

George Orwell and the Lasting Relevance of **1984***

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All through the history mind limps after reality.

Leon Trotsky

Mr. Chairman, I was delighted to receive the invitation to address the spring meeting of the College here in Leicester. I was interested to find that the College is able on these occasions to broaden its intellectual concerns to include discussions on topics which, while relevant to the practice of medicine, have obvious significance in a wider social context. Would a conference of engineers or lawyers, or –dare I say it– academics, be inclined to follow your excellent example? I wonder... Perhaps this explains why Deans of Medicine so often appear to be polymaths.

I was equally delighted to be asked to speak about George Orwell's work. He has long been a literary and political hero of mine and nothing that has been said about him in the recent spate of books, TV programmes or other sources has caused me to change my mind about his significance both as a superb writer of English prose and a man of quirky but nonetheless passionate integrity. Indeed, I recall with some nostalgia that my first published article dealt with Orwell's less familiar writings and I, therefore, welcome the opportunity afforded by Dr Crowe's invitation to return to his work.

E. M. Forster described Orwell as 'a bit of a nagger' – an apt description, because what Orwell does, throughout his corpus, is to challenge the conventional wisdom, especially that of his fellow socialists, many of whom in the 1930s and 1940s persisted in entertaining the most extraordinary illusions about the benevolent effects of life under Stalin, to a large extent the prototype for Big Brother in *1984*.

* This paper, originally titled 'George Orwell', was presented by the author, at the time a Professor at the University of Leicester, at the Conference of the Royal General Practitioners on 7 April 1984. It is published here in its entirety.

1984: *An outline*

I am assuming that most of you are reasonably familiar with the outline of the story of *1984*. Very briefly, it concerns the tragedy that befalls Winston Smith and Julia, his girlfriend, who have the misfortune to live in Oceania, one of the super-states constantly at war with each other and ruled by an omnipotent Party expressing itself in four agencies: the Ministry of Peace (responsible for making war); the Ministry of Love (responsible for spreading hatred of the enemy); the Ministry of Plenty (responsible for scarcity or, rather, for providing just enough food and drink to keep the citizens above a bare subsistence level); and the Ministry of Truth (responsible for telling lies and eradicating the past). The Thought Police are dedicated to stamping out dissent and a repressive technology enables the State to listen in to every conversation and observe every nuance of behaviour, thereby compelling a horrifying degree of conformity with the perverted values of the ruling elite.

The majority of the population, the Proles, are too sunk in apathy, degeneration and poverty to even think of rebellion, while the Party has contrived to eliminate any record of the past (the function of the Ministry of Truth) which might suggest that men had once lived differently and might do so again in the future. Thus, even the comforting, if ultimately deluding, hope of Utopian ideology finds no place in Oceania.

Winston and Julia contrive to meet, enjoy a brief but passionate affair, flirt naively with the idea of rebellion, and are ultimately trapped into confessing their errors. Worse still, they are compelled by a combination of torture and spurious intellectual argument into mutual betrayal and into accepting the logic and the legitimacy of the State's totalitarian premises, its definition of social and political reality.

On reflection I am not sure that tragedy is the appropriate term to describe *1984*. Aristotle defined it as an aesthetic experience designed to charge the spectator 'by pity and terror', implying that the process contained –both for the audience and the protagonists– the hope of moral rejuvenation. But Winston and Julia are hardly tragic heroes, especially if we bear in mind Jan Kott's definition: 'In tragedy the protagonists die, but the moral order is preserved. Their

death confirms the existence of the absolute.¹ In *1984*, however, even death is denied to the protagonists and the only absolute in Oceania is power. Indeed, it can be argued that the notion of tragedy is entirely alien to the world of *1984*, if only because of the latter's humanistic concern with questions of moral choice and the possibility of human error, freely committed and ultimately acknowledged by those who fall from grace.

Illness and its effect on 1984

Orwell's bleak conclusion, one that offers no prospect whatsoever of escaping a future characterised by 'a boot stamping on a human face for ever', has been criticised on a variety of grounds. One rather silly view is that *1984* was based on Orwell's experience of prep school which he described in his essay 'Such, such were the joys'. Now, it is true that English biography is rich in accounts of prep school life, which sometimes make the latter sound akin to life in a concentration camp. Yet Orwell clearly exaggerated; indeed, his essay on the subject could not be published for many years in England for fear of libel by an outraged headmaster.

