

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written during a period of anti-communist hysteria and is a highly sophisticated attempt to influence the political attitudes of its readers. In this article, Raymond Southall examines the devices which Orwell used to achieve his political purpose through the fictional literary form.

Klaus Staack



Die Demokratie muß
gelegentlich in
Blut gebadet werden.

Junta Chel Pinochet im Auftrag von
ITT, CIA, Kennecott Copper Corp u a

Solidarität mit Chile

Democracy must occasionally be bathed in blood. Junta Chief Pinochet under orders from ITT, CIA, Kennecott Copper Corporation etc. 1973 (Solidarity with Chile)

THE POLITICS OF DESPAIR

ART AND POLITICS

Raymond
Southall

George Orwell had already established himself as an anti-Soviet writer when *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appeared in 1949. His beast fable, *Animal Farm*, which was published four years earlier, has been described by Penguin Books as a "satire upon dictatorship, the history of a revolution that went wrong — and of the excellent excuses that were forthcoming at every step for each perversion of the original doctrine."¹ The success of *Animal Farm* is largely due to the manner in which George Orwell translates a trotskyite critique of the Soviet Union's attempt to build socialism in one country into the kind of cant which leads the bourgeois to agree with socialism in theory but not in practice and to maintain that

although socialism is a beautiful idea it cannot be realised because human nature is too beastly. This, incidentally, is the bourgeois attitude towards Christianity and towards any other doctrine which assumes that humans are something more than vicious, self-centred animals. It is an attitude which was being supported by 1945 by references to what had happened in Germany under fascism. "There you are," it was being said, "You see what people are like. They may appear decent enough on the surface, but underneath the thin veneer of civilisation human nature is still as Hobbes described it, red in tooth and claw." This is a view which presents a pretty picture of bourgeois humanism in the twentieth century!

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell jettisons the beast fable and elaborates the 'message' of *Animal Farm* into an horrific vision of the future. Following a period of atomic war and revolution the world in 1984 has divided into three power-blocs — Eastasia, Eurasia and Oceania. The international political scene is composed of the shifting alliances and the mutual betrayals of these three blocs as they wage constant war for control of the underdeveloped territories which provide them with a source of slave labour. Perpetual warfare has become the foundation of economic life in each of the blocs and in each of them provides the necessary psychological condition for the dictatorship of the Party. In England, a part of Oceania known as Air-strip One, the form of the Party is Ingsoc and society is divided into three groups: the affluent, policy-making Inner Party, the bureaucrats who comprise the Outer Party; and the Proles, the work force. The children of Party members, dressed in "blue shorts, grey shirt, and red neckerchiefs",² are organised into the Spies, so-called because their role is to spy upon their relatives and friends for the Thought Police. Women Party members also have their own organisation, the Anti-Sex League, the role of which is also explicit in its title.

Party members, dressed in black uniforms, are all employed in one or other of the four ministries. The Ministry of Peace directs the war; the Ministry of Love controls internal security through the Thought Police; the Ministry of Plenty is dedicated to reducing home-consumption and boosting war production. Finally, there is the Ministry of Truth, which is responsible for mass-producing culture, developing Newspeak (the official language which aims at eliminating the English vocabulary so as to make thought impossible) and rewriting history every time there is a change in Party policy.

Members of the Inner Party live in luxurious flats, have servants, drink real coffee and real wine, eat real butter, smoke real cigarettes. Outer Party members occupy broken-down tenements, drink synthetic coffee and synthetic gin, eat synthetic butter and smoke synthetic cigarettes. All Party members live under the constant and omnipresent eye of the telescreen from whose ever-watchful glare only the proles are free. Almost as numerous as the telescreens are the gigantic posters depicting Big Brother, leader of the Party and the People, an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing father figure, whose existence is an article of Party faith since no-one ever

appears to see him. Apart from the "black-haired, black-moustachio'd" face of Big Brother, the bill-boards are plastered with the three Party slogans — "War is Peace", "Freedom is Slavery", "Ignorance is Strength", which epitomise Doublethink, the intellectual methodology of the Party. Except for the billboards, which bear such slogans and ever-new pictures of Big Brother, and the smart modernity of the telescreens, the urban scenery is grey, shabby, dilapidated.

