# Future is Past: The Enduring Weight of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a heavy book, as the glut of spirits crushed beneath its weight attests. When at last he had a chance to look over the draft that Orwell had been racing to finish before death finished him, Orwell's publisher remarked that it was "among the most terrifying books" he had ever read and prayed that, in spite of its manifest greatness, he "may be spared from reading another like it for years to come." In part, what makes the work so terrifying is the immanence of the horror contained therein—a horror born not from supernatural beings, but from human, all too human ones. As such, it is the type of horror that demands more of the intellect than of the imagination; a logical horror, one might say, that preys upon the reader's rational fears rather than horror's more commonly targeted irrational ones. What only serves to compound the visceral dread that a preliminary read begets is the sinking feeling that, as E. M. Forster so marvelously put it, "there is not a monster in that hateful apocalypse which does not exist in embryo today."

Forster's remark rings as true today as it did when he proffered it three quarters of a century ago. If the monsters themselves remain by and large embryonic, conditions are much more propitious now than they were then. It is not just that opportunities for growth have multiplied, but that the elements that might have impeded that growth have deteriorated considerably, so that, like some invasive species, these monsters would find the stage well set for their proliferation, were they ever to hatch.

But that invasion has not exactly taken place, which is apt to foster a false sense of repose. Embryonic monsters are not all that frightening, at least when compared with ones that have spawned, to say nothing of those that have evolved. It demands a certain degree of perspicacity to perceive monsters of the embryonic variety—monsters that exist *in potentia* and not *in esse*—and it is not uncharitable to say that in any day, that sort of perspicacity is parceled out parsimoniously. What is more, the horrors of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are so over-the-top that in many readers' minds they remain remote and chimeric, thereby dulling their impact, if only a little. Torture chambers, perpetual war, public hangings, routine vaporizations, the Two Minutes Hate, to say nothing of its week-long cousin—like some paranormal horror or sinister nightmare, its frightfulness is felt, but it is not real, and hence, like the paralytically stupid Parsons, is readily disappeared.

That such horrors are not part of the West's reality, does not entail that they are part of no reality. Indeed, what

struck many readers who had the cosmic misfortune to be born on the Iron Curtain's wrong side was precisely its realism. As Czesław Miłosz recollected:

> A few have become acquainted with Orwell's *1984*; because it is both difficult to obtain and dangerous to possess, it is known only to certain members of the Inner Party. Orwell fascinates them through his insight into details they know well, and through his use of Swiftian satire. Such a form of writing is forbidden by the New Faith because allegory, by nature manifold in meaning, would trespass beyond the prescriptions of socialist realism and the demands of the censor. Even those who know Orwell only by hearsay are amazed that a writer who never lived in Russia should have so keen a perception into its life.

But the majority of those who have read and continue to read Orwell's masterpiece do so in a world insulated from war; a world of individual rights and procedural guarantees; a world of comfort, plenty, and security; in brief, a world that is, on the face of it, as unlike Oceania as one possibly could hope for. But that dissimilitude is deceptive; the relief it affords is readily shattered by a careful reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the awareness that many of its features strike too close to home and thereby, too close for comfort. Those who, upon putting the novel down, put it out of a mind (like a bad dream that one has been wrested from and is best not think of again), slumber on, blissfully unaware that the nightmare lies before them, not behind.

## ORWELL'S END FROM THE START

The terror that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* inspires is not Orwell's end, but a means to it. In a letter written to the president of the United Auto Workers union, who thought highly of the book but was mistrustful of its message, Orwell clarified his objective:

> My novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is *not* intended as an attack on socialism, or on the British Labor party, but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable, and which have already been partly realized in Communism and fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere.

In view of his aim, one might contend that the savagery contained in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is at once productive and counterproductive. It is productive insofar as it is bound to provoke. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not the sort of book that one reads without being rattled. It is a book that plumbs the depths of human depravity and does so unflinchingly, with a heavy-handedness that cannot but bear down on the reader, like a boot stomping on a face over and over and over again. If a soul must be agitated before it can be vigilant, Orwell would appear to have done his job well.

But precisely because the savagery is so egregious—because it is, like that boot, so in your face—the very people he sought to put on guard are liable to remain at ease, at least with respect to Orwell's stated aim. Sure, the horrors of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are plausible and a society resembling the one he depicts is realizable. The proof is, as Orwell observes, that it already has been realized. But it has been realized *elsewhere*. One need not endorse the notion that the so-called English-speaking races are innately better than anyone else to concede that totalitarianism has not found a footing in the English-speaking world the way

it has in many parts of the non-English-speaking world. What the record suggests is that totalitarianism can triumph elsewhere, not anywhere.

