

*The Moral Legacy of George Orwell**

Charles M. Swezey

Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia

Written in 1948, from whence its title is derived, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has since been translated into sixty languages, and its total sales are thought to be in eight (!) figures. The response of the public to this book has become a cultural phenomenon. In 1984 it seems impossible to attend any gathering, read any newspaper or journal, or even watch television, without being confronted by *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Everyone has an opinion—those who have read and digested the whole Orwell corpus, those who have read only *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, even those who have read nothing by Orwell. Pastors, who may belong to any one of these groups, are asked to assess the significance of Orwell's book, and appropriately so, for one task in interpreting the Christian tradition is to provide commentary on culture.

Why do so many people ponder the meaning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Public discussion expresses an awareness that our age is somehow different. To understand ourselves, we grapple with the distinctive features of our era. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become a measuring rod. It expresses, embodies, and speaks to our existence as creatures of the twentieth century. We have come to use it as a diagnostic tool to help us understand who we are in relation to the age in which we live.

This article is an interpretation of Orwell and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Richard Rovere expressed eighteen years ago what has become very close to my own view.

In the past decade, critics in large numbers have been drawn to Orwell's work and have found him for the most part a thorny problem. The truth is that his work does not much lend itself to theirs. His novels were direct and fairly simple narratives in an old tradition. Their meanings are mostly on the surface. Orwell posed no riddles, elaborated no myths, and manipulated no symbols. Even *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers limited possibilities for exegesis. One need only be alive in the twentieth century to grasp its significance.¹

Perhaps that statement is too simple. Certainly interpreters of Orwell differ. They run a gamut from those who think *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is realized in 1984 to those who see the book as the expression of a psychologically warped and dying man. Rovere's statement, however, is the springboard for my considerations—one need only be alive in the twentieth century to grasp the significance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

My procedure will be to sketch portions of Orwell's life, concentrating on his trip to Spain in 1937, as a context for his writings. In this task I depend upon the magnificent volume by Bernard Crick which is the definitive biography.²

Orwell was born in India in 1903, the son of a low-ranking official of the British Empire and his wife. He was raised in England and attended a prep school on partial scholarship. He later recalled his experiences there with great bitterness, especially his discomfort with the school's autocratic rule. However, he did well enough academically to gain admittance to Eton where he was not productive at all. He spent most of his time searching for his identity without success, and he graduated low enough in his class to prohibit further schooling. Like his father, Orwell served the British Empire. He was an Imperial Policeman in Burma for five years. His growing loneliness and desperation culminated in a rejection of imperialism. He wrote later, "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys."³

Orwell rejected imperialism and returned to England in 1927 to seek his own freedom. He decided to become a writer and spent the next ten years of his life in diverse activities—a tramp among the underclass in London and Paris, assistant waiter in a hotel, school teacher, book salesman—all the while writing, writing, writing. He had published four books by 1936 when he was commissioned to write a volume about working conditions and unemployment in England's industrial north. His commitment to "democratic Socialism" matured while writing *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a kind of documentary which combined literature and reportage. As Crick observes, this genre expressed "both his sense of shock at things as they were and the moral seriousness of his new belief that society could be reshaped for the better"⁴—elements which persisted the rest of his life.

In "Why I Write" (1946) Orwell asserted, "What I have most wanted to do through the past ten years is to make political writing into an art." Indeed, "every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism."⁵ *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell's account of the war in Spain, is the book which expresses most clearly his political values and commitments. Orwell went to Spain to fight against fascism and to fight for a socialist revolution. He discovered upon arrival several groups of militia, each drawn from various political and labor organizations. Orwell could not have cared less about the subtleties of Spain's internal politics—he was there to fight fascism! Thus largely by chance he was assigned to one of the militias, the P.O.U.M. (Marxist Unification Workers Party).

