

which is a compound of the two. For Swift it was Gulliver. Ultimately, then, Orwell does achieve his intention in the satire; but the final value of any work cannot be predicated on its aesthetic coherence alone. If *Animal Farm* is an artistic success, it does not embody the significance of thought and feeling evident in some of his less finished books, for example his next novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

III

It is difficult to account for *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* imaginative and emotional power. It is a flawed novel: The plot, obvious, heavy-handed and melodramatic, reduces the major characters, Winston and Julia, to pawns; Martin O'Brien, the antagonist, emerges more like a parody of a science-fiction villain than a representative of an inhuman tyranny; and Orwell even resorts to the worn-out device, akin to the letter in the Victorian novel, of including a long essay on the history of Oceania and on politics, a serious structural defect. It exists, also, as an example of the author's distrust of the dramatic, evident in some way in almost all his works.

The major plot failure, a difficulty he had to a greater or lesser degree in all his novels, is that the principal action does not begin until Part II, a third of the way into the book. In Part I he deals with Winston's job in the Ministry of Truth, his first diary entries, and the description of Oceania. It is not until Part II that he and Julia begin their fated affair. The initial section parallels in manner and purpose the

beginning of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, for example, in which Gordon Comstock is presented in detail. The result is the same in both novels: a certain tedium and wasted motion. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, furthermore, the explanatory nature and long build-up of Part I renders the plot itself fairly predictable. Thus the conflict between Winston and Julia and the Party, the inevitable force, is seriously weakened and the conclusion loses a necessary tragic dimension. It is, consequently, unmitigated pathos. In order to add interest to the plot, Orwell resorts to sensationalism, evident particularly in O'Brien's inquisition and Winston's torture.

Not only do the two main characters suffer because of the overabundance of machinery, but they themselves lack real depth and complexity. Orwell had, in a manner of speaking, painted himself into a corner. For the sake of the novel he required characters who possessed both the intelligence and will to revolt and yet, given the circumstances, they could be neither overly individualistic nor strong. Without question Winston is the more successful, for we can at least pity him. But it is impossible to feel anything for Julia. Unfortunately we tend to view her, like Winston does, as an object. The others, the Parsons, Mr. Charrington, the shopkeeper, the proles, and even O'Brien, remain faceless. A defense of his characterization on the basis that an individual personality would not be credible in this world is finally not to the point. More than in any other work of his fiction, Orwell simply sacrificed matters of plot and character to his obsession with idea. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it was not only

a sense of urgency which led him to emphasize the polemic, but also the intriguing nature of the concept itself.

And yet it is precisely the idea and even his careful detailing of it, including the appendix, "The Principles of Newspeak," which explains to a great extent the novel's power. That art creates culture is nowhere more evident than in the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The date itself has definite relevance in Western civilization and not merely to those who have read the novel. It has become a general metaphor suggesting a certain kind of political state while calling up an emotion of apprehension about the future. The novel's social effect can be seen further in the common usage of such terms as "Big Brother," "Oceania," "doublethink," and "newspeak" to describe select contemporary conditions like government spending and its accompanying jargon. They connote what is waiting for us as a result of the continued growth of government. Orwell has created a language for us to think about both the present and the potentialities of the future. It is not only, then, his personal, moral sense and integrity which make him a conscience of our time, but also his art.

He of course did not so much create the idea of a universal slave state as define an inarticulate emotion that lay close to the surface of his culture. He did have antecedents, like Huxley's *Brave New World*—opposed in kind though it was to his own vision—and Eugene Zamiatin's *We*, the principal source of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But appearing, as the novel did, after the atomic bomb, during the first years of the

United Nations, and just as the Soviet Union was approaching full nuclear capability, it became an embodiment of all the postwar terrors. Its continuing popularity and relevance to the present political situation indicate that these same fears, although somewhat muted, are still very real in us.

