

## Thoughts on Orwell's Truthfulness

THE LEAST PLEASANT and perhaps most important point about *1984* ought to be made at once. It is not a kind, generous, or finally, even very hopeful work. Its bitterness is in a class with Jonathan Swift's acidic account in *Gulliver's Travels* of human ugliness. George Orwell relieves his warning about what he envisioned as the worst possibilities of twentieth-century mankind, however, if we can call his effect anything so positive as relief, by his journalist's instinct to study the case, to offer a measure of evidence, to record specific details, both as he saw them and as they gave promise of becoming. Orwell's anti-utopia, bleak as it is, seems to me not without that measure of intellectual hope that comes from merciless but careful diagnosis. It urges attention to detail in the expectation that evidence and honesty may force vigilance, but I am not sure Orwell himself felt that vigilance alone is enough to confront depravity.

Essential to Orwell's purpose in *1984* are the doctrinal aspects of the book, much more than the human details, particularly the expository materials within the text and the Appendix on Newspeak. Theory and the reporting of possibility provide the thrust of the work. The fiction is a veneer. Motivation is often casually melodramatic. The plot is thin and the characters disagreeable. It has never seemed plausible to me that the Nietzschean O'Brien should trouble to hold dialogue with someone so schnooky as Winston Smith. Julia repels me, and, I think, was hardly intended to enchant universally. Orwell did not like casually liberal types like Winston Smith, perhaps an instance of rejecting an aspect of himself. He admired, respected, feared the power elite; grudgingly and distantly he respected the crude Proles, perhaps harbored some hope in them, exempting them from the routine horrors visited on the better educated and more favored.

*1984* is a large, extended treatise, an essay that takes the form partially of a novel. It is another instance of Orwell's well-known straining toward honesty in understanding a critically changing world. Few writers, it has been widely observed, in our time have been so merciless with themselves and their readers in recording their sense of truths they found abhorrent and inescapable. For Orwell, turning his vision at least partially into the softness of fiction was almost necessary to make accessible the hard ugliness of truth.

If Orwell's vision is apocalyptic, it is only incidentally and perhaps even accidentally so. It was not intended to be portentously prophetic, only tentatively warning, almost as though its terrible thrust of truth might undercut it. Orwell's modesty always aided his balanced confident sense of right and wrong. I think we distort and pervert the monitory character of *1984* if we take it too simply as Orwell's large, ambitious, considered projection of what the world would be like fewer than 50 years after he recorded his analysis of the momentum of events.

The book obviously grew out of Orwell's political experiences, theoretical and practical we must remember, in England, in Spain, in Burma, even out of his efforts in living down and out in Paris and London. *1984* is an alertly realized, shrewdly imagined projection in general terms of how and where politics, and the various forms of discourse that support politics, might take us. Its very slightness as a novel with lengthy expository inserts encouraged an easy and ultimately commanding boldness. That Orwell could glimpse such details as the emerging importance of the third world is testimony simply to the keenness of his journalistic instincts. He could always smell out significant political stories. Like Bernard Shaw, his first impulse was to record the world as he knew and could guess it, teacher and journalist before he was artist, using art in the service of reporting and enlightening.

How acute and fundamental his journalistic sense was may be gathered from his conviction that language, communica-

tion, the record of history, the shaping of opinion, and the way events are seen and set down, these ultimately determine affairs. In the world of 1984, the Ministries of Love, Peace, and Plenty are underpinned by, dependent on, the Ministry of "Truth," the center where the written record—of books, magazines, newspapers, government memos, private correspondence, and of who knows what else—was constantly reshaped, revised, refined to accord with current social and political exigencies. Revision, not vision, is the way reality is perceived in 1984. Erasing and remaking are the effective creative efforts, later and later drafts, not ever early, rough, unshaped ones. Reality is not what happens, but what the Ministry of Truth at any moment says has happened. Spontaneity is the real danger; control offers safety.

What Orwell caught early in the era of expanding mass media was the power of teaching. Politicians throughout history have long known that what students read in class, what the population peruses in newspapers and libraries, affects what a nation achieves and believes.

