

*Nineteen Eighty-Four:*  
**Satire or Prophecy?**

Bernard Crick

As we approach the year 1984, we must ask ourselves what is the enduring significance of Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? I have already made two assumptions: first, that we will reach 1984 and, secondly, what is reasonably obvious but often forgotten, that the book is a novel, not a monograph. I have given the correct title fully spelled out, which he deliberately favored because, presumably, he meant it as a title of fiction rather than as a date in a calendar or a prophecy. But notwithstanding it being a novel, I assume that its content may have some enduring significance as well as its still often underestimated artistic achievement.

Writing before the year 1984, I see the need to warn against too literal an interpretation of the text and any melodramatic desires to read it primarily as a prophecy rather than primarily as a satire. I will try to make good this warning by putting the text into both its contemporary setting and into the wider context of the whole of Orwell's works. Yet even if it is a consciously Swiftian satire of great strength, the emotional shock is not ordinary and, whether satire or prophecy, it does not reflect well on the world. From my life of Orwell, I am reasonably sure of three things.

1. The novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not his last will and testament—it was simply the last book he wrote before the poor man happened to die.<sup>1</sup>
2. It was not a work of unnatural intensity dashed off hastily by a dying man choked with death wish and regressing through the novel to childhood memories of his preparatory school (as some assert to be the importance often attached to his essay "Such, Such Were the Joys").<sup>2</sup>
3. It does not represent a repudiation of his socialism, since he continued to write for the *Tribune* and American left-wing journals right up to his final illness, during the time of the composition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This essay will form part of an introduction to a critical edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which the author is preparing for Clarendon Press.

Nonetheless, it remains the most complex of his books and the one attracting the most diverse interpretations. It has been read as a deterministic prophecy, as a conditional projection, as a humanistic satire (he said, but of what?), as nihilistic misanthropy, as a total rejection of socialism, and as a libertarian-socialist—almost an anarchist—protest against totalitarian tendencies both in his own and in any other society.

Czesław Miłosz, the Polish poet and writer, wrote in 1953 in his *Capitve Mind* about Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (having himself recently defected from the Communist party):

because [*Nineteen Eighty-Four*] is both difficult to obtain and dangerous to possess, it is known only to certain members of the Inner Party. Orwell fascinates them through his insight into details they know well, and through his use of Swiftian satire. Such a form of writing is forbidden by the New Faith because allegory, *by nature manifold in meaning*, would trespass beyond the prescriptions of socialist realism and the demands of the censor. For those who know Orwell only by hearsay are amazed that a writer who never lived in Russia should have so keen a perception into its life. The fact that there are writers in the West who understand the functioning of the unusually constructed machine of which they are themselves a part astounds them and argues against the "stupidity" of the West.<sup>4</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Few of the above viewpoints, rather like those famous many causes of the French or American Revolutions over which students are annually invited to exercise their judgment, can be rejected completely: it is a question of proportion and relative weight. There is no single message of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: it contains multiple messages. It is a novel, the most complex Orwell ever attempted, and more complex in its variety of themes than most commentators and critics still appreciate. If he had wanted to write a straight or even a more or less nonfiction book, he would have done so as he had done before. But a general difficulty with satires is that they depend greatly on contemporary references (now often missed), and warnings depend on plausibility in the circumstances of the day (now sometimes half misunderstood and underestimated).<sup>5</sup> And there is a special difficulty of the genre that satire and warning are a difficult mixture to bring off; it is difficult to judge how specific and precise the author is being. H. G. Wells, for example, wrote novels of both kinds, but on the whole, he kept them well apart. Orwell attempted something artistically very difficult in (as I called it in my biography) a "flawed masterpiece," an attempt to combine satire and warning in this

extraordinarily powerful and complex book, but certainly not the best thing he wrote artistically.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is already in the canon of modern English literature, and teachers of English in schools wrestle with it annually. It is also rapidly entering into the canon of political thought and the social sciences. Some of the above difficulties are made worse because academic political thinkers can be uncertain or inept in handling satire and in relating meaning to structure. (By all means study political concepts as found in novels as well as in monographs and tracts; but remember then that the meaning of those ideas is defined by the context of the fiction as a whole.) Or, if students of politics have critical ability, as shown by the way they can handle seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts, they can also make the common mistake—as many literary critics have done—of thinking that Orwell is always a simple writer with a clear message wrapped up in costume. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, I will endlessly repeat, a novel; but of a certain kind. Presumably he wrote it in the form of a novel rather than a monograph either because he thought some of the issues raised are inherently unresolvable, or at least because he had not as yet resolved them himself. But literary critics are often equally uncertain or inept in handling political ideas, and usually underestimate the originality of two of his major themes: the totalitarian hypothesis (even if it is found far more clearly—as I will argue—in his essays) and the complex epistemological argument he makes for relating both liberty and historical truth to plain language.

