent 'good sense'. The middle-class socialists, on the other hand, are savagely pilloried, as cranks for whom the working man has only contempt: 'One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words "Socialism" and "Communism" draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack and feminist in England.'* The working class, Orwell suggests, simply ignore such alien forces.

Orwell describes the working class in terms of an idealized community, putting up with life, that is, with unemployment, the dole queues, and poverty. The significant point about his characterization lies in the implications for socialism. The working class, Orwell repeats again and again, are not revolutionary, they have no deep commitment to the ideals of socialism, still less to communism: 'To the ordinary working man . . . Socialism does not mean much more than better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about.' The revolutionary implications of socialism are missed. In Orwell's *Diary* of his experiences in the North of England, he commented on the working-class audience at one political meeting in terms which leaves no doubt that he saw the proletariat not as the agency of social change but as one of the supports of continued bourgeois rule and capitalism: 'I suppose these people represented a fair cross-section of the more revolutionary elements in Wigan. If so, God help us. Exactly the same sheeplike crowd - gaping girls and shapeless middle-aged women dozing over their knitting . . . There is no *turbulence* left in England.' † Orwell could not grasp that the 1930s were a period of defeat for the English working class and that their apathy, indifference and seeming acceptance of the system were as much the result of prolonged economic depression as of political failures in the General Strike and the conservative rather than socialist legislation of the

* *Ibid.*, p. 206. Attending an Independent Labour Party meeting in London, Orwell typically observed, 'Are these mingy little beasts . . . the champions of the working class?' (*Ibid.*, p. 207).

† *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 1, p. 181.

second Labour Government (1929-31).* Orwell's *political* conception of the working class was thus forged at a time when the class was *demoralized*: it accepted a second-class life out of necessity, not choice. The cinema, radio, 'strong tea', football pools and fish and chips were not solely the social forces which averted revolution in England in the 1930s, as Orwell argued; a revolutionary class must have confidence, it must believe in itself, as a revolutionary force, as a viable oppositional unit. The workers' lack of interest in politics, a theme which runs through all of Orwell's writings, † was not necessarily an inherent tendency of the working class but rather the consequence of disbelieving in themselves as a potentially revolutionary class.

For the paradox here is that Orwell retained a belief in the socialist future and a *theoretical* view of the working class which conflicted with his observations. The English working class were not internationalist, he argued in his essay on the Spanish Civil War, they were far more interested in the day's football match than events in Madrid or Berlin, but yet 'this does not alter the fact that the working class will go on struggling against Fascism after the others have caved in'. Orwell's socialist vision led him against his own practical knowledge to ascribe a positive function to a working class which had accepted capitalism. This crucial contradiction is important for understanding many of the ambiguities of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For Orwell maintained that the working class historically are the only class which can defend democracy:

One feature of the Nazi conquest of France was the astonishing defections among the intelligentsia, including some of the left-wing intelligentsia. The intelligentsia are the people who squeal loudest against Fascism, and yet a respectable proportion of them collapse into defeatism when the pinch comes.

* The Labour government of 1929-31 which, as a minority government, depended on Liberal Party support in Parliament, had cut unemployment pay in 1931 in order to safeguard the pound internationally. For the mass of unemployed, the fact that the Labour Government had not solved the economic crisis, combined with its pro-capitalist policies, could only undermine working-class optimism.

† Curiously, Orwell, in all his writings on the working class, never discussed the trade unions but looked at the working class in isolation from the Labour movement. At both the annual Labour Party Conferences and the Trades Union Congress working-class political opinion was voiced during the 1930s. The fact that the official leadership of the Labour Party and the Trade Unions tended to ignore it is never discussed by Orwell.

Workers will always fight fascism; Orwell maintained, because fascism, of its nature pro-capitalist, cannot provide a better standard of living for the working class: 'The struggle of the working class is like the growth of a plant. The plant is blind and stupid, but it knows enough to keep pushing upwards towards the light, and it will do this in the face of endless discouragements.'* Orwell's experience in the Spanish Civil War (1936-8) as a volunteer fighting in the front lines † had convinced him that socialism was more than theoretically possible. In Spain in the workers' militias he experienced the practice of genuine equality: there was no sense of status, of hierarchy, and although there were many shortages, 'no privilege and no bootlicking'. The Spanish militias, wrote Orwell, were a microcosm of a classless society, a foretaste of what life under socialism would be like:

Many of the normal motives of civilized life - snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc. - had simply ceased to exist. The ordinary class-division of society had disappeared to an extent that is almost unthinkable in the money-tainted air of England . . . The effect was to make my desire to see Socialism established much more actual than it had been before. ‡

But socialism would not be possible through the self-styled middle-class left-wing intelligentsia. In Spain socialism was the working class. In England it was in the hands of 'cranks' and the 'Europeanized' intelligentsia. Orwell believed strongly in patriotism, in the 'English culture', encompassing dank weather, suet pudding, and the rights of the individual, and his most savage criticism of the middle class was directed against its 'severance' from this common culture. The middle-class intelligentsia, he wrote, 'take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow'. § Unlike the ordinary person, the in-

* *Collected Essays*, pp. 200-201.

† Orwell went to Spain in 1936 and joined the P.O.U.M. militia, through his membership of the Independent Labour Party. The P.O.U.M. was a semi-Trotskyist group advocating proletarian revolution. The Spanish Communist Party, on the other hand, urged a democratic and not revolutionary settlement to Spain's problems.

‡ G. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1951, pp. 111-12. See also his essay, 'Looking Back on the Spanish War' (1943), where his belief in socialism and the working classes' roles in achieving it are again stated.

§ G. Orwell, 'England Your England', in *Selected Essays*, London, Penguin Books, 1957, pp. 85-7.

the grounds that it attacked Russian communism; in 1938 Gollanz, before seeing the typescript, had refused to publish *Homage to Catalonia* because he knew that Orwell would be critical of the Stalinists in Spain.* It is true that *Animal Farm* is a savage satire on Stalinism and that Orwell's purpose in writing it was propagandistic: 'It was of the utmost importance to me that the peoples of Western Europe should see the Soviet régime for what it really was.† *Animal Farm* is not an attack on socialism nor on revolution,‡ but on the specific totalitarian features which Russian socialism had developed in its denial of the genuine socialist ideals of the 1917 Revolution. In Spain Orwell had experienced what socialism might be like and he wrote later that this period of his life was so different from anything that had gone before, it possessed 'a magic quality which, as a rule, belongs only to memories that are years old'.§ Orwell believed passionately in a society which was planned and humane, which neither Western capitalism nor the Soviet Union were. But already in *Animal Farm* there is an element absent from the novels of the 1930s: the obsession with power.

Totalitarianism is a system of tightly organized power; the

* Orwell's experience of left-wing journalism and publishing after he had returned from Spain, must have further convinced him of the inherent weakness of the left intelligentsia towards communism and totalitarianism. The *New Statesman* refused to publish an article written by him on the suppression of the P.O.U.M. by the Spanish communists, and his review of Franz Borkenau's anti-communist *The Spanish Cockpit* was rejected on grounds that it 'controverted editorial policy'. Orwell wrote that Gollanz, the publisher of all Orwell's early books, from 1935-37, was 'part of the Communism-racket' and as soon as 'he heard I had been associated with the P.O.U.M.' refused to publish *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 278-81 especially. *Animal Farm* was also turned down by Gollanz on political grounds, and when Secker & Warburg agreed to publish it, a year elapsed before they felt the political climate had changed enough to allow its publication.

† Introduction to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, in op. cit., vol. 3, p. 402.

‡ Thus Jenni Calder in her study of Orwell claims that in *Animal Farm* Orwell 'presents a compact and detailed statement of the corruption of revolution' (*Chronicles of Conscience*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1968, p. 225). The line should have read 'of a revolution' for Orwell was convinced of the necessity for revolution, if a truly humane society was to emerge, but the revolution had to be a democratic one. See his comments on the English revolution he expected to develop from the Second World War, in op. cit., vol. 3, especially pp. 374-5, 424-5.

§ *Homage to Catalonia*, p. 112.

animals revolt to throw off an oppressive régime only to find themselves at the mercy of the pigs, a cohesive power group; the revolution turns into its opposite and instead of a democratically diffused power structure, political authority becomes tightly concentrated. Power corrupts, Orwell seems to say, if not tempered by democratic institutions. And the chances of a democratic form of socialism seemed remote.