A more serious claim is that his long drawn-out struggle with tuberculosis created a 'morbid state of mind',² and that had he been well, the outcome of the book might have been different. This can only be a matter of speculation. Bernard Crick, in his masterly biography of Orwell, argues that if illness did have an effect, then it was on the 'execution' of the novel rather than the 'great overall conception'. It is true that Orwell said that *1984* was 'a good idea ruined', and claimed that 'the execution would have been better'³ but for the TB: 'I ballsed it up rather, partly owing to being so ill while I was writing it, but I think some of the ideas in it might interest you.'⁴

However, we should bear in mind that Orwell had said something of the sort about all his books. He was never satisfied with the final version of any work, and perhaps all we can say is that the characterisation of the protagonists and the structure of the novel

¹ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary* (London, 1965), p. 67.

² Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London, 1980), p. 551.

³ Letter to F. J. Warburg (22 October 1948), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 4: In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London, 1968), p. 448.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter to Julian Symons (4 February 1949), p. 475.

leave something to be desired in *literary* terms. But the 'overall conception', the *political* thrust of the novel, as well as its pessimistic conclusion took shape as early as 1943 and it is impossible to prove that the central thesis of the book –namely, the all-encompassing power of totalitarianism to mould its subjects' minds and bend their will to conform to the State's dictates– was affected one way or another by the effects of prolonged and debilitating illness. And even if this was the case, would it matter? The general conception of the book is rationally constructed and the picture presented, to quote Crick, 'rings true as a theoretically coherent model of what a regime would look like that blended the techniques of communism with those of Nazism for no other purpose than to perpetuate a power-hungry elite of intellectuals in power'.⁵

I hesitate to dilate further on this theme. You are, after all, professionals in the business of illness and its effects on the mind, and I am not. Would you, therefore, agree with me that in the absence of evidence of the sort that Lord Moran provided about the effect of illness on Churchill's performance as a politician, we cannot say very much of substance about the impact of Orwell's medical condition on the writing of *1984*?

I say this with one important qualification: there is evidence from *1984* that Orwell understood the nature and effect of pain. There is a marvellous passage in the book which clearly brings this out, and perhaps his experience of debilitating illness had a positive, as distinct from a negative influence on the writing of the novel:

All he had eyes for was the truncheon in the guard's hand. It might fall anywhere; on the crown, on the tip of the ear, on the upper arm, on the elbow – The elbow! He had slumped to his knees, almost paralysed, clasping the stricken elbow with his other hand. Everything had exploded into yellow light. Inconceivable, inconceivable that one blow could cause such pain! The light cleared and he could see the other two looking down at him. The guard was laughing at his contortions. One question at any rate was answered. Never, for any reason on earth, could you wish for an increase of pain. Of pain you could wish only one thing: that it should stop. Nothing in the world was so bad as physical pain. In the face of pain there are no heroes, no heroes, he thought over and over as he writhed on the floor, clutching uselessly at his disabled left arm.⁶

⁵ Crick, *George Orwell*, p. 552.

⁶ George Orwell, *1984* (London, 1973), p. 192.

Thus, illness, if it did have any effect on the execution of the novel, heightened and refined Orwell's perception of totalitarian reality rather than distorted it.

Insights into totalitarianism

For me the central message of *1984* has to do with the role of private life in a civilised community. Orwell recognised something that political philosophers like Hannah Arendt came to appreciate and write about much later, that the distinction between a totalitarian society and one based on orthodox, liberal values is one of kind rather than degree. It may be, of course, that Orwell felt obliged to assert this distinction precisely because the experience of World War II had convinced him that both the Western democracies and the Fascist dictatorships were resorting to the same techniques of social control: centralised administration of the economy; the direction of labour; the creation and refinement of vast propaganda machines; rationing of foodstuffs and essential services; military and economic conscription; all designed to enable the state to mobilise human and material resources to fight the enemy more effectively in what came to be known as 'total war'.

It is also significant in this context that Orwell's division of the world into the three superstates of Oceania, Eastasia and Eurasia was clearly influenced by the creation of 'zones' or 'spheres' of influence by the super-powers in the immediate aftermath of World War II. He was, of course, also influenced by his experience of the Communist forces in the Spanish Civil war, and in particular the ruthless way in which the political commissars attached to those forces had traduced, undermined, and ultimately betrayed the POUM or anarchist movement on the side of which Orwell had fought. Undoubtedly too, his approach to the writing of *1984* was influenced by his marked hostility to what he perceived to be the machinations of an unreformed capitalism which, in the 1930s, had condemned millions to the sterility of mass unemployment. (This, after all, was the message of his book *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in 1937.)