As well as a picture of a certain kind of totalitarianism, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is obviously a picture of a hierarchical society, which in itself has created a foolish misunderstanding. If Orwell was still a socialist, where in the text does he assert his libertarian and egalitarian values? Some ask this question rhetorically and assume that somehow, because he does not mention these things, he has abandoned them: certainly that he has abandoned his egalitarianism. This view is strengthened if one "locates," as has become a routine English literature exercise, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the tradition of Huxley's *Brave New World*, Zamyatin's *We*, Jack London's *Iron Heel*, and H. G. Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes*. The issue is a complex one. Certainly there are borrowings from and echoes of all these books—and many more—in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>6</sup> But finally it is arbitrary and foolish to limit one's interpretation of a text in this way. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* owes as much to Swift's *Gulliver* as to any of them, and, in any case, also needs locating both in the political events of the 1930s and 1940s and in Orwell's reading of nonfiction (particularly, as will soon be argued, of James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*). However, let us compare

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* to *Brave New World* even in the broadest features of their plots: Huxley was satirizing equality, he disliked and feared equality, therefore equality is an explicit theme in his satire which shows equality through happiness carried rather too far. Orwell also disliked "happiness," or rather he often railed against "mere hedonism" both as a proper motive for life and as an explanation of human conduct,<sup>7</sup> although doubtless to Huxley's horror he located true happiness in the ordinary, decent life of a working man in good employment, not in the hyped-up higher moments of the literary intelligentsia. But Orwell is far from satirizing equality, he is at least (we can refine this in a moment) satirizing hierarchy. More precisely he satirizes the pretensions of intellectuals to exercise power nominally for other people's good, but adds the sardonic twist that they are really enjoying power for its own sake. Therefore in the rigid hierarchical structure of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is authority and power hunger which are carried too far. There isn't a word about equality (except, significantly, in Goldstein's book), but equality is surely the thing denied by such hierarchy: the implicit message is that men should behave in a more egalitarian manner. A satire has a moral presupposition: it is not cynical or totally pessimistic (which is why so much contemporary so-called satire is simply nihilistic, which Orwell's never was).

The satire is so consistent that the dictator is actually called "Big Brother": "Big Brother is watching you." Satires turn the truth upside down. It is both comfort and threat—a perfect piece of "doublethink." It has a touch of the Stalinist perversion of early Communism about it, but also has a touch of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Brudersband* of the Nazis, their false fraternity and contempt for individual liberty. In a satire, the positive values of a writer emerge as the contrary of what he is attacking, or of the fanatical and usually disgusting world which he portrays.

Consider for a moment *Nineteen Eighty-Four* simply as a story. It is a story of a man, Winston Smith, trying to struggle against a new kind of despotism. But the story makes clear right from the beginning that effective resistance is impossible, if things are ever allowed to reach such a pass. On one level, Winston attempts to resist by activism and rebellion, seeking out the enemies of the regime; but on another level, he simply struggles to maintain his individuality (the original title was to have been *The Last Man in Europe*). In this struggle, which for a weak and unheroic man he pursues with surprising courage and tenacity, right up to the final torture, *memory* and *mutual trust* are the positive themes. That he is finally defeated is inevitable in the satire of total power, but Orwell believes that that can happen only if we are utterly alone: while we have someone to trust, our individuality

cannot be destroyed. For man is a social animal, our identity arising from interaction, not autonomy. Mutual trust is that virtue praised by Aristotle, asserted to be necessary to true citizens and the very thing that a tyrant must smash (he tells us in book 5 of *Politics*) if he is to perpetuate his rule successfully. Mutual trust is a component of that overworked word in Orwell, that essential concept, "decency" (Orwell's equivalent of "fairness" in John Rawls's moral philosophy or "mutual respect" in Kant's).