In his essay on James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* (1946) Orwell, although critical of Burnham's actual analysis, accepted some of the conclusions, especially Burnham's prediction on the rise of a new managerial class which would replace the old capitalist ruling classes. The managers will 'crush the working class, and so organize society that all power and economic privilege remain in their hands'. Private property rights will be abolished but without instituting common ownership; the world will be divided into three super states in Europe, Asia and America, each internally stratified 'with an aristocracy of talent at the top and a mass of semi-slaves at the bottom'. This is already the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; power is separate from property, has become a thing in itself. Burnham went on to argue that capitalism as a system was 'clearly doomed' but that socialism was no more than 'a dream'. Orwell remarked that Burnham's conclusions on an irresistible world-wide movement towards planned economies controlled by repressive oligarchies were both 'plausible' and 'difficult to resist'. He seems to accept Burnham's argument that the seeds of totalitarian power in the Soviet Union were sown by the 1917 revolution itself, in the form of the Bolshevik party with its core of dedicated, full-time revolutionaries and theory of 'democratic centralism'.* Orwell's vision of the world, then, was now totally political and thoroughly pessimistic. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he created a significant dynamic structure precisely because his vision was deeply felt and compounded of these diverse contradictions.

* *Collected Essays*, pp. 352-76. Lenin's conception of 'democratic centralism' implied a professional group of revolutionaries who would act as the directors of revolution. The masses' natural revolutionary activity against the ruling classes had to be coordinated from a revolutionary centre. Orwell believed that Stalinism in part developed from this conception.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is the most savage of anti-utopias, a direct satire on the Soviet Union as well as on certain aspects of Western capitalism. Some critics have argued that Orwell based his novel on an earlier Russian anti-utopia, Zamyatin's *We*, which was written in 1920 as an implied attack on the Bolshevik party's control of all aspects of social and political life in Russia. In 1946 Orwell had reviewed Zamyatin's novel, comparing it favourably with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1930), which he thought was partly derived from it. Zamyatin, Orwell argued, had grasped the essence of totalitarianism, the notion of 'cruelty as an end in itself, the worship of a Leader who is credited with divine attributes'. Huxley's vision of the future, Orwell went on, was weakened by his inability to explain the rigid system of social stratification which characterized his society - there were no economic or psychological reasons why it should exist: 'The aim is not economic exploitation... There were no economic or psychological reasons why it should exist: ... There is no power-hunger, no sadism, no hardness of any kind. Those at the top have no strong motive for staying on the top, and though everyone is happy in a vacuum way, life has become so pointless that it is difficult to believe that such a society could endure.' In Zamyatin's society, by contrast, social stratification and its system of inequalities exist precisely to satisfy the 'power-hunger, sadism, and hardness' of the ruling élite.*

In Orwell's vision the world has become divided into three super states of Oceania, Eastasia, and Eurasia, organized for total control of their populations and for permanent warfare. In Oceania technology has developed to such an extent that material inequality is no longer functionally necessary, yet a rigid system of stratification divides the population into the 85 per cent working class (the 'proles'), a middle class of administrators, and a ruling élite of bureaucrats. The proles are kept under permanent control by the mass media with its mechanically manufactured films 'oozing with sex', sentimental songs, and newspapers full of sport, astrology, and crime, the products of the 'Ministry of Truth'. The 'Thought Police' periodically weed

* *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 4, pp. 72-5.

out from the working class any potential leaders and the 'proles' lead lives which are wholly non-political. The motive for the domination of the Party (INGSOC) and the authority of its leader, Big Brother, is power itself.

Oceania is thus a society in which the individual as an individual has ceased to exist. Telescreens keep a relentless check on the behaviour of all members of the Party, at work, in the streets, at home; BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU bears down from countless street hoardings and telescreens. Social life is thoroughly regimented. The Thought Police operate through terror, torture, and the manipulation of language; revolt becomes impossible if there are no words to express dissent. 'Newspeak' replaces English: words change their meaning, lose some of their ambiguity, or are simply removed from the language itself. At the same time the past is continually rewritten so that Big Brother and the Party never make mistakes. Individuals periodically disappear, 'vaporized' for 'thinkcrime', that is, for nonconformist thought. The family unit exists, but the children are encouraged to spy on their parents and report them for any signs of unorthodoxy.