A more important question in determining the novel's significance is whether its image of civilization's possibilities has anything more than a temporary value. Has Orwell touched a nerve unique to our own time? Or has he given expression to a universal anxiety about man's ability to control his own nature? It is an especially difficult question at this time, but ultimately, I believe, the novel is more than a historical oddity. In fact, it points to both a cultural phenomenon and one of man's fundamental preoccupations. If the utopian vision is indigenous to humanistic culture, so, paradoxically, is the tragic view. And if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* directly opposes the dream of human perfectibility, it also explicitly dramatizes the underlying but never realized dread of all tragedy. In the classic form of the tragedy, this dread: the doubt about man's essential worth, is put to rest—if not always easily—at least in the final movement; Orwell, on the other hand, carries the tragic uncertainty in his last novel to its logical and inevitable conclusion. And that end is shown most poignantly in the scene where O'Brien seeks to destroy Winston's belief in humanity. To confute him the inquisitor describes Winston's terrible emaciation, and then says, "You are rotting away' . . . , 'you are falling to pieces. What are you? A bag of filth. Now turn round and look into that

mirror. Do you see that thing facing you? That is the last man. If you are human, that is humanity. Now put your clothes on again'" (p. 278). In response Winston insists that he has at least maintained his integrity; he has not betrayed Julia. Because he is no longer convinced of his humanity, however, it is only a matter of time until he does.

Nineteen Eighty-Four, then, might be described as what Orwell calls a "good bad" book. In this category he places frankly escapist literature, but also novels which are serious in intent but lack artistic taste and coherence. More particularly, he cites *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "as the supreme example of the 'good bad' book. . . . It is an unintentionally ludicrous book, full of preposterous melodramatic incidents; it is also deeply moving and essentially true; it is hard to say which quality outweighs the other."¹² In other words, certain novels, and he puts those of Trollope, Dickens, and Dreiser in the group, succeed despite their aesthetic grossness because they possess "sheer skill, or native grace, which may have more survival value than erudition or intellectual power." He concludes, "I would back *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to outlive the complete works of Virginia Woolf or George Moore, though I know of no strictly literary test which would show where the superiority lies."

To be sure it is a poor literary test which places survival in the common culture as the supreme value. Orwell cannot define the quality which insures a work's continuance in the face of its own outrageous faults and is reduced to calling it "a sort of literary vitamin" or "native grace." He means, perhaps, what

is identified by the equally unsatisfying phrase, "a sense of life or reality." *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, at any rate, does overcome its failure of plot and character, its imaginative vulgarity, and very well could survive as a "good bad" novel because it accurately presents an idea which corresponds to our universal and ever present fear of what we might become.

The annihilation of the spirit is, nevertheless, only one side of the novel's dialectic; on the other is that of the instinctual ego insisting on its own survival and selfish wants. And it is Orwell's development of this theme which remains as *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* artistic achievement. In the novel, as in all his work including the nonfiction, underlying the self's demand for freedom resides the idea that man, following his instincts, will find meaning.

But there is also the realization that for the individual to become completely himself, he must alleviate the horrible isolation of his rebellion through love, union with the non-self which is uncorrupted by society. John Flory mistakenly seeks it in Elizabeth; Dorothy Hare at least understands the need for others; Gordon Comstock accepts Rosemary and bourgeois values; the narrator of *Homage to Catalonia* and George Bowling attempt to find themselves in a closely knit community; Winston Smith sees in Julia another rebel and an opportunity to return to his natural self. Even in *The Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell celebrates the individual in the family where the nexus is human rather than cash. All fail, however, except Comstock and Bowling, who settle for a compromise. Flory, Dorothy, and Winston end in terrible isolation,

the self dead or fragmented. Winston's final position is the worst, for he betrays his human loyalty and turns to Big Brother; he loves the machine.