Be that as it may, the danger to which Orwell points is not Russian or German or Chinese, but *human*. It imperils man qua man. And it does so particularly, if not uniquely, in this modern or post-modern age. If totalitarianism has not afflicted the English-speaking peoples as it has so many others, it is not because they are immune from the affliction, but because they have been more effective defending against it. Their long-standing health in this regard stems not only from the values they embody, but the heedfulness with which they have upheld them. But as was apparent to Orwell and as any diagnostician worth his salt cannot fail to note, those values and the sedulity needed to sustain them are in decline.

Thus, although the grim totalitarianism so prominently on display in Orwell's day has been all but vanquished or at least, very narrowly circumscribed, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is arguably more pressing than ever before, precisely because of the beguiling peace of mind that the putatively progressive march of history promotes. That march goes hand in hand with the inexorable advance of technology, which portends to be instrumental in exploiting the very security it provides. Human freedom is always insecure, but it is especially so in the present day. If there is any prospect of preserving it, ultimately it will depend on the heightened vigilance that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was penned to inspire. The unabashedly atheistic Orwell was not on a mission to reform man; to turn sinners into saints, but to warn the people of his day and the days that followed that freedom's place in this brave new world is precarious, not least in those places where totalitarianism has never secured a foothold and, as a result, freedom is most likely to be taken for granted. Orwell envisaged a future in which freedom had been stamped out so systematically that it admitted no possibility of resuscitation. The passage of time has done nothing to confound Orwell's fears and much to confirm them.

## BIG TECH IS WATCHING YOU

If much like the horror that riddles *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that all sounds rather hyperbolic, a convenient place to begin would be with the rise of surveillance. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to be is to be surveilled. From the book's opening page to its last, Big Brother—"the colossus that bestrode the world"—is watching you. His enormous mustachioed face peers from "those posters that were plastered everywhere" and were contrived in such a manner that the eyes follow one about wherever one goes. Of course, it is not just the sensation of being watched that encumbers the occupants of this world. No less ubiquitous are the telescreens, those instruments that simultaneously transmit and receive, recording every movement and every sound above the feintest whisper. Like the posters, they pervade the novel, from its opening pages to its last—their ubiquity hammered home by the revelation that even where undetected and unsuspected (for example, throughout much of the book's second part), they prove ineludible.

If at present, surveillance does not boast comparable ubiquity, the potential for it ought to have a chilling effect all the same, all the more so since it is a potential that existed in no earlier day. Presumably, surveillance in some form or another is as old as society itself. The spy who breaches enemy lines, the relative who conceals himself in a chamber's recess, the woman who seduces an unsuspecting lord—all with an eye to surreptitiously acquiring and imparting information—enjoys its own sort of ubiquity throughout time. What distinguishes surveillance in the current age is the sheer scale of it. Even the divinities of earlier days who disguised themselves as mortals, to say nothing of the mortals who disguised themselves simply, so as to learn the machinations of some unsuspecting character, were decidedly limited in their reach. That limitation is denoted in the word eavesdrop. In its now obsolete noun form, eavesdrop refers to that spot where rainwater drips from the roof (i.e., eaves) of a house. The eavesdropper is one who stands at such a spot to hear what is going on within earshot.

The limited reach of surveillance was an elemental feature of it throughout history, until very recently. (Such limitations of space and time were transcended by the Biblical God, who knows everything at once, as His knowledge of the number of hairs on one's head implies. But God has no place in *Nineteen Eighty-*

*Four*; the void He has left behind is filled by Big Brother, who assumes an earthly omniscience and omnipresence. If God has not been banished from the present age, His providential gaze disconcerts far less than it did in an earlier one.) Technology is the gamechanger, though it should be borne in mind that well into the twentieth century, surveillance essentially remained targeted. As with eavesdropping, wiretapping definitionally bespoke its limits. In order to listen in on someone's conversation, a device (or bug) had to be physically connected to the person's phone line. Like the prying neighbor 'neath the eaves, the wiretapper's surveillance was predominantly restricted to the person being pursued. Extraneous chatter may have been detected, but the fact remains that it was an individual (his home, his business, his favorite haunt) that was being deliberately singled out. What could be said of mass eavesdropping by and large could be said of mass wiretapping in its original incarnation: it would defy reality.

In the digital age, surveillance is unbound by these limitations. Though surveillance still is routinely targeted, an inordinate amount of it is conducted indiscriminately. To substantiate this point, the mere mention of the NAS ought to suffice. For those for whom it does not, consider that in a 2011 government memorandum, it was disclosed that under Section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act, the government had *retained* more than 250 million internet communications each year, a number that does not include those communications that were scanned and deemed undeserving of retention. In the digital age, mass surveillance does not defy reality. It is reality.