Nearly all children nowadays were horrible. What was worst of all was that by means of such organizations as the Spies they were systematically turned into ungovernable little savages, and yet this produced in them no tendency whatever to rebel against the discipline of the Party. On the contrary, they adored the Party and everything connected with it. . . . All their ferocity was turned outwards, against the enemies of the State, against foreigners, traitors, saboteurs, thought criminals. It was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own children. And with good reason, for hardly a week passed in which the *Times* did not carry a paragraph describing how some eavesdropping little sneak - 'child hero' was the phrase generally used - had overheard some compromising remark and denounced its parents to the Thought Police.*

Nineteen Eighty-Four describes the revolt of one individual against this all-pervading conformism. Winston Smith is Orwell's 'hero', thirty-nine years old, separated from his wife, a member of the 'Outer Party' and employed in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth to rewrite the past in conformity with the present policies of Big Brother and the Party.

* G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1950, p. 27. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text in parentheses.

As a character Winston Smith is similar to Comstock in his general depressive passivity, and the way in which his surroundings dominate him. Like Comstock, who hated the conformity of the middle classes, Winston finds himself increasingly critical of the Party and its rigid system of discipline, but unlike Comstock he finally rejects the Party, only to be crushed utterly by its overwhelming power.

The novel is built around the conflict which develops between Winston Smith's humane individualism (in newspeak, 'own-life' which takes the form of a nostalgia for a dimly remembered past, when life may have been better) and the collective, inhuman values of the Party and Big Brother. Winston is portrayed as an anomaly within a totally organized society: he recalls, for example, that only four years previously 'Oceania had been at war with Eastasia and in alliance with Eurasia. But this was merely a piece of furtive knowledge which he happened to possess because his memory was not satisfactorily under control' (p. 36). Winston is on the way to 'thinkcrime', the moment he begins a diary, a private activity outlawed in Oceania, in which he struggles to recall the past: was life always so dreary and so regimented? His rebellion is further strengthened when he finds proof that the Party has deliberately falsified the past knowing it to be false and that the Great Purges of the sixties were fabricated to leave Big Brother entirely in control of the Party and the Party in control of the State. Winston accidentally finds a photograph from *The Times* of three convicted spies, Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford, attending a Party delegation meeting in New York at the very moment when, according to the confessions at their trial, they were conspiring the downfall of Big Brother and the Party in enemy territory (pp. 76-7). Winston consigns the damning photograph to the incinerators, the 'memory hole', but he knows it existed and that the Party is not always right.

Winston begins an affair with Julia, who operates a fictional writing machine in the Ministry of Truth. Julia embodies an *instinctual* revolt against the Party; her rebellion is wholly private, aimed at the denial of pleasure which functions as an integral part of the Party's repressive authority. It complements Winston's *intellectual* revolt against the Party's deliberate and systematic perversion of history. They make love irregularly

until Winston rents a room over a junk-shop in the proletarian area of Airstrip One (London). Their act of rebellion leads them to contact O'Brien, a member of the Inner Party, who Winston mistakenly believes is a member of the outlawed opposition, led by the reviled Goldstein, the recipient of the daily two-minute *Hate*. Emmanuel Goldstein is the 'Enemy of the People', the renegade and backslider, who once . . . had been one of the leading figures of the Party, almost on a level with Big Brother himself, and then had engaged in counter-revolutionary activities, had been condemned to death and had mysteriously escaped and disappeared' (p. 15). All acts of sabotage, treachery, doctrinal deviations, are ascribed to Goldstein's teaching summed up in his book, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, and his organization *The Brotherhood*. Clearly Goldstein is Trotsky and the Brotherhood is his revolutionary anti-Stalinist Fourth International.* O'Brien meets the two rebels and asks for unconditional commitment. They agree except for one demand - never to see each other again - they would commit murder and sabotage for the opposition, but not this. O'Brien gives Winston Goldstein's book and he has read the first few chapters when the lovers are arrested by the Thought Police and taken to the Ministry of Love.

Winston had once said to Julia that the Party could control an individual's life externally, but it could not 'get inside you'. This is precisely what the Party, embodied by Winston's torturer interrogator, O'Brien, strives and succeeds in doing. Totalitarianism can destroy both the external freedoms and the freedom of the spirit; it was this illusion, that under the most repressive governments man could still retain his inner freedom, which Orwell attacks in the final part of his novel. The purpose of the torture is to get inside Winston's mind, to make him 'sane', to 'cure' him. He must believe his own confession of guilt and he must renounce his individual love for Julia. His submission must be of his own free will. O'Brien tells him, 'We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he