Decency<sup>8</sup> is mutual trust, toleration, behaving responsibly toward other people, acting empathetically—all of these. Mutual trust is of supreme importance to a civic culture, for political action is impossible without it. Again the author is no more explicit about "mutual trust" than he is about "equality." In a satire only the contrary or the negation is explicit, but then perfectly explicit. O'Brien tells Winston Smith,

Already we are breaking down the habits of thought which have survived from before the Revolution. We have cut the links between child and parent, between man and man, and between man and woman. No one dares trust a wife or a child or a friend any longer.<sup>9</sup>

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

"You *want* it to happen to the other person. You don't give a damn what they suffer. All you care about is yourself."

"All you care about is yourself," he echoed.

"And after that you don't feel the same towards the other person any longer."

"No," he said, "you don't feel the same."<sup>10</sup>

And a wretched old man, grieving in an air raid shelter for someone dead, "kept repeating,"

"We didn't ought to 'ave trusted 'em. I said so, Ma, didn't I? That's what comes of trusting 'em. I said so all along. We didn't ought to have trusted the buggers."

But which buggers they didn't ought to have trusted Winston could not now remember.<sup>11</sup>

"Mutual trust" is thus a minimum demand on us if we want to stay human, but it is also a maximum demand: there is no need to treat one's fellow citizens with more than mutual trust or decency. For instance, there is no need to love everybody equally, which is either impossible or a debasement of "love"; but there is a categorical imperative to treat people equally, as if everyone were an end in themselves and not a means toward some other's ends. Some critics have

argued that "love" is asserted as a positive value in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and is necessary for a good society, as shown by the love affair between Winston and Julia. They then say, not surprisingly, that the portrayal of love is clumsy and shallow. But it begins as simply a "love affair"; if it can be said to be love at all, that only grows on them toward the end. Indeed the love affair is shown in the story to have been a mistake on Winston's part (Julia falls asleep when he reads Goldstein's testimony and she is bored by his tale of the photograph); and on her part, it is a gesture of contempt for the regime (she actually boasts that she has had it off with Party members many times before and that turns Winston on again). She is closer to the proles than Winston is in behavior, because she had come from the proles, but not in sympathies—she wants to get away from them. But Winston is more like the middle-class intellectual who is determined to find hope amid the people. If the affair is not a love affair in a genuine sense, it is, however, exemplary of "mutual trust" right up to the end when they are tortured. Mutual trust, fellowship, fraternity, and decency are recurrent themes in all of Orwell's writings after *Wigan and Catalonia*. These themes qualify his earlier individualism.

The second positive and major theme, *memory*, is explicit in the satire, and links *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with *Coming Up for Air* and with Orwell's general view of morality. He held (rightly or wrongly, but so he did) that a good and decent way of life already existed in tradition: an egalitarian or genuine postrevolutionary society would not transfigure values or expect them to be different (his anti-Marxism comes out here) but would simply draw on the past. Quite simply, Orwell did not believe that poverty and class oppression (which he believed were real forces in the history of the West) had dehumanized people completely. Rather these forces had created a genuine fellowship and fraternity in the common people that the middle classes, wracked by competitive individualism, lacked. Hence the importance of the proles in the story, much more positively characterized (if perhaps too briefly for emphasis) than usually noticed.

As Winston Smith observed when he walked among the proles, what mattered were individual relationships, and the completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself. [The proles,] it suddenly occurred to him, had remained in this condition. They were not loyal to a party or to a country or to an idea, they were loyal to one another. For the first time in his life he did not despise the proles or think of them as merely an inert force which would one day spring to life and regenerate the world. The proles had stayed human. They had not become hardened inside. They had

held on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to relearn by conscious effort.<sup>12</sup>

This is a crucial passage in the book, completely consistent with Orwell's moral and social perspectives in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*. Thus the authenticity of memory, thus the diary: the attempt to write the diary begins the main thread of the plot in which private memory is defended against the official attempts to rewrite history; and this becomes a parallel action in the plot to the defense of plain language against ideological discourse.