For all intents and purposes, Big Brother *is* watching you. That the screen in effect has become the medium through which much of this takes place only serves to lend further weight to Orwell's flair for prophecy. To be sure, today's denizens can avoid screens in ways that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s never could. Screens can be turned off (a luxury reserved for Inner-Party members) and barred from spaces (even the ostensibly concealed alcove in Winston's flat where he furtively writes in his diary fails to go undetected). But whatever consolation that may afford ought to be rather trifling. It demands very little imagination to envision a day when the screen—conceived literally or figuratively—will be inescapable. Already, half a century removed from the admittedly arbitrary date of Orwell's dystopia, screens have metastasized through the body politic like a virus spreading through an unsuspecting host. The metastasization is Orwellian in a manner Orwell himself did not anticipate, for while the screens of Oceania are fixed to the walls of homes, public buildings, and other physical structures, screens today are habitually affixed to the people themselves. It is estimated that 90% of American adults own a smartphone (that percentage was 35 a decade and a half prior). What is more, over 80% keep their phones nearby while they are awake and 70% whilst they sleep. What makes all this even more Orwellian is that even when turned off (and lest there be any illusion on this score, most Americans rarely turn their phones off), smart phones continue tracking. All this suggests that the comfort alluded to above is not so much a small one, but a false one. As it turns out, the screen is more ubiquitous in the real world than in Orwell's fictional one, where the proles, who comprise 85% of the population, are largely unmonitored by Big Brother and left to their own devices. If there is an equivalent to the proles in America, and Orwell intimates that in every society there is, they are not commensurately free on that score.

What aggravates the insidiousness of all this is that in the real world, Big Brother has little brothers that are engaged in the family business. Although they operate independently, they generally are quick to do their bigger brother's bidding when asked. Nominally, their motives are different—they are in the business of business rather than of governing—but ultimately, their concern is one and the same: control. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the Party controls everything; nothing circumvents its regard. In the real world, the state has not assumed such colossal proportions; it sees much, but not all. But much of what might otherwise go unseen comes into view when one factors in the operations of its little siblings: Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and related enterprises. In many ways, their operations are even more nefarious than the state's. For while, in principle at least, the state surveils its people so as to check their behavior, the corporation surveils its people so as to manipulate theirs. To this end, it mines and stores and analyzes the data of its users, (mis)appropriating a profile of them so comprehensive and denuded that users likely would balk at sharing it with their closest confidantes and even, frankly, owning up to it to themselves. In the end, it mat-

ters little which is the more nefarious, for the increasing collusion between Big Government and Big Tech suggests that whatever line may separate state from corporate surveillance grows thinner by the day.

It is true that little brothers can stand up to Big Brother and refuse to cooperate, but the family history shows that on the whole, they are all too willing to comply. That some of this compliance is the result of compulsion, if not coercion, should not distort the fact that much of it results from an unscrupulous and symbiotic quid pro quo relationship. Whatever the nature of that relationship may be, the bottom line remains that the people are surveilled—by which brother ought not to matter much—more and more extensively. When one factors in the assemblage of smart devices that percolate through the homes of smart people—smart speakers, doorbells, thermostats, and the like—it becomes apparent there is scarcely a nook and cranny that remains private.

What only serves to make all of this even more dismaying than it already is is that this ever-expanding surveillance apparatus has been bolstered by the objects of it: the people themselves. The duplicitous escapades of companies like Google and Facebook have been grudgingly disclosed time and time and time again. The public outrage generated by such revelations tends to be complacently shrugged off by a people more preoccupied with the conveniences these corporations provide than the incursions they have conducted. The eagerness with which the people facilitate the surveillance activities of these companies is arguably more outrageous than the activities themselves. In China, cameras and listening devices are installed in the homes of Uighurs against their will and often without their knowledge. But in America, the people exuberantly line up to install them themselves. Twentieth-century Americans were for the most part staunchly opposed to being surveilled; twenty-first century Americans appear insouciantly resigned to it. What Oliver Wendel Holmes, Jr. dubbed the "dirty business" has become business as usual.

## PRIVACY GOES PUBLIC

In this vein, it is interesting to reflect on the place of privacy in America. Privacy, of course, has no place in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In America, privacy exists, but as the foregoing remarks indicate, its position is becoming more and more exposed. What is curious about this is that an abiding commitment to privacy is said to be integral to the American ethos, a conceit affirmed by the nation's highest tribunal when it conjured from the penumbras of the nation's highest law a constitutional right to privacy. The specific rights that emanate from that more general right to privacy have become battlegrounds where legions of Americans take up arms to defend those rights whenever they appear imperiled. Yet for all the uproar surrounding privacy's ostensible sacrosanctity, the American people exhibit a perverse fondness for flaunting themselves. Some of that is hinted at in the preceding paragraphs. Privacy hardly seems much of a concern for the person who communes with Alexa; sleeps with her iPhone at, if not in, hand; and regularly updates her Facebook page to keep people abreast of what and how she has been doing—and doing this with an awareness, however vague, that everything she broadcasts is being monitored by third parties to be collected and sold off to fourth and fifth and sixth ones.