It is worth pausing a moment to comment on how Americans today, all too reluctantly, are acknowledging the importance of textbooks, in large general ways and in petty, local ones. Perhaps the least controversial recommendation of the belligerent report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk," for example, whose rhetoric resembled that of a document released by the Pentagon, was to improve our textbooks. More specifically, in Texas a board annually approves textbooks for the whole state after open hearings at which leftist and rightist lobbyists clash. Because financial stakes are so high, publishers alter biology, economics, and literature texts to ensure the Texas market, ultimately affecting what students elsewhere study. One publisher even offered to drop certain words in a well known dictionary and to change definitions of others to ensure an adoption. The Texas "Ministry of Truth" chooses what its

citizens will read on the basis of the pressure of votes and profits. Any bonus of truth is incidental.

Orwell did not imagine or invent the practices of the Ministry of Truth. The Soviet Union long ago began revising its library and classroom books to control what its citizens learned of its history and that of other countries. Reactionary groups in Japan recently tried to expunge all references in their textbooks to the country's brutality in World War II. Zimbabwe after independence launched an extended program to change textbook versions of British colonialism in Rhodesia. None of these enterprises needed the inspiration of Orwell, nor did Orwell need their evidence.

Politicians, those whose profession it is to shape opinion, to get populations to march in step to a certain drumbeat, to manipulate human activity in large or small contexts, know the need to create first the protective setting. Truth is not only often irrelevant to politics, it may be dangerous; in any case, truth is elusive; in the final analysis, it may be sold as less important than survival, self-delight, the absence of pain, any of a myriad of immediately fleshly human needs. For a man like Orwell engaged in a life-long encounter with understanding ethical, moral, political complexities, the sustained attack on truth by doctrinaire apparatchiks, whether emanating from Stalin and his followers or from his opponents, or from Labor or Conservative Party leaders, or from political commissars on the battlefields of Spain, added up to the essence of crystallized evil.

We may regard *1984* itself most provocatively as a textbook on communication for our time, not simply as an important modern instance of a certain kind of fiction, melding the imagined with the theoretical and the real, but as a reference source for the study today of political science, social history, and the nature and power of language. I think *1984* far more cogent and disturbing as a commentary on the politics of rhetoric than Orwell's overpraised and occasionally murky, cer-

tainly strained essay on politics and language. We can see more or less quickly through the falsity and imprecision of mere individual words and phrases; it requires the shock of thought provided by the world of 1984 to apprehend fully the deceptive power of a public relations machine in the service of a political enterprise. The linguistic lapses and charlatanism of some of our individual political figures are as nothing to the cunning campaigns of sophisticated combines which blend the expertise of advertising, public opinion polls, merchandising campaigns, media sampling, and the like. The Ministry of Truth in 1984 dominates all three worlds of 1984, through the control of thought, not with the playing with phrases. The Big Lie is a massive social and political tool; the fuzzy or fudged word is a petty personal one.

Winston Smith spends a surprising amount of his time in bed with Julia, surprising because of the difficulties and risk of getting there in the first place, simply reading to her from Goldstein's excitingly revelatory paradoxes. Smith is turned on by paradox. His maturity has been delayed. I recall some of my own adolescent growing up in the Bronx in the 1930s, mixing politics and courtship, as we read to each other passages from Bukharin, Lenin, Plekhanov, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Lionel Trilling, T.S. Eliot, and Granville Hicks, not often enough in bed. Paradox, like plain poetry, piques adolescents.

What that reading did for Winston, however little it may have done for Julia, who slept through much of it, is what the reading did for us in the Bronx, what such reading has done anywhere in periods of intellectual, political, and social upheaval; what the reading of Bunyan, Milton, and Hobbes did in the seventeenth century; of Cardinal Newman, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, in the nineteenth. Such reading offers ways into new truths, truths that have to do with life and death, with work and ambition, with sacrifice and the changing of lives, with choices of commitment. The salvation of the soul and the evolution of the body and mind are of no

less an order of belief than that of freedom through slavery, or strength through ignorance, peace through war, fulfillment through sacrifice. Friends and acquaintances in the Bronx joined the Lincoln Brigade in Spain, and heard some of the same rhetoric and other sounds Orwell heard there; at least one died there. Reading can have serious consequences.