Orwell was enthralled to be living in what appeared to be an authentic workers' state. After a period of inconsequential training, he and his colleagues were assigned to fight in a geographical setting which almost prevented engagement with the enemy. The opposing forces, armed with unreliable rifles, were stationed on ridges too far apart to be accurately traversed by a bullet. Moreover, the ridges were deep enough to prevent attack from below. "In trench warfare," Orwell wrote, "five things are important: firewood, food, tobacco, candles, and the enemy. . . in that order, with the enemy a bad last."⁶ That is too cynical. Ill-equipped, bitterly cold, often hungry, and usually filthy, Orwell's group engaged in limited combat. After 115 days in the trenches, Orwell welcomed the opportunity to take leave in Barcelona.

When he reached Barcelona, however, a civil war within the civil war

broke out. Following a series of complicated events, the P.O.U.M. was charged with starting this war, that is, with preventing and obstructing the revolution. The charge was not really true, and would have been news to the P.O.U.M. militia at the front. The lie served the interests of persons attempting to consolidate (nonrevolutionary) power. Meanwhile, members of the P.O.U.M. in Barcelona were being rounded up and placed in jails.

Orwell discovered that the Communist Party did not support the revolution, but served the national self-interest of Russia. This self-interest included placing in power in Spain persons friendly to France. Orwell was outraged to see the revolution betrayed in the name of revolution, to be followed by excesses we have come to associate with totalitarianism.

Some of the scenes in *Homage to Catalonia* are vivid. In the next to last chapter he returned to Barcelona again, to meet his wife. Unannounced, he strolled into a hotel lobby where his wife greeted him coolly. But let Orwell tell it . . .

When I got to the hotel my wife was sitting in the lounge. She got up and came towards me in what struck me as a very unconcerned manner; then she put an arm round my neck and, with a sweet smile for the benefit of the other people in the lounge, hissed in my ear:

"Get out!" "What?"

"Get out of here *at once!*" "What?"

"Don't keep standing here!" . . . She had me by the arm and was already leading me toward the stairs. . . . "What the devil is all this about?" I said as soon as we were on the pavement.

"Haven't you *heard?* . . . The P.O.U.M.'s been suppressed. They've seized all the buildings. Practically everyone's in prison. And they say they're shooting people already." . . .

Patiently she explained the state of affairs. It did not matter what I had done or not done. This was not a round-up of criminals; it was merely a reign of terror. I was not guilty of any definite act, but I was guilty of "Trotskyism." The fact that I had served in the P.O.U.M. militia was quite enough to get me into prison Practically the law was what the police chose to make it. The only thing to do was to lie low and conceal the fact that I had anything to do with the P.O.U.M.⁷

Orwell consistently used the word "nightmare" to describe his experiences in Spain. "You had all the while a hateful feeling that someone hitherto your friend might be denouncing you to the secret police. The long nightmare . . . had put my nerves on edge."⁸ Again, "It is not easy to convey the nightmare atmosphere of that time—the peculiar uneasiness produced by rumours that were always changing, the censored newspapers, and the constant presence of armed men."⁹

The experience in Spain was decisive enough for Orwell to write about it a second time. Here are two citations from "Looking Back on the Spanish War" (1942).

In Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied by an

ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. . . . I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various "party lines." . . .

What is peculiar to our age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written. . . . If the leader says of such and such an event, "It never happened"—well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five—well, two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs.¹⁰

Orwell's experience in Spain did not turn him into a cynic. "Curiously enough the whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings." Yet in view of the force of fascism, England seemed to be "sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England."¹¹ The image conveys the need to awake.

Orwell and his wife managed to get out of Spain and return to London, where he wrote *Homage to Catalonia*. It did not sell. Indeed, copies were still in the warehouse when Orwell died in 1950. He had not found the genre with which to communicate with ordinary readers.

Animal Farm appeared in 1945. Though there was trouble finding a publisher, it was a great success. Orwell had found an artistic form which communicated with the ordinary reader. He gives an account in the preface to the Ukrainian edition.