It is reasonable to rail at Big Tech for undermining privacy, but doing so largely misses the point. There is no doubt that innovations in technology have made privacy's place in the digital age much more vulnerable, but it should be borne in mind that to some degree, the technology is not being imposed on the people so much as embraced by them—ebulliently. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the reader learns that

> [w]ith the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end. Every citizen, or at least every citizen important enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty-four hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda, with all other channels of communication closed. The possibility of enforcing not only complete obedience to the will of the State, but complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects, now existed for the first time.

In principle, that power exists in the modern day and to a greater degree than even Orwell's penetrating mind could have conceived. Privacy still exists in ways that Big Brother never would brook, but what makes the real-world scenario so troubling is that in addition to being destroyed from without it is being disavowed from within. The very person who regards the right to privacy as uninfringeable is all too willing to divulge what in any other day would have been one's most intimate secrets (regarding one's mental health, past traumas, sexual proclivities, and so on). The reason for this, as Carl Trueman has unriddled, is that reality or identity has essentially become inward. One's identity is no longer shaped by his or her extrinsic relations or intrinsic traits, but by how one feels. In order for that reality to get acknowledged and that identity to get the respect it demands, one must let it be known; one must scream it from the mountaintops or desktops or laptops. And so, without any solicitation, to say nothing of interrogation, one readily learns all one could wish to know, and much that one would prefer not to know, about the private lives of not so private peoples.

## THE PROTEAN PAST

In one of the book's more memorable and demoralizing lines, O'Brien remarks to Winston, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever." It is the crushing weight of Orwell's world that, as noted above, can make it so difficult to relate to, especially in the West. A world where pleasure has been methodically eradicated seems far removed from a world where pleasure is hedonically pursued and effortlessly procured, however insubstantial and transient those pleasures may be. But as Orwell himself expounded, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is more of a cautionary tale than a prognosticatorary one. He did not contend that the kind of society he describes will arrive, but that something approximating it could. In a world where people feel more threatened by microaggressions than macro-ones, that contention, even when qualified, is likely to sound overblown. But the essence of Orwell's world is not its brutalism so much as its totalitarianism. It is not the loss of safety but the dispossession of freedom that defines it.

In this regard, the state of terror is more means than end. It is a means that allows the Party to control the people. Or to put it more nakedly, it is a means to power. But what if the means to that end became by and large dispensable? What if power did not need to be brutally imposed on people because it already had been relinquished by them? Or rather, suppose people had become so thoroughly manipulatable that they remained incognizant of the fact that they were being manipulated? The totalitarian order that might result would perhaps be more akin to a soft Tocquevillean despotism than a hard Orwellian one; a Huxleyan future where people, instead of being ruthlessly tyrannized, will have learned to love their subjugation. In either case, freedom, and humanity with it, would be surrendered irrevocably. What more convenient way to establish despotism than to find a people ready-made for it?

Of course, it is not just the egregious and unrelenting brutality that gives *Nineteen Eighty-Four* its sadistically quixotic air; a vision horrific enough to haunt the imagination, but too implausible to menace reality. The Party's control over history is apt to strike the reader as being too contrived; a clever literary device, wonderfully conveyed in the Party's slogan, *who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past*, but one that could never be put into practice. It would presuppose a degree of control so total on the part of those in power, as well as a degree of ignorance no less total on the part of the people, that the proposition is more likely to amuse than alarm.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "all history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary." As it turns out, for a party bent on maintaining power and an air of infallibility, necessity demands an almost constant alteration of the past. "Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date." "Every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance," including "newspapers… books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, soundtracks, cartoons, [and] photographs," was adjusted to accord with the Party's predictions and decrees, the offending originals destroyed for good. In this way, the past was whatever the Party willed it to be.

As O'Brien patiently explains to Winston, what has been no longer is. History vanishes once it has been made. The past cannot be revisited. To the extent that the past exists at all, it is in the records and relics that bear witness to it. Who controls those records and relics controls the past. This complete command of history cannot but seem fanciful at a time when so many testaments to the past lie beyond the reach of the powers that be. But the premise is hardly far-fetched, particularly at a time when more and more of the past is being digitized. A past that has been virtualized is never more than a short remove from being vaporized.

History, by its nature, is evanescent. One might say of it what Heraclitus said of nature: it loves to hide. Historical records in some ways constitute acts of defiance; a resistance to the impermanence of being and time. It should be noted as a relevant aside that this undertaking is not exactly natural or automatic. Cows do not have history. To the extent that one might speak of a history of cows, it is only insofar as humans have composed it. And as with cows, so too with peoples. An ahistorical culture is not a contradiction, any more than a pre- or illiterate culture is; indeed, it was the norm throughout much of, well, history. So as not to sow confusion, history ought not to be equated with myth or memory. Clearly, non-human beings have memory, just as ahistorical humans have myth. The import of history may be divined from its etymology. History derives from the Greek *historia*, which connotes an account of one's inquiries. More foundationally, *histor* signifies someone with knowledge or more to the point, a witness. To the extent that history might be equated with memory, its reach would be very limited and woefully unreliable. As for the creation myths of ahistorical cultures, there are no witnesses. Herodotus is the father of history because he is the first to inquire into the past and chronicle his inquiries. History is a testimony to what has been. In chronicling the past, the historian enables future generations to peer into a time that is no more and thereby witness events whose actual witnesses have long since perished.