My claim is that both the memory and mutual trust themes and the defense of plain language theme work best as satires of contemporary mass-produced writing (Orwell sees even the nominally nonpolitical writing of prolefeed and prolecut as having a political, deadening, perverting, and pacifying effect) as well as possible parts of a model of a totalitarian society. Indeed, if we see them primarily as part of a future totalitarian society, then we actually distance the thrust at ourselves. Consider this passage from his essay of 1946, "The Prevention of Literature."

It would probably not be beyond human ingenuity to write books by machinery. But a sort of mechanizing process can already be seen at work in the film and radio, in publicity and propaganda, and in the lower reaches of journalism. The Disney films, for instance, are produced by what is essentially a factory process, the work being done partly mechanically and partly by means of artists who have to subordinate their individual style. Radio features are commonly written by tired hacks to whom the subject and the manner of treatment are dictated beforehand. Even so, what they write is merely a kind of raw material to be chopped into shape by producers and censors. So also with the innumerable books and pamphlets commissioned by government departments.<sup>13</sup>

One of the satiric rages that moved Orwell was plainly bitter disappointment that almost a hundred years of the democratic franchise and of compulsory secondary education had not realized the liberal dream of an educated, active, and politically literate citizenry but that industrial society had turned people into proles: "films, football, beer and, above all, gambling filled the horizon of their minds. To keep them in control was not difficult."<sup>14</sup> Several of his essays bristle with contempt for what he still called "the yellow press" and, as a working journalist, he had obviously believed that through writing plain English one could—if not prevented—reach ordinary people with important issues. He implied that most intellectuals now lived off the backs

of a debased populace by supplying prolefeed, no longer trying to "educate and agitate"—the old radical slogan. He only erred in his satire of two-way television by seeing its development primarily as a device of surveillance; and, even so, these other things had so debased the proles that "the great majority of the proles did not even have telescreens in their homes." The actual development of mass television would have been added grist to Orwell's satiric mill, prolefeed indeed.

Seen as a projective model of totalitarian society, the text actually works badly. The proles are left passive, they are not mobilized systematically as nearly every author who used the term *totalitarian* had thought was the essence of the concept—including Orwell himself in a whole group of wartime and postwar essays. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not his clearest model of a totalitarian society, simply because the demands of the specific satire make the proles debased rather than adequate human material for political mobilization.

The intensity of the writing and his immediate reactions to reviews must convince us that, even if it is not a prophecy of totalitarianism (still less a timetable, nor a precise model), the book is certainly a warning that "something like this could happen even here." Of course, the details of the regime cannot be reviewed as a precise model but only as parts of a satiric story. It is almost as absurd to object to Orwell that the class structure in Oceania is obscure or contradictory as to tell Swift that the babies of the Irish poor would have been too emaciated to serve as food for the starving.

Orwell himself was disturbed when a first wave of American reviews (notably from the *Time-Life Corporation's* journals) hailed *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as, first and last, an explicit attack on socialism. Not unexpectedly, Communists took exactly the same line. Orwell dictated notes for the following press release:

It has been suggested by some of the reviewers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that it is the author's view that this, or something like this, is what will happen inside the next forty years in the Western World. This is not correct. I think that, allowing for the book being after all a parody, something like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could happen. This is the direction in which the world is going at the present time, and the trend lies deep in the political, social and economic foundations of the contemporary world situation.

Specifically the danger lies in the structure imposed on Socialist and on Liberal capitalist communities by the necessity to prepare for total war with the U.S.S.R. and the new weapons,

of which of course the atomic bomb is the most powerful and the most publicized. But danger lies also in the acceptance of a totalitarian outlook by intellectuals of all sorts.

The moral to be drawn from the dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: *Don't let it happen. It depends on you.*

George Orwell assumes that if such societies as he describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* come into being there will be several super states. This is fully dealt with in the relevant chapter of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is also discussed from a different angle by James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution*. These super states will naturally be in opposition to each other or (a novel point) will pretend to be more in opposition than in fact they are. Two of the principal super states will obviously be the Anglo-American world and Eurasia. If these two great blocs line up as mortal enemies it is obvious that the Anglo-Americans will not take the name of their opponents and will not dramatise themselves on the scene of history as Communists. Thus they will have to find a new name for themselves. The name suggested in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is of course Ingsoc, but in practice a wide range of choices is open. In the U.S.A. the phrase "Americanism" or "hundred per cent Americanism" is suitable and the qualifying adjective is as totalitarian as anyone could wish.