* After his expulsion from the Soviet Union by Stalin (1929), Trotsky believed at first in reactivating the Communist International but gradually came to see the International, the Third founded by the Bolsheviks to coordinate world revolution, as a reactionary tool in the hands of the counter-revolutionary Russian Communist Party. In 1938 he founded the Fourth International. Two years later Stalin's agent in Mexico murdered him.

resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him' (p. 256). Winston resists: the Party is not all — there is the 'human spirit' — but Winston has been tortured out of all recognition and when he looks at his shattered body in the mirror, he breaks down and weeps. In his cell he comes to realize that the Thought Police have watched his every move during the previous seven years; they have photographs of Julia and himself, they knew of his diary, of the incriminating photograph — he is *alone*; he has not even the comfort of the Brotherhood, for O'Brien claims part authorship of Goldstein's book. The party is invincible. The Party must always be right. He writes: FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, and TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE. He is almost cured. In room 101 a cage is strapped to his face. Inside are two rats; Winston cannot stand rats. They are ready to devour his face when the spring which holds down the door which separates them from Winston is pulled. He cannot stand this final torture. He screams:

'Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!' (p. 287)

Thus the novel closes with Winston sitting alone in the same café as the three 'enemies of the people', Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford had done earlier, sipping gin and waiting for his execution. One day he meets Julia; each of them has betrayed the other. They have both lost their inner freedom, for they know that what they screamed was true. The novel closes with Winston's acceptance of Big Brother: 'He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother' (p. 298).

5

Most commentators have accepted *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an attack on the Soviet Union and its ideology of Stalinism. There can be no doubt that this was Orwell's intention. He was not attacking socialism, but only, as he himself expressed it, 'the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism'. He did not believe that totalitarian society was historically

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inevitable, only that it was possible 'if not fought against'.^{*} Orwell's characterization of totalitarianism, his 'sociology of power', however, has serious weaknesses which relate to his misunderstanding of the nature of Russian communism.

Oceania is a society in which political rule is not legitimated by ideology but simply functions through total repression and physical force. Orwell had criticized Huxley for misunderstanding the nature of power in a society of plenty, but his own anti-utopia operates on the non-sociological basis of sheer terror. O'Brien's justification for power was simply power itself. But this is not a sufficient explanation for the persistence of Oceania. The telescreens operate to whip up nationalistic feelings, the public executions and parades of captured prisoners together with mass rallies promote a frenzied, irrational atmosphere — but nowhere is there any awareness that for any society to function properly there have to be symbols and myths which justify the rule of the few. Every ruling group in history, justified its rule in terms other than mere private gain or advantage. Political rule is possible only if those groups which govern do so with a belief that its policies are in the good of the nation. Russian communism in its Stalinist phase justified its vast system of political terror and repression on the grounds that its policies were in the interests of the communist future as well as for Russia itself. The Communist Party called for sacrifices in the interests of the future. The Stalinist State took care, for example, to cultivate the writer and the artist, to win them over for nationalistic communism. And through a perverted form of Marxism, turning it into a dogma, the Russian bureaucracy could claim advantages over the capitalist West and, through the public ownership of all property, that Russia was moving towards communism. The masses could not be left simply to vegetate, as is the case with Orwell's 'proles'. Russian communism had to win them to its side, both with terror and ideology.

Oceania is a totalitarian society: but what type of social structure is it? Orwell fails to make this clear. In the past there has been a civil war and if the parallel with the Soviet Union is pursued, then the power structure of the Party is the equivalent to the *counter-revolutionary* bureaucracy of the Stalinist period. As in the Soviet Union capitalism has been abolished, but

^{*} *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, vol. 4, p. 502.

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what has taken its place? Is the working class employed in factories, in productive work for profit, and if so, who controls and organizes the work units? What kind of economy does the Party administer: is it bureaucratic collectivism, state capitalism, or simply production for perpetual warfare? In the Soviet Union a proletarian revolution destroyed capitalism only to end in a society rigidly stratified, in which Party functionaries were increasingly recruited from the middle and not working classes. It is not clear if Orwell intended the Oceania bureaucracy as a counter-revolutionary force opposed to the achievements of an original revolution. On the contrary, from the portrayal of the working class in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as essentially passive and non-revolutionary, concerned solely with consumption rather than with political change, the bureaucracy was probably not a counter-revolutionary force, but something which grew naturally out of civil war, international wars, and the total mobilization of the population to fight these wars.