To return to history as virtual reality, the recent imbroglio surrounding Google's Gemini-generated depictions of historical figures attests both to the absurdity and feasibility of manipulating the past in the manner that Orwell entertains: absurd because at this time, the rendering of George Washington as an African American woman is risible; feasible because the rudiments that would allow such a rendition to become accepted are already in place.

The other key component to history, which serves as a stumbling block for those who would seek to rewrite it, is, as Winston responds to O'Brien's inquisitorial probing, "in the mind. In human memories." On its own, memory's capacity is rather paltry. It is notoriously unreliable and becomes less reliable the more protracted it becomes. The documenting of history is intended to correct or preempt the fallibility to which memory is inherently susceptible. History, then, permits memory to reach back further and more dependably than it otherwise would be able to. Presumably those who laughed at the image of a black female George Washington did not need to consult the history books to confirm that their derision was warranted. Memory served them well enough.

But memories must be made in order to serve, and they must be made well in order to serve well. If memory fails today, it is not because of some collective amnesia (though the prospect of *that* should not be discounted, as, for example, the memory, or lack thereof, of the Tiananmen massacre in China today demonstrates), but because when it comes to history, it is, these days, seldom well made. The historical illiteracy of college graduates is glaring. According to a recent survey, only a third of respondents knew when the Constitution was written; a mere quarter knew that the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. (With 75% of respondents able to name the the wife of Jay-Z and 89% able to identify the owner of Amazon, what knowledge the college educated do boast merely compounds the despair their lack of knowledge invites.) If memory can serve to corroborate the accuracy of history, what happens when the historical knowledge that undergirds memory is erroneous or non-existent?

A people growing increasingly illiterate of a past that is becoming increasingly digitized: it hardly requires Orwell's genius to imagine Orwell's future.

## I DOUBLETHINK THEREFORE I AM NOT

A key to the Party's ability to control reality that has not been touched on, one that is likely to reassure the reader that his world will never approach Orwell's because like the barbarity of it, it is too preposterous to entertain seriously, is the art of doublethink: "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them." The principle is embodied in the Party's immortalized slogans:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

A mind not trained thus is naturally inclined to dismiss such a notion as not merely being implausible but impossible. The principle of non-contradiction binds human thought so firmly that it cannot engage in doublethink. *X* cannot be not-*x*. War cannot be not-war, i.e., peace. A means to peace, sure, but peace itself, never.

On that last note, it is worth emphasizing that doublethink is not simply hypocrisy or a logical fallacy. That variety of specious reasoning would appear to be endemic to human thought. When someone says it is necessary to steal an election to save democracy, that is not doublethink, strictly speaking. For that stolen election is not itself democracy—an instance of it—but a means to safeguarding it, however misguided or unjustified the means may be. Stolen elections are democracy would be a doublethought; an absurdity, really, one that the mind—even the mind of one who is willing to steal an election to save democracy—is unwilling to countenance, and not just unwilling, but unable. *X* cannot be not-*x*.

But doublethink is not beyond or beneath the powers of human cogitation. If the mind has not been trained to ratiocinate in this fashion, it certainly is capable of doing so and not just capable, but accustomed to doing so. By way of illustration, consider the conception of a virgin birth. In humans at least, birth presupposes a loss of virginity; virginity precludes the possibility of birth. To believe in a virgin birth is to hold two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accept both of them.

In response, people will be quick to call attention to the religious nature of this teaching—both those who consider it gospel and those who think it piffle. That detail probably does more to vindicate the teaching than confound it, at least with respect to the principle of non-contradiction. For a sine qua non of the gospel in question is an omnipotent being unconstrained by the strictures of human logic. What is a miracle but a stretching, if not transgression, of the natural order? To contend that God cannot do it because human logic will not allow it would entail a diminution of God's sovereignty and an aggrandizement of man's. It would flout the divine supremacy clause upon which the cosmological balance of power rests. Man would be rendered the measure of all things, God Himself included.

Be that as it may, none of this should detract from the verity that a virgin birth is doublethink. That it is cloaked in an air of religious (il)legitimacy does not change that. It may validate it in the eyes of those who believe, but it does not alter the (il)logicality of it.