The problem with Orwell's dialecticians, with those functionaries in the Ministry of Truth, is their slavish subservience. Our hero, Winston Smith, is one of them, one must recall, as typical a modern anti-hero as any in the plays of Beckett, only less sympathetic I'd say. Brecht's good soldier Schweik at least remains a waspish smart-aleck. You cannot believe a fact Smith and his colleagues offer, you cannot follow or accept on its merits any argument they make, they are as little to be trusted as a functionary issuing a press release on a complex event in our own or the Soviet government. Smith, like his followers, is programmed. Programming is not simply exalted; it is the only pattern of development. The only independent human we see (except for our fleeting glimpses of Proles) is O'Brien, who has consciously, deliberately, indisputably stripped down his character to the simplest exertion of sheer movement, the irreducible motion that one may find in the electricity of particles. He has no respect for feeling or truth or any quality that is vestigially human above the level of electrical impulse. On that level we can trust him.

The corruption, the decay of O'Brien, like that of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, is so total that we hesitate to accept its extremity as even remotely relevant to any situation imaginably our own. "Evil be thou my good," Milton's Satan proclaims. The only aim of power is power, says O'Brien. Such final commitments, we are persuaded by the skill of Milton and of Orwell, are genuine enough to Satan and O'Brien, but they can only serve as terrible warnings to those of us less depraved, less reducibly human, less capable of that total dedication to everything that totalitarianism demands.

What Orwell's warning in *1984* comes down to is the danger of obscuring, blurring however triflingly, the edges of truth. The book is not simply, reductively, an attack on capitalism, Communism, English or any other socialism, or of any particular country, although it was early taken as such at various times. At one time or another, Orwell, his publisher, and various friends, saw it as satire or parody of what any state can become through corruption. Unfortunately, I think, it was too often considered simply a companion volume to *Animal Farm*. It remains for me testimony of an enormous willed moral strength witnessed in behalf of truth, of seeing accurately, of sensing precisely, without sentimentality or wishfulness. Lionel Trilling, who celebrated the moral force of literature, was impressed by the "intensity and passion" of what he called this "momentous book."

One cannot read through Orwell's personal essays, criticism, reportage, fiction, without again and again being blinded by a flare, a flash, of unexpected, often painfully insightful truth at his own expense. He concludes his account, "Shooting an Elephant," "I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool." "I am anxious to make it clear," he writes in "Such, Such Were the Joys," sometimes taken to foreshadow the claustrophobic world of *1984*, "that I was not a rebel, except by force of circumstances." His reflections on Gandhi remain disturbing because he could so clearly distinguish the saintly and the human in the man.

Orwell worked on the last stages of *1984* in the last stages of his ravaging illness, a time when one must willy-nilly allow truth to embrace, enfold one. He sensed that he had not successfully integrated the fiction and exposition in *1984*, but he refused to delete, as requested by the Book-of-the-Month Club, Goldstein's disquisitions within the body of the book or the Appendix of Newspeak. Bernard Crick in his biography of Orwell describes *1984* as "a long premeditated, rational warning against totalitarian tendencies in societies

like our own rather than a sick and sudden prophecy about a Soviet or neo-Nazi takeover, still less a scream of despair and recantation of his democratic Socialism." I see that warning as arising from Orwell's life-long effort to apprehend clearly the totality of life anywhere. Truth itself, so to speak, cannot be doctrinaire; only its denial, perversion, shading become tools against man. Orwell's identity remains first and last as a political writer. He con-

cludes his essay "Why I Write": "... looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into . . . humbug. . . ." One need hardly say today that Orwell succeeded in *1984* because he tried so hard to envision a world as closely as he could in its complete political truthfulness.

—*Morris Freedman*