Thus power in Oceania does not flow from the collective ownership and bureaucratic control of property, as is the case in the Soviet Union, but from the fact of power itself. In the past, totalitarian states, such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, have used power to subvert the possibility of working-class militancy and to this end the trade unions became part of the State and not distinct from it as is the case in capitalist societies. Power here hinges on the organization of work: a collectivized economy demands a high degree of worker, management, trade-union collaboration for the ultimate goal — economic efficiency. In Oceania, however, power is pure sadism, the irrational domination of man by others. Its point is not economic efficiency in production, but simply the psychological satisfaction of controlling others. O'Brien tells Winston that it is not sufficient for man to obey authority, he must *suffer*:

Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing. Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating? . . . A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of ^{*} State capitalism is a system of production in which the State appropriates profit for its own purposes; it usually has nothing in common with socialism, which is a system of production in which workers' control of production determines that profit is socially useful, that is, in the interests of the masses, not a caste of bureaucrats or capitalists.

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trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress towards pain. The old civilizations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred... If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever. (pp. 267-8)

By contrast, Gletkin, the interrogator of the old Boshevik, Rubashov, in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1941), believed in the necessity for violence and terror and the Purges if the revolution was not to be subverted; he tortured out of a conviction in the future. O'Brien tortures Winston as part of the Party's policy of destroying the world of humane values. He claims triumphantly that the Party is destroying feelings between parents and their children, between friends, and finally individual love:

... in the future there will be no wives and no friends. Children will be taken from their mothers at birth... The sex instinct will be eradicated. Procreation will be an annual formality like the renewal of a ration card. We shall abolish the orgasm. Our neurologists are at work upon it now. There will be no loyalty, except loyalty towards the Party. There will be no love, except the love of Big Brother. (p. 268)

In these passages Orwell is stating his dominant political belief: a revolution which socializes property will not effect a truly humane society, as many Marxists had assumed, unless the collectivization of property is carried through democratically. If the revolution is left in the hands of the middle-class intellectuals who usually form the hard core of any oppositional party, then it will bring only tyranny: the socialist revolution must be the task of the working class - this had been his political credo since 1936, for the middle-class intellectual, unlike the proletarian, worships power. In Spain, Orwell had experienced socialism, and this vision of the future, of the necessary future, never left him. The problem was always the working class - in England they were not revolutionary. Thus how was socialism to be achieved?

This problem constitutes the basic structure of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's pessimistic vision is more total here than in his earlier novels; he has written from within a vision of the world which demanded that socialism replace a bankrupt 'finished' capitalism, but a vision which became increasingly a

utopia. In his diary Winston Smith writes that the only hope 'lay in the proles' and before he completes Goldstein's book he knows Goldstein's message is proletarian revolution. In the interrogation O'Brien tells him that the conception of proletarian rebellion is absurd: 'The proletarians will never revolt, not in a thousand years or in a million' (p. 262). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Orwell's testimony to his declining optimism in the possibilities of democratic socialism. The working class is not the revolutionary agent of social change; society will change through a total mobilization of power concentrated in the hands of a small, middle-class, intellectual, and technical élite.

Thus throughout the novel the physical presence of the working class is counterpointed to Winston's desperate search for understanding. 'I understand HOW: I do not understand WHY,' he had written; the 'proles' are the only hope for they constitute a majority and would thus need only 'to rise up and shake themselves like a horse shaking off flies [to] blow the Party to pieces tomorrow' (p. 71). But they do not. For Orwell's vision of the working class in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was no different from his conception of them in the 1930s, defeated by the general strike and years of mass unemployment. In the novel Winston (Orwell) makes this observation, on proletarian women:

They were born, they grew up in the gutters, they went to work at twelve, they passed through a brief blossoming period of beauty and sexual desire, they married at twenty, they were middle-aged at thirty, they died, for the most part, at sixty. Heavy physical work, the care of home and children, petty quarrels with neighbours, films, football, beer and, above all, gambling, filled up the horizon of their minds. (p. 73)

This is the Orwell of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, who now observes, through Winston, 'two bloated women' arguing ferociously over tin saucers (p. 72), another wrangle over the correct number of the weekly lottery winner, noting that 'the Lottery was the principal if not the only reason for remaining alive' (pp. 86-7).