But it is the disbelievers, or at least those that would denigrate the notion of a virginal birth as being a delusion indicative of the superstitious folly to which religious simpletons are prone, who seem to be on shakier ground. Anyone who declaims the delusive power of religious faith while ignoring the no less delusive power of political faith is himself deluded. The peerless atrocities of the twentieth century were by and large the fruits of political faiths, not religious ones. Indeed, one could argue that it was a dearth of religious faith that exacerbated those atrocities (on that, more below). It might also be noted that religious faith enjoys a saving grace or an escape clause, alluded to above, which political faith has no recourse to: Religious faith rests on or points to a transcendent being that is unbound by the constraints that come with being human. Political faith, however ambitious its promises may be, cannot overstep those limits.

By way of a secular example of doublethink, one serendipitously related to the aforementioned religious example, be so charitable as to consider the following: men can give birth. Logically speaking, men are as capable of giving birth as are virgins. To adopt this notion is to hold two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accept them both. And to do so, moreover, without the support of a supernatural being that has the power to supersede the laws of nature.

To insist that men can give birth is to deny the reality that men cannot give birth and to do so, moreover, while denying that one has denied reality. That is the very essence of doublethink.

> The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt…. To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies—all this is indispensably necessary.

Political faith may not move mountains but it can transform men into women and women into men and both into neither—why not! Miracle or not, that is no mean feat. That this is a matter of political faith can be inferred from the shared political leanings or ideologies of those who doublethink thus. What is remarkable about the growing acceptance of this proposition is the facileness with which it is conceded and the fervidness with which it is defended. Winston had to be tortured mercilessly to learn that 2+2=5. Today's minor (political) party members learn that men can give birth without ever being brought to Room 101. Gender Studies 101 turns out to be enough.

## HOLLOWED GROUND

If the transformative power of political faith inspires wonder, its redemptive power leaves much to be desired. For it is unclear what sort of salvation is vouchsafed to those who cling to it. In the past, religious faith accorded the prospect of an ethereal and eternal happiness, one that offered solace in this life to those who abided by it—a life much briefer and more burdensome than what typically transpires today. If the promise of political faith is an earthly bliss, it by and large has failed to deliver. Numerous signs announce this failure, including escalating rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, drug addiction, and suicide. That may not be enough to inspire faith in the powers of God, but it ought to be enough to shake one's faith in the powers of Man.

The growing power of political faith can be gleaned from the growing polarization that plagues the republic. The vitriol that rankles the public arena, to say nothing of the violence that spills out into it with ill-omened consistency, evinces a mindset that prioritizes people's political allegiances at the expense of a broader shared identity (as Americans, for example, or more broadly still, as humans). That prioritization also erodes religious unity, as the fracturing of Protestant denominations along *political* lines suggests. But internal religious schisms aside—besides, they are nothing new—political faith in America appears to be in the process of supplanting religious faith. The decline in religious affiliation in America has been well underway and well documented for some time now, a time that coincides with the increasing hyperpolarization of the American populace, intimating that the two faiths—religious and political—may be inversely aligned. As recently as 2000, nearly 90% of Americans identified as Christian, with an additional 5% affirming some other religious affiliation. A mere two decades later, the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian dropped below 70%, while the percentage of those who professed no religious affiliation swelled to nearly 30%. It is anticipated that a couple decades hence, those percentages will achieve parity. It would seem that man requires faith and that faith abhors a vacuum. The abandonment of religious faith is not the abandonment of faith *tout court*; it is merely the exchange of one type of faith for another.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, religion has no place. In fact, the word itself has ceased to exist. The proles alone are afforded religious freedom, but as with the intellectual freedom they are given, they make no use of it. "They can be granted intellectual liberty because they have no intellect." Likewise, they enjoy religious freedom because they have no religiosity. The proles largely evade the scrutiny of Big Brother, not because they are above suspicion, but because they are beneath it. "As the Party slogan put it: 'Proles and animals are free.'"

In that world, the Party has displaced God. Having assumed His omniscience and omnipotence, it demands the sort of reverence and obedience that once was owed Him. As it turns out, the Party demands even greater obedience, for while God allowed himself to be defied, the Party permits no defiance. It is true that those who sinned against God were consigned to hell, but this too amounts to a comparative shortcoming when measured against the power of the Party, as Patrick Reilly astutely observed in his study of Orwell's dystopia. Every child of God who winds up in hell is a child who could not be saved. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, everyone is saved, even the wayward Winston who in the end learns to love Big Brother. That Oceania in effect has become a hell from which there is no escape only further underscores the absolute power of the Party and the utter powerlessness of the people it rules over.

It is no coincidence that in this world from which religion has been banished, so too has humanity. As a rueful Winston remarks, the proles alone have stayed human. In spite of their debasement, in spite of their animalization, "they had not become hardened inside." Though the proles were regarded by the Party as sub-human, they treated themselves humanely. "They were governed by private loyalties which they did not question. What mattered were individual relationships, [so that] a completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself." For the non-proles, there is no value in itself. Whatever does not serve the interests of the Party has no value.