Yet despite or, rather, because of what appeared to be a convergence in the structure, process and objectives of Western capitalism and Soviet communism, Orwell stressed throughout *1984* the proposition that totalitarian ideologies like Communism and Nazism make no distinction between claims of the state in the public,

political domain, and man's need, indeed his right, to enjoy, free of interference by the state, both a solitary privacy as well as the communal pleasures of family life. However, the argument can be put more strongly still: what Orwell is emphasising is man's right to think, to speak, to write as he pleases; and you may recall that Winston Smith's first act of rebellion is to write down his subversive thoughts in a diary out of sight of the ubiquitous telescreen in his threadbare apartment.

It is Orwell's greatest achievement in *1984* that he successfully asserts these rights, whether enjoyed in private or public, not by turning his hero, Winston Smith, into a stereotyped radical claiming rights through the rhetoric of public denunciation of the evils of state control and through a dramatic defiance of its injunctions. Rather, he portrays Smith as a weak, vacillating, rather scruffy anti-hero (he constantly has to scratch the festering sore on his varicose veins) who only comes alive after he meets Julia. Orwell describes their desperate search for somewhere to be alone to enjoy the pleasures of sexual love which for Julia (in many ways the more attractive of the two) is the only true and valid act of rebellion. As Winston tells her after she persists in falling asleep during his attempts to educate her into the wicked ways of the Party: 'you're only a rebel from the waist downwards'. Her earlier remark sums up Orwell's belief in the sanctity of individual life: 'I'm not interested in the next generation, dear. I'm interested in us.'⁷

Thus Orwell hammers home his argument about the virtue and value of privacy by focussing on the most intimate and private act of all, sexual love. If that cannot be private and free from the prying leer of the state, then nothing can and life becomes intolerable. This is the great original strength of *1984*, the assertion of the claim to a simple, all too human private pleasure, and one which cannot be properly enjoyed in the most profound sense without a corresponding assertion and defence of freedom in the public, political sphere.

However, there is a terrible irony, indeed a paradox in Orwell's account of the destruction of both private and public liberty. In the context of *1984*, even private love has political overtones and cannot be enjoyed for its own sake. The love between Winston and Julia cannot escape a degree of political perversion, indeed corruption, as the following quotation makes clear:

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

He pulled the overalls aside and studied her smooth white flank. In the old days, he 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 a fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act.⁸

Ultimately Winston and Julia are wrenched apart because the state cannot countenance a relationship concerned with values such as love and tenderness. For Big Brother, private love is subversive of the public order and must be destroyed. By definition the totalitarian state demands total involvement of the citizen, all his private hopes, fears and aspirations must be subordinated, and –worse still– *willingly* subordinated, to the insatiable demands of state policy.

This, of course, is a familiar theme in the literature of totalitarianism. That men should apparently willingly and enthusiastically embrace doctrines such as Nazism and Fascism was a source of wonder to more pragmatic and perhaps less imaginative Anglo-Saxons who witnessed the Nuremberg rallies and their counterparts in Italy and Japan in the 1930s. One must be wary of the crudity of single-cause explanations, but I do commend the work of the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm who, in his book *The Fear of Freedom*, offers an interesting, if partial, explanation of what occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. Fromm argues that in the circumstances of economic and social deprivation peculiar to the post-1919 period men feared freedom, feared the consequences of clinging to a classical atomistic doctrine of liberty that assured a society of atomistic individuals free to rise and fall by their own efforts but without any expectation that the state or any external agency would help them on their way or, alternatively, cushion failure. In the parlous economic conditions of the post-1919 world, this doctrine, according to Fromm, fell out of favour as men, unable to cope with the stresses and strains of economic and social dislocation, fled from the burden imposed by individual freedom to embrace political doctrines that promised private and public salvation.

The price was heavy, ultimately a ruinous one: Nazism and Communism took away the burden of individual freedom and substituted a faith in the state's capacity to deliver not simply

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

economic security, but the psychological satisfaction that came from identification with the state's ideological aspirations at home and abroad. The public and the private therefore fused together, as men were persuaded that only the state's definition of reality mattered. Hence the knock at the door at midnight, hence the concentration camp if one's racial origin ran counter to the state's view of the appropriate qualification not only for citizenship, but the right to life itself. Hence, in Nazi Germany, men could be found to carry out the evil dictates of a Himmler or an Eichmann; they could deny their essential humanity simply because they had become slaves to an ideology that asserted that true freedom was only attainable through subordination in heart and mind to its all-pervasive dictates.