If there is a failure of nerve and the Labour Party breaks down in its attempt to deal with the hard problems with which it will be faced, tougher types than the present Labour leaders will inevitably take over, drawn probably from the ranks of the Left, but not sharing the Liberal aspirations of those now in power. Members of the present British government, from Mr. Attlee and Sir Stafford Cripps down to Aneurin Bevan, will *never* willingly sell the pass to the enemy, and in general the older men, nurtured in a Liberal tradition, are safe, but the younger generation is suspect and the seeds of totalitarian thoughts are probably widespread among them. It is invidious to mention names, but everyone could without difficulty think for himself of prominent English and American personalities whom the cap would fit.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly Orwell thought that something like it could happen, but notice how contemporary—division of the world between the great powers and his fears for the Labour Party—the specific elements of the satire become: and notice his use of the phrase that it was "after all a parody." The problem still remains, a parody of what? Here the book perhaps ceases to speak directly to the modern reader unless a

few introductory lines are written. For it is reasonably clear that a major part of the book is a parody of James Burnham's thesis, in particular, and of the power hunger of intellectuals (an old Orwell theme) in general. "Who was James Burnham?" many of the celebrants of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may well ask.

Burnham had a double thesis: that the two great ideologies and superpowers would one day converge, neither the commissars nor the congressmen winning; and that the state would be taken over not by politicians or party men (of whatever ideology) but by technocrats who would develop a common culture and common interests. Orwell was fascinated by both views. He wrote two major essays on Burnham, although in the end he rejected both views. Nonetheless, if one takes intellectuals as a subclass of managers, as Orwell seems to do, he had considerable ambivalence about them. While he defends intellectual liberties, he seems to dislike intellectuals as a class and suspects them of coming to be more interested in power than in thought. He is vastly impressed by a fear (from his BBC wartime experience) that most intellectuals sell out to the machine all too easily for the sake of a job, rationalizing their positions easily. Bureaucrats in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are, as it were, types like himself but who had stayed on and made a career in the BBC. And worse,

The motives of these English intellectuals who support the Russian dictatorship are, I think, different from what they publicly admit, but it is logical to condone tyranny and massacre if one assumes its progress is inevitable.<sup>16</sup>

Orwell packed a lot into that cheerful little aside: not merely his usual polemic against the fellow travelers, but a Karl Popper-like assumption that a belief in inevitable history or in historical prophecy inevitably gets used as an excuse for tyranny. This he linked to the fear of the suppression of truth.

The fallacy is to believe that under a dictatorial government you can be free *inside*. Quite a number of people console themselves with this thought, now that totalitarianism in one form or another is visibly on the upgrade in every part of the world.<sup>17</sup>

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

by removing him entirely from historical record, making him an unperson. Orwell on a deeper level tries to wrestle with the epistemological problem as to whether it is *possible* so to control the past. Although Winston strives to achieve authentic memories, what he finds among the proles is extremely disturbing: their memories are short, ridiculous, wandering; it needs a trained mind to have a trained memory in favorable circumstances. It emerges from some of Orwell's earlier essays that (a) he fears totalitarian regimes believe their own propaganda, and (b) a contradictory theme, that totalitarian regimes could not possibly work if some of their leaders or functionaries, scientists or bureaucrats, did not know what was really happening. Orwell never resolved this profound and difficult epistemological dilemma.

Nor did he fully resolve whether he was satirizing Burnham's view of the primacy of pure power—"It is curious that in all his talk about the struggle for power, Burnham never stops to ask *why* people want power" ("Second Thoughts on James Burnham," 1946<sup>18</sup>)—as an impossibility, or whether he thinks it all too possible that party leaders and civil servants who begin as civilized men end up simply as a regime of officeholders, brutally interested in nothing but power for the sake of power. O'Brien gives the nihilistic reply to Winston Smith when he allows Winston to ask him what it is all for: "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever."<sup>19</sup>

Could there be such a thing as power devoid of ideology? Can history be completely rewritten?

Consider these two views on the possibility of total thought control, in one passage from "The Prevention of Literature" (1946).