Winston's and Julia's revolt is primarily sexual, a most appropriate metaphor of the individual's search for the primary self in a totally mechanical and non-personal environment. But their love-making, in the last analysis, has little to do with the higher, human emotions or even ordinary sensual pleasure: "In the old days, [Winston] thought, a man looked at a girl's body and saw that it was desirable, and that was the end of the story. But you could not have pure love or pure lust nowadays. No emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow against the Party. It was a political act" (p. 130). Sexual intercourse for them is a drive to recover the biological self, the animal self, which radically opposes the Party's requirement of total impersonality. So their physical act recreates at least the tension between self and society. It is not really a human expression but simple copulation, which is nevertheless perfect rebellion, being nonrational, against pure mind. Winston rejoices therefore in Julia's animality:

His heart leapt. Scores of times she had done it: he wished it had been hundreds—thousands. Anything that hinted at corruption always filled him with a wild hope. Who knew, perhaps the Party was rotten under the surface, its cult of strenuousness and self-denial simply a sham concealing iniquity. If he could have infected the whole lot of them with leprosy or syphilis, how

gladly he would have done so! Anything to rot, to weaken, to undermine! He pulled her down so that they were kneeling face to face.

"Listen. The more men you've had, the more I love you. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"I hate purity, I hate goodness! I don't want any virtue to exist anywhere. I want everyone to be corrupt to the bones."

"Well then, I ought to suit you dear. I'm corrupt to the bones."

"You like doing this? I don't mean simply me: I mean the thing itself."

"I adore it."

That was above all what he wanted to hear. Not merely love of one person but the animal instinct, the simply undifferentiated desire: that was the force that would tear the Party to pieces. He pressed her down upon the grass, among the fallen bluebells. (pp. 129-130)

The primeval quality in their love-making links them with nature, the past, and the proles. Their meetings occur either in the country or in the secret room overlooking the proles' housing development and in full view of the washerwoman, a figure of gross fertility. For a time, then, they are able to create a separate world, symbolized by the paperweight Winston purchases from Mr. Charrington: "[The paperweight] was a heavy lump of glass, curved on one side, flat on the other, making almost a hemisphere. There was a peculiar softness, as of rainwater, in both the colour and the texture of the glass. At the heart of it, magnified by the curved surface, there was a strange,

pink, convoluted object that recalled a rose or a sea anemone" (p. 99). Later Winston tells Julia that "It's a little chunk of history that they've forgotten to alter. It's a message from a hundred years ago, if one knew how to read it" (p. 150). Then he looks deeply into it:

The inexhaustibly interesting thing was not the fragment of coral but the interior of the glass itself. There was such a depth to it, and yet it was almost as transparent as air. It was as though the surface of the glass had been the arch of the sky, enclosing a tiny world with its atmosphere complete. He had the feeling that he could get inside it, and that in fact he was inside it, along with the mahogany bed and the gateleg table, and the clock and the steel engraving and the paperweight itself. The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal. (p. 151)

Ironically, of course, their world is crystal, fragile, and transparent, but, still, for those moments, an individual one. Underneath, both Winston and Julia know that it is temporary but prefer the uncertainty rather than the Party or self-destruction: "In reality there was no escape. Even the one plan that was practicable, suicide, they had no intention of carrying out. To hang on from day to day and from week to week, spinning out the present that had no future, seemed an unconquerable instinct, just as one's lungs will always draw the next breath so long as there is air available" (p. 156).

The Party, however, realizes that the main threat to their power is not the intellect but the instincts;

therefore the Ministry of Love is responsible for law and order. It does not attempt to crush nature directly but to control it through isolation. Just as Winston and Julia are segregated from the society, so are the proles. The instincts alone are undisciplined energy, capable only of revolt, of anarchistic gestures, but not of revolution. Since they are only two and effectively kept apart from any community, they are doomed. The proles, on the other hand, form a real community which maintains the instincts inviolate. They remain impervious to the mind of the Party; bluntly, they are stupid but, as Winston sees, "By lack of understanding they remained sane. They simply swallowed everything, and what they swallowed did them no harm, because it left no residue behind, just as a grain of corn will pass undigested through the body of a bird" (p. 161). Their sanity, their insistence on self-preservation, ultimately manifests itself as communal morality. Just as the prole woman protests against the violent propaganda film in an effort to protect the children, so a man saves Winston from a bomb:

"Steamer!" he yelled. "Look out, guv'nor! Bang overhead! Lay down quick!"