The full horror of life in 1984 is revealed to us through the consciousness of Orwell's central character, Winston Smith. A member of the Outer Party, he works in the Ministry of Truth, where his job is continuously to rewrite history, fitting the records of the past to the latest turn of Party policy by destroying every record which disagrees with it and substituting forgeries. He himself, like everyone else in 1984, has lost all sense

"In a period of growing anti-communist hysteria Nineteen Eighty-Four was naturally taken up and popularised by the media: it was condensed in Readers Digest, selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, had eighty pages devoted to it in Life magazine and was turned into a film."

of the past, although he is visited occasionally by elusive memories of childhood. Through this consciousness we view the daily ritual of the two-minute hate and the frenetic preparations for Hate Week, the annual festival of Air-strip One. It is a consciousness which is slowly drifting into heresy against the Party and Ingsoc. The deviation begins with the keeping of a diary, develops into a rather sordid love-affair with another Outer Party member and prompts Smith to seek contact with The Brotherhood, a resistance organisation which is probably a pure invention of the Party. Finally, it leads him to O'Brien, a member of The Brotherhood who, it turns out, is a leading member of the Thought Police. Winston Smith and his girl friend are duly arrested, taken to the cellars of the Ministry of Love, subjected to horrible tortures and finally denounce each other. They then proceed to confess to crimes they have never committed and are brought to a condition in which they actually love Big Brother for having saved them from further crimes. Full of genuine gratitude and love towards Big Brother and the Party for having taught them the error of their

ways, they are released to await assassination.

In a period of growing anti-communist hysteria *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was naturally taken up and popularised by the media: it was condensed in *Reader's Digest*, selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, had eight pages devoted to it in *Life* magazine and was turned into a film. Of course, there were some very nasty things said about it by those opposed to Cold War propaganda, but these opinions had a very small market. Howard Fast, for instance, described it as "garbage" and "filth" from "the cesspool of fascism".³ An understandable reaction, no doubt, but not really very helpful or enlightening, and one which lost face when Fast went on to refer to "the absolute consistency with which the reactionary writer plumps for the separation of 'art' from politics".⁴ The

truly reactionary writer does nothing of the sort. In an essay entitled "Why I write", which appeared in 1947 and in which he refers to his next book, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* — "I do know with some clarity what kind of book I want to write"⁶ — Orwell explicitly mentions political purpose as one of his motives in writing. He defines 'political purpose' as a "Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's ideas of the kind of society that they should strive after".

He then goes on to say that "no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude".⁵ That is a statement with which every marxist would agree; it is plainly not that of a writer who, in Fast's words, "plumps for the separation of 'art' from politics". Orwell is one of those artists who, as Christopher Caudwell remarked, "cannot be content with the beautiful art work, but seem to desert the practice of art for social theory and become novelists of ideas, literary prophets and propaganda novelists".⁷

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a novel with a definite and fully realised political purpose. Its overt effect is that of "a

25 Jahre Menschenrechte 25 Jahre Folter



25 years of Human Rights. 25 Years of Torture 1974. This poster was published 25 years after the writing of 1984.

piercing shriek announcing the advent of a black millennium", as Deutscher claimed. "This effect, however, is very carefully created; it is not the shrill utterance of a madman, obsessed by a terrifying nightmare. On the contrary, Orwell's novel is a highly sophisticated attempt to influence the political attitudes of his readers. This he attempts in the novel by calling upon the entrenched fears, frustrations and confusions which are recorded and strengthened in the literature of modernism and by a cleverly selected, edited and condensed appeal to actual historical experience. For instance, the historical setting of the novel is in many respects that of war-time London. There is the same general air of dilapidation about the city; the rocket bombs falling upon it from time to time; the rows of houses with their

windows broken and boarded up; the marked public interest in the progress of the war; the war effort in the factories; the synthetic foodstuffs; rationing; the occasional and inexplicable shortages of razor blades, darning wool, shoe-laces, buttons, all of which are on offer on the black market. The suggestion that a socialist revolution would simply perpetuate such conditions, transforming temporary austerities into the normal pattern of life, was a nicely judged piece of political persuasion at a time when people in England were still fretting under many wartime restrictions.