The organised lying practised by totalitarian states is not, as is sometimes claimed, a temporary expedient of the same nature as military deception. It is something integral to totalitarianism, something that would still continue even if concentration camps and secret police forces had ceased to be necessary. Among intelligent Communists there is an underground legend to the effect that although the Russian government is obliged now to deal in lying propaganda, frame-up trials, and so forth, it is secretly recording the true facts and will publish them at some future time. We can, I believe, be quite certain that this is not the case, because the mentality implied by such action is that of a liberal historian who believes that the past cannot be altered and that a correct knowledge of history is valuable as a matter of course. From the totalitarian point of view, history is something to be created rather than learned. A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its po-

stion, has to be thought of as infallible. But since, in practice, no one is infallible, it is frequently necessary to re-arrange past events in order to show that this or that mistake was not made, or that this or that imaginary triumph actually happened. Then, again, every major change in policy demands a corresponding change of doctrine and a reevaluation of prominent historical figures. This kind of thing happens everywhere, but is clearly likely to lead to outright falsification in societies where only one opinion is permissible at any given moment. *Totalitarianism demands, in fact, the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth.* <sup>20</sup> [Emphasis added.]

But then, in the same paragraph, he immediately contradicts himself.

The friends of totalitarianism in this country usually tend to argue that since absolute truth is not attainable, a big lie is no worse than a little lie. It is pointed out to us that all historical records are biased and inaccurate or, on the other hand, that modern physics has proved that what seems to us the real world is an illusion, so that to believe in the evidence of one's senses is simply vulgar philistinism. A totalitarian society which succeeds in perpetuating itself would probably set up a schizophrenic system of thought, in which laws of commonsense held good in everyday life and in certain exact sciences, but could be disregarded by the politician, the historian and the sociologist. Already there are countless people who would think it scandalous to falsify a scientific text-book, but would see nothing wrong in falsifying an historical fact. It is at the point where literature and politics cross that totalitarianism exerts its greatest pressure on the intellectual. <sup>21</sup>

He is contradicting himself here because he is assuming not a total system of false thought but a schizophrenic one. This is undoubtedly the more commonsense view, the mildly less nightmarish. Perhaps, as Czeslaw Milosz once argued, it is possible (indeed common) for even quite high functionaries in a totalitarian regime to be inwardly skeptical. We do still live in the world of Thomas Hobbes, in other words, one of conventional fear, not only of total brainwashing and total reconstituting of character. Totalitarianism may be a temperament and a tendency, but it is not a result: nothing in this world is perfect. <sup>22</sup>

Orwell simply was not sure on both these big issues: can there be a total divorce of power from morality and history and ideology from truth? Few of us are sure. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* raises these two

dilemmas acutely. Perhaps he had not got the philosophical ability to resolve them, but he had the literary genius to go right to the heart of the problem as few philosophers have done. Perhaps because they were open-ended dilemmas, he chose to write a novel, not a tract—even though so many people read it as if it were a tract, and a deliberate last message at that.

In "The Prevention of Literature," he brings satire down to earth again: "let me repeat what I said at the beginning of this essay: that in England the immediate enemies of truthfulness, and hence of freedom of thought, are the Press lords, the film magnates and the bureaucrats, but that on a long view the weakening of the desire for liberty among the intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all."<sup>23</sup> He radiates mistrust for the debasing effect of the press and feared that intellectuals were betraying their principles. I see this as the enduring relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the main satiric thrust.

### Notes

1. See Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, rev. ed. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1981), 384–85 and 397. (The Penguin Books edition is identical.) I obviously disagree with William Steinhoff, when he sees *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "as a culminating work which expresses, almost epitomizes, a lifetime's ideas, attitudes, events, and reading." His *George Orwell and the Origins of 1984* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975) is a magnificent feat of scholarship that puts all serious students of Orwell in his lasting debt, showing precisely the "ideas, attitudes, events, and reading that helped to make up *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," but I must disagree that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a "culminating work": it is neither Orwell's best nor did he plan it as his last.
2. Crick, *Orwell*, 2, 410–12, 416–17.
3. Crick, *Orwell*, xiv–xv and 404.
4. Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Knopf, 1953), 40.
5. When William (now Sir William) Empson wrote to thank Orwell for *Animal Farm*, he pointed out that his son read it as "Tory propaganda," whereas he knew that Orwell intended it as socialism.