The working class is simply stupefied by the control exerted upon it by the Party and the Thought Police. It is a passive, undifferentiated mass, in which prostitution, drug addiction, and criminality of all kinds thrive. Deviance is ignored by the Party presumably since it functions as a social control. And the proletariat are outside the rigid, sexual ethic of the Party too,

living instinctual lives, breeding in dirty profusion. It is this class which Winston must have faith in if there is to be any hope:

But if there was hope, it lay in the proles. You had to cling on to that. When you put it in words it sounded reasonable: it was when you looked at the human beings passing you on the pavement that it became an act of faith. (p. 87)

He says later, when he is with Julia, that only the 'proles' had remained human; they were spontaneous, instinctual - 'The proles are human beings. We are not human.' (p. 167) Here we have the typical Orwellian theme of middle-class deadness (the novels of the thirties) contrasted with genuine working-class spontaneity. The Oceania bureaucracy is middle-class and inhuman. And there is no hope: the proles will always be *integrated* into this inhumane society and they will never revolt. This is the message of Orwell's novel: socialism is mere utopia.

This is, however, a one-sided view of the working class. Orwell at no point discussed trade unions; he seems to believe that working-class social solidarity can never extend to political consciousness. In his works before 1945 he stressed the potentiality of the working class for socialist revolution. In his last years the vision becomes totally bleak: the working class will never be the agency of social change, for they accept bourgeois society. It was just one step to his view that they would accept totalitarian society also.

Thus the revolt of Winston and Julia takes on a special significance if seen from this class standpoint. In his earlier novels Orwell failed to portray genuine sexual love; his females are frigid and status-conscious. Julia is his one exception. She desires sexual love, she strives to fulfil herself erotically, to break away consciously from the Party's puritanical ethic. Orwell had grasped the sexual dynamics of totalitarian organization, for the sexual energy can better be directed to political values and activity:

Life as she saw it was quite simple. You wanted a good time; 'they', meaning the Party, wanted to stop you having it; you broke the rules as best you could... Unlike Winston, she had grasped the inner meaning of the Party's sexual puritanism. It was not merely that the sex instinct created a world of its own which was outside the Party's control and which therefore had to be destroyed if possible.

What was more important was that sexual privation induced hysteria, which was desirable because it could be transformed into war-fever and leader-worship. (pp. 133-4)

Julia, although uninterested in politics and depicted as insincere rather than intellectual, is remarkably conscious of the Party's reasons for sexual control: 'They want you to be bursting with energy all the time. All this marching up and down and cheering and waving is simply sex gone sour' (p. 134). Julia is Orwell's first real woman because her rebellion, consciously sexual, must place her in opposition to the dominant Party norms; her relationship with Winston must develop towards socialism, towards understanding the nature of totalitarian society. In Oceania society a genuine human relationship is possible only in opposition to the prevailing values of the Party. In the earlier novels, written from the standpoint of the middle class, Orwell depicted women as part of that class, their horizons limited by its values, and desirous of remaining within it; they accepted its norms. But in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell's vision was far richer, and more completely pessimistic, for his grasp of what socialism could be informs the hopeless quest of Winston and Julia for understanding and for humane values. Their defeat is a total defeat; humanity is defeated in Room 101. Only the middle classes were beaten in Orwell's early novels.

6

In his essay on Swift, Orwell concludes by arguing that no matter whether a writer is 'progressive' or not, the ultimate test for a work of literature lies with the writer's sense of conviction, for 'if the force of belief is behind it, a world view which only just passes the test of sanity is sufficient to produce a great work of art'. * *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the vision of a man for whom socialism remains as the only hope for humanity and which itself is defeated by bureaucratic collectivism and totalitarian politics. Orwell was not a member of any political party; he had left the Independent Labour Party in 1940 when it adopted a pacifist attitude towards the Second World War. He remained an individual, criticizing the Russophile left, the Labour Party and, of course, the Conservatives, from the standpoint of demo-

* *Collected Essays*, p. 398.

cratic socialism. Unlike others of his contemporaries, Orwell spoke out fearlessly against any infringement on democratic freedoms. His style embodied his personal commitment: he was not *frightened*, as he himself had written of Henry Miller. His style and his vision are one: capitalism is finished, the middle classes are done for, all orthodoxies, political and religious, are suspect, totalitarianism is a menace and the working class is the last hope. He wanted socialism; he thought that the working class did not. Ultimately, this political pessimism, the consequence of a one-sided view of the English proletariat, is the strength of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