The second device used in the novel to discredit socialism is much subtler. It is the implication that socialism in Britain would be the imposition of a foreign,

Klaus Störck

i.e. Russian, system. This implication is contained most powerfully, of course, in the image of Big Brother. Big Brother is quite plainly not a latter-day Harry Pollitt but a latter-day Stalin; not only is he the object of a fervent personality cult, but he has the unmistakable black moustache. Perhaps for a German reader I would not need to argue the fuller implication of this image of Big Brother; in Australia the implication operates but operates unnoticed. It is that the description of the venerated, black-haired, black-moustachio'd leader could equally well apply to Hitler. Australian people are inclined to consider this far-fetched until one explains in more detail the subtlety with which Orwell creates an image of socialism which is a monstrous hybrid of socialism and 'national socialism'. Members of the Party, for instance, are dressed in black uniforms; the program of the Party is war; the purpose of conquest is to obtain slave labour for the munitions factories; the arch-villain Goldstein has the face and doctrines of Trotsky, but he is also Jewish, and the mass hysteria of the daily two-minute hate is intended not only to suggest Soviet attacks upon Trotsky but also Nazi anti-semitism.

This deliberate confusion of socialism and fascism directed the deep and fresh horror of fascism, which springs directly from a failure to revelations of Nazi brutality, against the possibility and desirability of a socialist future. It is a confusion which proved very serviceable to those responsible for spreading anti-communist Cold War hysteria and one which springs directly from a failure to make sense of the modern world. For the bourgeois nowadays socialism and fascism are conveniently lumped together under the general title of *totalitarianism* and Orwell's intention and performance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* needs to be viewed in the light of this confusion, for as he himself confessed in 1947, "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism".⁹

"Democratic socialism" is a fine phrase and it suggests, insofar as it suggests anything at all, the kind of belief which Orwell's hero, Winston Smith, expresses when he writes in his diary, "If there is hope ... it lies in the proles".¹⁰ But Orwell's attitude to the working class is implicit in the very word used to describe them — 'proles'. This middle-class contraction of *proletarians* is a term of ridicule or

contempt. It sums up very nicely the image of the working class with which we are presented in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: Working class people are invariably represented as chauvinistic, bovine, pleasure-seeking, vice-ridden oafs:

Heavy physical work, the care of home and children, petty quarrels with neighbours, films, football, beer, and, above all, gambling, filled up the horizon of their minds. To keep them in control was not difficult ... no attempt was made to indoctrinate them with the ideology of the Party. It was not desirable that the proles should have strong political feelings. All that was required of them was a primitive patriotism which could be appealed to whenever it was necessary to make them accept longer working-hours or shorter rations. And even when they became discontented, as they sometimes did, their discontent led nowhere, because being without general ideas, they could only focus it on petty specific grievances. The larger evils invariably escaped their notice ... Even the civil police interfered with them very little. There was a vast amount of criminality in London, a whole world-within-a-world of thieves, bandits, prostitutes, drug-peddlers, and racketeers of every description; but since it all happened among the proles themselves, it was of no importance."

How is it possible for a man to believe himself to be a democratic socialist and yet to look upon working-class people in this way? For although Orwell is here describing what the working class would become, obviously he must believe that potentially this is what it is. Such contempt for the mass of the people — and the 'proles', we are told, comprise 85 percent of Oceania's population — is characteristic of bourgeois egoism. By 'democratic socialism', therefore, Orwell is referring apparently to the rule of those who believe, like Flaubert, "that the mob, the herd, will always be hateful" and that "What counts is only the small group of kindred spirits, ever the same, who hand on the torch from one to another."¹² And his attitude to the working class arises from the same source as Flaubert's; as Raymond Williams has pointed out, Orwell's "way of seeing working people is not from fact and observation, but from the pressures of feeling exiled" which leads the middle-class writer to see other people as "an undifferentiated mass".¹³