Displays of humanity are very few and far between in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and invariably they meet a dispiriting if not ghastly end. The refugee woman, "blue with fright," futilely shielding the screaming boy in her arms from the bullets raining down on them, only to be blown to bits by a "20 kilo bomb" that had been dropped from above. Bumstead's offer of a "grimy piece of bread" to his fellow prisoner, wasting away before his eyes; an act of charity that earns Bumstead "a frightful blow" from the prison guard that catapults him across the cell and does nothing to save "the skull-faced man" from the dreadful fate that awaits him in Room 101. Winston's own mother clasping his starving baby sister in her arms knowing that the gesture could do nothing to yield the "precious little morsel of chocolate" that she cried for nor keep her safe from the tragic denouement—whatever it may be (starvation, labor camp, vaporization)—that inexorably drew near.

Before it is irreparably stamped out of him, Winston, too, provides one of the novel's rare displays of humanity. At the start of part two, when Julia stumbles in front of him, landing on her face and emitting "a sharp cry of pain," Winston reflexively comes to her aid, notwithstanding that at this juncture, he is convinced she is a spy bent on ratting him out.

> A curious emotion stirred in Winston's heart. In front of him was an enemy who was trying to kill him: in front of him, also, was a human creature, in pain and perhaps with a broken bone. Already he had instinctively started forward to help her. In the moment when he had seen her fall on the bandaged arm, it had been as though he felt the pain in his own body.

Winston's fate was sealed long before he came to Julia's aid. But it is that moment that sets in motion the drama of the book's second part, a stirringly human drama suffused with hope and love and, well, humanity. That sliver of humanity will go the way of all humanity in the Orwellian future. By book's end, nothing of it will remain.

To sustain a semblance of humanity in so inhumane a world, one would have to be, to paraphrase Aristotle, a prole or a god. Winston, of course, is neither. Long before he is tortured and the last remnants of humanity have been snuffed out of him, he reveals that his capacity for inhumanity is no less than

that of the cold-blooded tyrants he conspires to topple. In an effort to gauge Winston's dedication to the Brotherhood, O'Brien asks him what he is prepared to do. In a litany that haunts the reader and will come back to haunt him, Winston declares that he is "prepared to commit murder [,] acts of sabotage which may cause the death of hundreds of innocent people[,] distribute habit-forming drugs, [] encourage prostitution, [] disseminate venereal diseases…and [] throw sulphuric acid in a child's face."

How is it that the very same man who selflessly came to the aid of a woman in distress, a woman whom he presumed to be an enemy no less, is prepared to throw sulphuric acid in the face of an innocent child? Though Winston retains a shred of humanity in a world by and large bereft of it, he is prepared, even eager, to forfeit that humanity for what he views to be a higher good. That the path to that higher good is paved with flagitious wrongs is of no moment in a world from which God has been exiled. The loss of religion precipitates a loss of humanity. The disavowal of religious faith will not spell the disavowal of faith simply, but will entail the advent of a new faith, an irreligious faith in whose name one will be sanctioned in perpetrating unspeakable enormities.

Orwell, himself a devout atheist, was hardly so naïve as to think that man ceased to be a knave the moment he embraced religion. No matter how much religion may lift him, man always will remain base. But religion serves as a positive check all the same. It supplies a sense of measure, a moral compass without which man is bound to go astray in the tenebrous abyss into which he has been tossed. Just how far astray man is capable of going was made plain in Orwell's century when abominations the likes of which the world had never before seen were carried out, not in the name of God, but for the sake of some godless cause, be it communism, Nazism, or imperialism.

The proles, it will be observed, appear to retain their humanity in the absence of religion. They did so by holding "on to the primitive emotions which [Winston] himself had to re-learn by conscious effort." In some Rousseauian sense, those primitive emotions bespeak a latent affinity for one's fellow human being and an aversion to seeing that fellow being mistreated. Such primitive goodness enjoys a precarious place in civilization, which often seeks to efface or mend man's primitive ways. Because they remain uncivilized, the proles have managed to preserve those ways. But civilized man requires some substitute and here religion serves him well. For what it teaches is that humans, made in God's image, are born with dignity and should be treated accordingly. In the absence of God, the ground of human dignity becomes a lot less stable, its source much less evident. The modern penchant to root human dignity in reason or autonomy is often little more than a superficial and supercilious effort to conserve biblical morality while scrapping biblical faith, as Nietzsche had so trenchantly argued. Orwell too exposes the dubiety of that undertaking in one of the book's more devastating scenes. When O'Brien paints for Winston a picture of the future, a future in which the Party forever holds on to power, implacably crushing the heretics who resist it (for heresies too will live forever), so that whatever remains of humanity is subsumed beneath the Party itself, Winston weakly replies "You can't!" Though he can adduce no evidence that would controvert O'Brien's claim, he believes, nay knows, as a matter of faith that the Party "will fail. There is something in the universe—I don't know, some spirit, some principle—that you will never overcome." When Winston confesses that that spirit is human and not divine, his delusion is laid bare. Having been tortured and starved for an unknown period of time—long enough to lose more than 50 pounds—a decaying Winston is forced to undress and behold before the mirror "the bag of filth" he has become. That is what the human spirit has been reduced to; that is what it is eminently reducible to. Men are pitiful creatures, perhaps all the more so in view of their puffed-up and misplaced pride.