"Steamer" was a nickname which, for some reason, the proles applied to rocket bombs. Winston promptly flung himself on his face. The proles were nearly always right when they gave you a warning of this kind. They seemed to possess some kind of instinct which told them several seconds in advance when a rocket was coming, although the rockets supposedly travelled faster than sound. (p. 87)

If there is a hope, therefore, it must lie with the proles, since their individual instincts are directed by and protected in the community. But this time the drama of rebellion is resolved in favor of the machine. Winston and Julia are beaten before they begin; the real test would be between the proles and the Party. Even if it does not come, however, there is the assurance that the human spirit, if it will not achieve dominance, will endure.

If Orwell had maintained a dramatic concreteness, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would undoubtedly have been a more coherent work of art. Yet there were matters, such as the history of Oceania, the rationale behind the slave state, and the political significance of the debasement of language, which he felt impelled to include for ideological reasons and which could only be treated through expository devices like Goldstein's book, O'Brien's long monologues and the essay on newspeak. He obviously thought that it was more important to describe how certain social phenomena present in postwar civilization resulted in Oceania rather than to work in concrete and personal terms. If he sacrificed aesthetic integrity and cogency by failing to completely unify the political and human centers of the novel, he managed to clearly articulate a complex idea of what was occurring in society, where it could lead, and, lastly, an effective antidote for the disease. Orwell, like D. H. Lawrence, was writing primarily for a middle-class audience and was intent on showing what they had lost in the pursuit of progress and how the loss of proletarian spontaneity, instinct, and com-

munity ends in the demolition of their precious individuality and of their civilization.

In many ways *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stands as the culmination of his thought. Similarities of theme, atmosphere, character, and plot between it and preceding books indicate that Orwell's essential concept of reality varied little. The change took place not so much in his approach as in his growing confidence in what he saw and what he felt was required to effect a solution to cultural chaos. In fact, his last novel is his clearest, if not his most artistic, statement of his understanding of the central conflict in modern society. And if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be dismissed as art, it cannot be explained away as science fiction nor as the nightmare of a man in despair, for it seriously calls into question the very bases and assumptions of our entire way of thought and life.

IV

Of the many paradoxes confronting the critic of Orwell, the most complex is that while he did not produce either a significant body of art or a finished system of political thought, he remains one of the paramount figures in modern British literary history. Not only has he drawn as much or more critical attention than anyone of his generation, but he has had a substantial moral and intellectual influence on contemporary writers. Even in matters of form, many of today's artists are following his lead. To a great extent his pertinence may be accounted for by the fact that he is the most immediately relevant heir of the radical-

liberal tradition which has reacted against industrialism and mass civilization since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Like his own idea of Dickens, he was more a rebel than a revolutionary and essentially a moralist rather than a political thinker. Although he often called for a reordered social structure, he emphasized the necessity of maintaining traditional ethical roots. The change he envisioned was not so much a new system but an evolution of the present order. Much like Matthew Arnold, for example, he sought the best self of each class as the basis of a classless culture. He wanted to reestablish the traditional strengths of English society, the morality of the yeoman, shopkeeper, and workingman and the intellectual acumen of the middle class as a foundation of his socialism.

His intellectual ancestors, then, were nineteenth-century radicals like William Cobbett, Dickens, and William Morris and moderns like Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, rather than Marx and Lenin. He is also related to the enlightened, liberal thought of E. M. Forster as well as Arnold. As diverse as these writers may have been in particulars, they shared a similar attitude toward the development of industrial civilization; they recognized the substitution of the economic for the personal nexus as disastrous and foresaw the possibilities of cultural chaos unless some basis other than the industrial could be found for the community. In essence, however, they called for a transformation of the self rather than of the system.¹³