The same contempt for people is evident in the handling of Winston

Smith's love affair with Julia. What his initial feelings for her were he declares to her when they are along together for the first time:

*"I hated the sight of you," he said "I wanted to rape you and then murder you afterwards. Two weeks ago I thought seriously of smashing your head in with a cobblestone."*¹⁴

The physical brutality of this is typical of the emotional tone of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Smith prepares to make love to Julia on this occasion he learns that she has made love with Party members scores of times. This news delights him because it suggests corruption in the Party and the thought that crosses his mind is that "If he could have infected the whole lot of them with leprosy or syphilis, how gladly he would have done so". He then turns to Julia with the declaration, "I hate purity. I hate goodness! I don't

"The undermining of sanity which takes place in Nineteen Eighty-Four is primarily a social event and not an individual misfortune. It is the kind of insanity which led Dulles' predecessor to commit suicide by jumping out of a window screaming that the Reds were after him"

want any virtue to exist anywhere. I want everyone to be corrupt to the bones". To which Julia replies, "Well then, I ought to suit you, dear. I'm corrupt to the bones" The Lawrentian notion of living through the senses in a world of corruption seems to be what we actually encounter in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and not only in the sordid love affair. But in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we can plainly inspect the consequences of such a notion. Here sensuality is itself, of necessity, also corrupt and finds its natural expression in sadism — in the spontaneous desire to rape, murder and smash. In a particularly horrific passage, for instance, O'Brien asks Winston Smith what acts he and Julia are prepared to undertake against the Party:

"You are prepared to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases — to do anything which is likely to cause demoralisation and weaken the power of the Party?"
"Yes."

"If, for example, it would somehow serve our interests to

throw sulphuric acid in a child's face — are you prepared to do that?"

"Yes."

The same vicious obsession with physical brutality is elaborated in the lengthy scenes of torture which follow Winston Smith's arrest, scenes which culminate in the final horror of Smith clamped down, unable to move, while starving rats are released to feed on his face and eyes. He is saved from the rats by betraying Julia, by screaming out,

*"Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her — Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!"*¹⁵

The same obsession is expressed in O'Brien's vision of the future: "If you want a picture of the future," he tells Winston Smith, "imagine a boot stamping on a human face — for ever."¹⁷

I remarked earlier that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not the shrill utterance of a madman. No doubt that judgment becomes increasingly suspect as one responds to the horrifying nastiness of the book. Nevertheless, it is, I believe, still the correct judgment. Orwell was not insane: isolated, vicious, crass, maybe but with a disposition that was emotionally in tune with the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War period. The undermining of sanity which takes place in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is primarily a social event and not an individual misfortune. It is the kind of insanity which led Dulles' predecessor to commit suicide by jumping out of a window screaming that the Reds were after him and placed so much power in the hands of Senator Joe McCarthy. Orwell himself is best seen as a victim of social forces he never properly understood. We might usefully say of him, therefore, what he himself said of Salvador Dali, that his "fantasies probably cast useful light on the decay of capitalist civilisation. But what he clearly needs is diagnosis. The question is not so much what he is as why he is like that".¹⁸

continued on page 51

A CAREFUL ANALYSIS from page 47

internationally — is elaborated on and criticised.

Part of the new ASIO Act of 1979 is examined in Chapter 6. Steve Rix is an Australian government employee who was given an adverse security report in relation to his employment on the basis of his membership of the Communist Party. He appealed successfully. Through the examination of this case and the way ASIO defines its powers — often in contravention of the Act which is the theoretical source of its legal powers — Aarons

reveals the very serious extension of ASIO's powers and the surreptitious erosion of civil liberties which occurred when the Act was passed. The Act means that all people employed directly or indirectly by the Federal Government are now the subject of ASIO assessments. All these people are now placed at risk in relation to their democratic right to freely associate in lawful social and political activity.

All under the pretext of "national security".

Finally, the argument is drawn together in the seventh chapter on the security services and the labor movement. The Combe-Ivanov Affair is not an isolated crucifixion of one person. The orientation of the security services is established:

ASIO faithfully followed the Security/Intelligence tradition, dating back to 1916, of seeing the left as the main danger and almost ignoring the right.