On my return from Spain I thought of exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone. . . . I saw a little boy. . . driving a hugh cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became more aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat. I proceed to analyze Marx's theory from the animals' point of view.¹²

And so the allegory was born, "the first book," Orwell says, "in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole."¹³ *Animal Farm*, of course, is not anti-socialist, at least not by intention. It is anti-fascist. It is not against revolution, it is against the betrayal of revolution.

Orwell declared that he wanted to make political writing into an art. He succeeded with *Animal Farm*. Did he also succeed with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? I approach this volume by way of brief observations about vision, dream, nightmare, satire, and negative vision.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a *vision* of the future. A vision provides a view which orients those who see it. Persons informed by a vision receive motivation and guidance. They are motivated to follow the vision, and they are guided where the vision leads.

The vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is in the form of a *dream*. A dream is a kind of human awareness which differs from ordinary consciousness. Dreams do not reproduce what is called the real world, but are related to it by exagger-

ating and simplifying images drawn from ordinary life.

The vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a dream in the form of a *nightmare*. A nightmare is a frightening dream, accompanied by a sense of oppression or suffocation, which usually awakens the sleeper. One may even say that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a *satiric* nightmare—a way of holding vice and folly to scorn and contempt, again by simplification and exaggeration. The satiric nightmare if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a *negative vision*. Unlike a positive vision, which one is motivated to follow for guidance, a negative vision motivates by directing persons *away* from it.

Common sense helps in approaching *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Ask yourself, *if in fact* you had a nightmare which envisioned a satiric future, and woke up frightened, what would you do? If not in therapy, you would either dismiss the nightmare or ask what it might have to do with ordinary life. That puts it simply, but that is what Orwell intended. He wanted his readers to turn from his nightmare and direct attention to ordinary political life. If we do that, he will have succeeded in his purpose of making political writing into an art which communicates with ordinary readers.

By political, Orwell did not mean party politics. He wrote in a notebook while composing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "Must not engage in party politics as a [literary] writer."¹⁴ Orwell used the term "political" in the "widest possible sense" as the "desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they would strive after."¹⁵

If these observations are accurate, there are two ways not to read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. First, the book is not a prediction. It is a nightmare, a warning to awake and a call to public tasks. To ask whether *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is fulfilled in 1984 is somewhat beside the point, although it makes for fun and games in the parlor and on television. To ask how much of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been realized in 1984 also misses the point insofar as it helps evade a contemporary agenda.

Second, to take the vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* literally is deeply problematic. Those who try to work deductively off the vision back into the present, misconstrue and misuse it. We need to know a great deal more about the world than is contained in the vision. For example, it is troublesome to take "doublethink" so literally that it must always be avoided. In a court of law, we judge a person innocent until proved guilty; we engage in doublethink.¹⁶ Again, it is troublesome to take literally the relation of language and thought in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The view that language *determines* thought is simply wrong. Less literally, if it is assumed that language *influences* thought, the results are both good and bad—good when alerted to the potential for mind control, bad when practiced by behaviorist psychology.¹⁷ To take literally the role of the telescreen (watching persons in their homes) overlooks the use of television as providing entertainment, and, incidentally, also overlooks its potential impact in "making the population progressively more stupid, incapable of sustained thought and concentration, and politically apathetic."¹⁸ Examples could be multiplied. It is a mistake to take Orwell's vision so literally that one is reduced to making deductive moves off it into the present.¹⁹

Orwell's vision works if taken seriously but not literally. Persons take it seriously because they see in it a terrifying portrayal of distinguishing features of the twentieth century. We continue to read Orwell because we sense that he was correct in perceiving that the forces present in exaggerated form in totalitarianism are forces inevitably linked to the modern age. Totalitarianism had forerunners, but did not appear until the twentieth century. The social and historical conditions for totalitarianism were not present until the twentieth century. These conditions are still present, and that is what haunts us about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The images in the negative vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* should be taken as touchstones to direct and alert us to problems which require attention now. The moral legacy of George Orwell calls us to active and informed participation in the political arena—in the broad sense. In a democracy, this legacy requires cultivating those civic virtues which enable a republic to flourish—an active citizenry, informed on a broad array of issues which are so complex and ambiguous that they cannot be turned over to officials and experts. It is beyond my competence to set a full agenda, but here is a sample.