To the young intellectuals of the thirties, after the debacle of World War I, in the midst of the depression and during Hitler's rise, Cobbett's celebration of

rural England, Dickens's "change of heart," Arnold's and Morris's cultural dreams, Forster's philosophy of personal relations, and Lawrence's sexual ethic seemed hopelessly dated; better as material for the Cambridge Debating Union than as solutions for a social crisis of such magnitude. Orwell shared their belief that the nineteenth century's remedies for society were no longer adequate, but he did not turn in desperation, like many of them, to revolutionary communism. Indeed, as his thought developed he saw that no change could be brought about with any assurance of justice if one eliminates, as he states in "Fascism and Democracy," the healthy bases of liberal civilization. Such values as the objectivity of truth, the sanctity of the individual, and traditional moral standards could not be dispensed with, he insisted, unless one wanted another version of the Soviet Union or the Third Reich. Bourgeois democracy is not enough, but a just and equitable socialism, if it is to arrive, must be constructed on democracy's permanent values. Even though Orwell was faced with an obviously more dangerous political situation than that which confronted Arnold or Hardy or even Lawrence and though he realized that more drastic and immediate reformation was required than they proposed, he understood that their insistence on the radical centrality of the self must under no condition be disregarded. It was this native, bourgeois wisdom that protected him from the hysteria of commitment which nearly brought about, as he argues, Hitler's defeat of England.

During a period of transition when liberal democracy was obviously breaking up and society was mov-

ing toward another, as yet uncertain, form, Orwell attempted to shape a political idea with roots in the past that would also accommodate the needs of the present. There was no question in his mind that man in the mid-twentieth century was irrevocably a social being, that if he were to survive, in fact, he must commit himself to making a just society and combating the tyranny of any orthodoxy which would deprive him of his freedom. But the threat of a cataclysm never frightened him into the extremism of anarchistic individualism or the other extreme of a political philosophy which denied the self. It is his refusal to see the world in simplistic terms, his courage in attempting a synthesis of self and society, a synthesis, in short, of liberalism and Marxism which constitutes his contemporary relevance. I view Orwell's position in much the same way as Morton Zabel describes that of Lionel Trilling, who sees the necessity of bringing the liberal tradition to bear on modern politics:

It is the will in modulation (Trilling contends) that must survive if absolutes are to be denied their tyranny and the intelligence is to survive for the use of justice and truth. The charge of defending "individual morality" against "social morality" is one that Mr. Trilling has not escaped in his experience of political controversy. This novel [*The Middle of the Journey*], with its subtle, athletic, and unsimplified articulation of "the double truth" of social and individual values shows how honestly he sees the complex actuality of values which the simplistic moralism of dogmatic or abstracting minds, hot for action and accusation, ignores.¹⁴

For the most part present-day British writers have recognized the validity of the same "double truth," shunning the romantic stance as well as ideological extremism; and since Orwell in his life and writing dramatized this so clearly, he persists for them as a forceful moral and artistic guide.¹⁵ Like Gordon Comstock, the "semi-heroes" of Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Alan Sillitoe, Raymond Williams, and John Braine, for example, see only emotional death in isolation and strain to make a connection, no matter how tentative, with society. Inherent in much of their fiction is Orwell's idea that personal values are not sufficient, indeed are not possible unless one eliminates the span between the self and culture. None of their characters are absolutely successful, but even when they fail, they see that it is necessary to create the relationship. Even though the society is a destructive jungle, protagonists like Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Charles Lumley in *Hurry on Down*, and Peter Owen in *Second Generation* apprehend the fact that for the sake of their own moral and spiritual health they must accept sociality.

Since one of the chief insights to emerge from contemporary experience is that the person is unalterably a social being and the principal problem is how to make contact with an essentially hostile environment and yet retain one's individuality, for most writers the realistic novel appears as the appropriate form. Here again they are at one with Orwell, with the important difference that today's novelists are, on the whole, more successful, even though they are faced with the same problem of dramatizing social ideas. The answer

is not simply that they are better craftsmen, although this is a major part of it. But this brings us to a final evaluation of Orwell's search for an artistic form.