A picture is built up. Whitlam is elected and Security checks on staff are vetoed at first. Attorney-General Murphy "raids" ASIO. Accusations fly about CIA-ASIO involvement in the fall of the Whitlam government. State police Special Branches are disbanded by Labor governments.

Faced with a new Labor government, including ministers who had been critical of ASIO and ASIS, the Security Establishment may well have felt some concern for the future ... the issue could and should be put to the test, the Security Establishment left. The Combe-Ivanov matter, almost routine on 3rd February 1983 with Fraser in office, suddenly became a matter of utmost urgency on 5th April, with Labor in office only a month.

A plausible scenario? The details are interesting: read them.

Steve Catt is a lawyer and member of the ALR collective.

THE POLITICS OF DESPAIR from page 45

The answer to that question is to be found in isolation and loneliness, the cultivation of art as a substitute reality, the use of art as a weapon against the life which has rejected the artist, the feeling of contempt for others who comprise that life and the viciousness that results as the artist takes his revenge upon them. Indeed, it is significant that Orwell should look back upon his childhood and see it as an enactment of this modernist predicament:

I was somewhat lonely, and I soon developed disagreeable mannerisms which made me unpopular throughout my schooldays. I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life.¹⁹

It is a common charge against marxist criticism that it attempts to characterise a writer's work in terms of his background. But while it is not in the spirit of marxism to descend to such crude determinism, it is quite evident that a writer's background cannot be entirely ignored. This is particularly so in Orwell's case, for having himself reminded us of his childhood he goes on to explain,

I give all this background information because I do not think one can assess a writer's motives without knowing something of his early

development ... before he ever begins to write he will have acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never completely escape.²⁰

We cannot ignore Orwell's own insistence upon the importance of his early development; nor can we ignore that description of the emotional attitudes towards life and other people, formed in childhood, and from which, in his own words, "he will never completely escape". He was, I believe, unable to escape from those early attitudes because he failed to rise to an understanding of the nature of modern life, of its qualities and possibilities, and was unable therefore to grasp the great liberating ideas of the times in which we live. He had made contact with these ideas, but he was unwilling to accept them and the view of life which they represented: as he himself remarked, "I am not able, and I do not want, completely to abandon the world-view that I acquired in childhood".²¹ He did not wish to abandon a view in which his "literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued" and in which art became "a sort of private world in which" he "could get" his "own back for" his "failure in everyday life".²² It is this sense of personal failure coupled with this desire to be avenged upon life which is projected in the failure of Winston Smith and the sordidness and brutalities of his world. But the success which attended and continues to attend *Nineteen Eighty-Four* gives it a wider significance and places it as a fantasy which, as Orwell said of Dali, casts "useful light on the decay of capitalist civilisation".

Raymond Southall is a lecturer in English at Wollongong University.

FOOTNOTES

1. George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Penguin 1951).

2. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Penguin, 1954), p. 22.

3. Howard Fast, *Literature and Reality* (New York, 1950), p. 97.

4. *ibid.*

5. George Orwell, "Why I write", *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays* (Penguin, 1965), p. 187.

6. *op.cit.*, p. 184.

7. Christopher Caudwell, *Studies in a Dying Culture* (London, 1938), p. 48.

8. Isaac Deutscher, "'1984' — The mysticism of cruelty", *Russia in Transition* (New York, 1957), p. 245 Reprinted in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 1984*, ed. Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), pp. 39-40.

9. "Why I write", p. 186

10. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 59.

11. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp. 60-61.

12. Gustave Flaubert. See 4, 35n

13. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Penguin, 1963), p. 284.

14. *ed.cit.*, p. 99.

15. *ed.cit.*, p. 140.

16. *ed.cit.*, p. 230

17. *ed.cit.*, p. 215.

18. George Orwell, "Benefit of Clergy", *Decline of the English Murder*, p. 27.

19. "Why I write", p. 180.

20. "Why I write", p. 182.

21. "Why I write", p. 186

22. "Why I write", p. 180.