People are hungry in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and in 1984. What do we *know* about hunger and the conditions of hunger, in this country and abroad? What programs and policies, governmental and voluntary, are we for and against? And why?

People are poor in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and in 1984. What do we *know* about poverty and the conditions of poverty, in this country and abroad? What programs and policies, governmental and voluntary, are we for and against? And why?

Freedom of information is questioned in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and in 1984. What do we *know* about the Freedom of Information Act and its seven exemptions? Are we for them or against them, and why? What do we *know* about Executive Order 12356 which replaced Executive Order 12065 last August? Are we for it or against it, and why?

Military secrecy is present in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and in 1984. What do we *know* about the fighting taking place in Guatemala? in Honduras? in Nicaragua? in El Salvador? Are we for it or against it? Are we anti-Communist, as was George Orwell? Or are we for a revolution, as was George Orwell? What policies are we for and against, and why?

The list could be extended easily. Problems in the political arena are enormous and increasingly complex. The question is whether citizens today can be informed and active in the formation of public policy. Orwell asks us to wake up, to turn from his negative vision and cultivate political virtues in a republican mode so that democracy can be sustained. That is his moral legacy.

Should theologians offer a religious interpretation of Orwell? I think not. Certainly he should not be baptized as an anonymous theologian. To be sure, Christians give theological reasons for cultivating citizenship. But in the task of cultivating citizenship, Orwell, though not a theologian, is an ally. His writings inform us of the need, and may be sued by pastors to communicate about aspects of the Christian moral life. When Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 are held in one hand, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may profitably be held in the

other.

Nineteen Eighty-Four provides an interpretation of the age. It should be read as a call to active and informed citizenship. It may also be read as a challenge to provide a *theological* interpretation of contemporary society and culture. This type of portrait has been an important ingredient of the Christian legacy that is lamentably neglected today.

NOTES

* Adapted from a lecture delivered at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 14 February 1984.

¹ Richard H. Rovere, "Introduction" in *The Orwell Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, A Harvest Book, 1956), xviii.

² Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

³ George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant" in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1968), 1:239.

⁴ Crick, *George Orwell*, 294.

⁵ George Orwell, "Why I Write" in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 1:5,6.

⁶ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 195, 201.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰ George Orwell, "Looking Back on the Spanish War" in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 2:256-257, 258-259.

¹¹ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, 220-221.

¹² Orwell, *The Collected Essays*, 2:277.

¹³ Orwell, *The Collected Essays*, 1:7.

¹⁴ Crick, *George Orwell*, 538.

¹⁵ Orwell, "Why I Write," 1:4.

¹⁶ Barbara Allen Babcock, "Lawspeak and Doublethink" in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. Peter Stransky (Stanford: Stanford Alumni Association, 1983), 91.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Closs Traugott, "Newspeak: Could It Really Work?" in *On Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. Peter Stransky (Stanford: Stanford Alumni Association, 1983), 134.

¹⁸ The purpose and function of a piece of literature should not be confused with the purpose and function of political, economic, social, and moral *argument*. Literature may alert us to the need for moral argument, for example, but it is not a substitute.

It is also a mistake to ask: what would the historical Orwell have us do? As Irving Howe has pointed out, we really do don't know ("1984: Enigmas of Power" in *1984 Revisited*, ed. Irving Howe [New York: Harper & Rowe, Perennial Library, 1983], 17-18.) Moreover, this line of inquiry also switches the grounds of evidence. The merits of a political stance, for example, must surely be argued on grounds independent of whether Orwell would agree.