His attempt to find or create a form in which he could combine his polemic and artistic intentions did not really succeed, as I have shown, except in the case of *Animal Farm*. Just as he gave no final coherence to his political thought, neither did he resolve his problems as an artist. Orwell's failure occurred because he did not allow his ideas to develop from the characters and action but tended to impose and interject them. In his discussion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Woodcock defines the book's weakness as the author's inability to unite the human and theoretical centers.¹⁶ The deficiency of all his works, fiction as well as non-fiction, can be traced to the same source, for he essentially mistrusted the dramatic imagination to carry his message.

The reason behind his lack of confidence also accounts for his inability to establish an ultimately satisfying political and artistic idea: The fact that he lived in a transitional period of great danger brought about political pressures that he was not equipped as a man or as an artist to handle. Like many of his generation he had neither the political experience nor the education to deal with violent social upheavals and the threat of brutal and oppressive dictatorships. In his poem "A Happy Vicar," written in 1935, he describes his longing for the eighteenth century and his sense of displacement: that neither he nor anyone was born for an age of industrialism and commissars.¹⁷ In *Homage to Catalonia*, speaking of the Spaniards he met

during the Civil War, he says, "They have . . . a generosity, a species of nobility, that do not really belong to the twentieth century" (p. 239). Indeed, the drama of the book suggests that ironically this nobility left the Spaniards vulnerable to the agents of the commissars in Barcelona. No matter how hard he tried to become "George Orwell," the contemporary man struggling with his age, he always retained something of Eric Blair, a man out of his time and place. The present often overwhelmed him, most dramatically in Spain but also immediately before the war when he was writing *Coming Up For Air* and afterwards when he was working on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

At times like this his reaction, prompted by a sense of urgency, was often to sacrifice the integrity of his work for the sake of the discursive message. Analogously, he felt there was no leisure to order his political thought; the first task, he insisted, was to combat the Soviet and German tyrannies and to eliminate poverty. To be sure, novelists at the moment live in a potentially more perilous age than his, but also there is time, or at least there seems to be, to think about the problems of art and politics which an era demanding commitment creates. Moreover, the experience of the thirties and forties, communicated by writers like Orwell, have made the world of commissars and atomic weapons a less alien one. In a very real way, he taught the next generation about a world that no one was born for but that everyone must learn to live in.

He not only revealed our world in his art, however; he also demonstrated a way to avoid the devastating fate he imagined for us: If we refuse to accept the

illusion of the whale, the illusion of security in any state or ideology, and are willing to risk our last wager on the self, the root and foundation of our civilization, then we can do more than survive. This process of wrenching the self free from the deceptive safety of any hole-and-corner, the agonizing rebirth that he himself underwent and symbolically indicated by changing his name, was for him the prelude and basis for wholeness, for relationship, for community which would provide the strength to prevail. Unfortunately when his commitment to found a community or his terror of the present interfered with his art, the results were a simplification of reality and outright propaganda. Yet for all the dissatisfaction one feels with him as an artist, one cannot ignore that he managed, because of his involvement, to add a human dimension to a historical era which would otherwise have remained an abstraction, a mass of political issues, rather than the intense personal struggle it was. So it is not only George Orwell's life, that drama made valuable by his refusal to despair in man, but also his art which guarantees his permanency in our civilization.

Notes

Whenever possible and for the sake of convenience I have used *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (Volume I, *An Age Like This: 1920–1940*; Volume II, *My Country Right or Left: 1940–1943*; Volume III, *As I Please: 1943–1945*; Volume IV, *In Front of Your Nose: 1945–1950*), edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) rather than the original sources. For Orwell's novels and the longer non-fiction I have employed the uniform edition published by Secker & Warburg, London, and cited the original publication dates in the text and the Bibliography.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. (New York: Viking, Compass Book Edition, 1964), p. 159.
2. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 46.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. "W. B. Yeats," *My Country Right or Left*, pp. 273–274.
2. "Inside the Whale," *An Age Like This*, p. 515. Also note what C. Day Lewis says in his autobiography: "We had all, I think, lapsed from the Christian faith, and tended to despair of Liberalism as an effective instrument