Nazism and Communism, of course, offered the hope of a glittering future when history would come to a full stop and Utopia would arrive. In *1984*, by contrast, even this faint prospect is denied. Indeed, for Orwell, the state in *1984* has reached a point where ideology has become unnecessary; love of power and its exercise for its own sake is all that drives the Party onwards. As O'Brien's interrogation of Smith makes abundantly clear, technology and what it provides for total surveillance, constraint, and modification of individual behaviour rules out the necessity of having to promise Utopia to justify a harsh present, and, by the same token, rules out any possibility of change through revolution. This, in Orwell's view, was implicit in the logic of totalitarian rule as the following passage makes clear:

When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and all illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul. We make him one of ourselves before we kill him. It is intolerable to us that an erroneous thought should exist anywhere in the world, however secret and powerless it may be. Even in the instant of death we cannot permit any deviation. In the old days the heretic walked to the stake still a heretic, proclaiming his heresy, exulting in it. Even the victim of the Russian purges could carry rebellion locked up in his skull as he walked down the passage waiting for the bullet. But we make the brain perfect before we blow it out. The command of the old despotisms was "Thou shalt not". The command of the totalitarians was "Thou shalt". Our command is "*Thou art*". No one whom we bring to this place ever stands out

against us. Everyone is washed clean.⁹

This passage echoes Arthur Koestler's account in *Darkness at Noon* of why those who were purged in the Soviet Union of the 1930s seemingly made voluntary and public confessions of their ideological sins. In some ways, Koestler's account is more convincing than Orwell's; in *1984*, Orwell has to resort to a rather melodramatic torture scene, the famous Room 101 confrontation between Winston and the one thing he fears most – rats. (Orwell subsequently admitted that this was an unsatisfactory piece of writing.) By contrast, Koestler shows how men can be persuaded to recant their sins and not to betray the Party: 'His past was the movement, the Party; present and future too, belonged to the Party, were inseparably bound up with its fate; but his past was identical with it.'¹⁰ Thus Rubashov's conversion is more convincing than Winston Smith's.

I have tried in this brief account to show the influences that operated upon Orwell in the writing of *1984*. Clearly, when he wrote he perceived aspects of *1984* already present in his own time. But he also might have quoted the experience of trench warfare in World War I and the Nazi concentration camps which, to my mind, portray horrors different in kind and degree from those of earlier times. It could be argued that the modern state had, by 1914, and irresistibly since then, amassed resources of technology, bureaucracy, economic and social capability, and media indoctrination unavailable to Genghis Khan and Napoleon alike. In both these seminal, traumatic twentieth-century experiences men had to endure suffering over which they had no control and to which they could see no end. The gas chambers after all would have been impossible without an appropriate technology, a bureaucracy and an ideology to organise and justify their use.

On the other hand, we must be wary of taking *1984* too much at its face value as a commentary and nothing else on the evils of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Orwell wrote long before evidence appeared of how man could sustain decency –indeed defend it– even in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. A recent book, Schindler's Ark, is a refreshing antidote to the terrifying persuasiveness of *1984*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205.

¹⁰ Quoted from Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (London, 1940), p. 61, in Jennie Calder, *Chronicles of Conscience: A Study of George Orwell and Arthur Koestler* (London, 1968), p. 128.

Schindler, a German businessman, by playing on the corrupt desires of his Nazi masters, contrived to save the lives of some 1,500 Jews. His story is a profoundly moving one, all the more telling in its impact because Schindler was himself all too human in his enjoyment of the sins and pleasures of the flesh.

Conclusion

I have not attempted in this brief address to look at the present in terms of Orwell's analysis. For me, *1984* is a satire rather than a prediction and one concerned to assert the values of privacy and decency, typical Orwellian values well-reflected in his own life. We could all play the game of trend-spotting in search of those features of modern society, which most resemble *1984*. But this has been done by others *ad nauseam*. I wanted to try to do something different, and identify Orwell's still small voice as the expression of a marvellous sanity. That he lived, that his writings still have a profound influence and set a profound example is perhaps, paradoxically, the best weapon we have of keeping *1984* at bay.

Let me finish by quoting another 20th century writer, W. H. Auden, whose vision was not unlike Orwell's.

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Orwell's voice was clearly raised against 'the fashionable madmen' of his day or, as Auden put it elsewhere, 'the terrible simplifiers'. I commend his example to you all.