Reason does not keep men from being reduced to bags of filth. One might rejoin that neither does God, but so long as man is more than the sum of his material parts, it does. What is more, one will not hesitate to do to a bag of filth what one would demur to do to a child of God. Brotherly love no doubt is an elusive ideal, but children of God are naturally more disposed for it than are children who pride themselves on having no need of God because reason is enough to light their way. As Orwell illustrates and as the century to which he belonged attests, without an effective moral restraint, reason never will lack for reasons, even when it is called to legitimate the most heinous iniquities. The ease with which reason can be corrupted—

or perhaps, can corrupt those who rely too exclusively on it—was exemplified by those Marxists who never wavered in their conviction that, to paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm (among the more luminous of them), the sacrifice of millions upon millions of lives was justified to reach the radiant tomorrow.

And of course, one need not repair to the previous century nor look to the radiant tomorrow to substantiate this verity. For in the present day, this logic is borne out with deplorable regularity. One sees it in the widespread lament that the assassination attempt on Trump was but an attempt; in the ill-concealed glee with which the vaccinated in the time of COVID rejoiced in the deaths of the unanointed; and on college campuses across this country following the events of October 7th, when people came together not to mourn the victims and condemn the appalling horrors that were committed, but to commemorate those horrors and clamor for new ones (and new victims with them). No one who believed that human dignity is inborn and inviolable would behave thus. That conviction will not transmute men into angels, but it will help keep them from becoming devils.

## THE OBJECT OF POWER

A related component to all this, one to which Orwell presciently points, is power and the unshakeable thirst for it. Humans seem inveterately inclined to forsake the better angels of their nature in the pursuit of it and, even more so, when in possession of it. The wisdom of Lord Acton's dictum is demonstrated by its universality. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is demonstrated by the absolute corruptness of the Party.

What enables the Party to maintain its absolute rule is not simply its lack of scruples, but its lack of illusions. Whereas the norm has been for rulers—benevolent and malevolent alike—to regard power as a means, the Party transparently treats it as an end. "The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power." Even the great twentieth-century totalitarians were misguided on this score. "The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives." Power in their eyes was but a means to that radiant tomorrow, whether its hallmark was racial purity or human equality. Inevitably, then, those in power would one day cease to be, either because their goal had been achieved or, more likely, because their goal remained ever out of reach. A ruling group that pursues an unattainable goal cannot long sustain the requisite faith in itself that is a precondition for its reign. The Party has sidestepped this pitfall by being honest with itself. One does not wield power for some greater good, for in a cosmic abyss, there is no greater good. Nor does one ever surrender power, for when power is the greatest good, there is nothing to surrender it to or for. The sage who regards virtue as the highest good does not abandon virtue once he becomes virtuous, but continues to practice virtue, redoubling his efforts whenever he falters. Of course, that pursuit, unlike that of power, demands restraint of its practitioners. In the absence of a higher good than power, there is no restraint. Everything is permitted.

Power may not be reckoned the highest good in the present day, at least not openly, but it has become an obsession all the same. It has become the paradigm through which human relations are viewed, an essentially—and essentialist—Marxist paradigm that neatly and simplistically divides the world into two groups: oppressors and oppressed. An oppressor is, definitionally, one who wields power over others, harshly and unjustly. What today's self-proclaimed victims want is not so much an end to oppression, but an end to *their* oppression. This is made evident in the enthusiasm with which, whenever the opportunity arises, they become oppressors themselves—by shaming or excluding, if not outright harming, those they accuse of oppressing them. That today's purported oppressors are so susceptible shame—to being shamed—suggests that they have lost faith in their ability or right to oppress and soon will cease to be oppressors, if they have not already or, for that matter, if ever they were. If what has been can provide a glimpse into what will be, then pace Marx, what lies just beyond the horizon is not the radiant tomorrow, but the same interminable struggles that have littered history heretofore, albeit with different oppressive and oppressed players strutting and fretting their hours upon the stage.

The centrality of power in the minds of today's self-designated victims can be gleaned from the frequency with which the word "empower" is bandied about, as well as the subtle shift in the word's connotation. (Google's Ngram Viewer shows that the usage of the word has surged over the past few decades, without showing any sign of abating.) In its earlier usage, to *empower* typically meant to *authorize*, as in empowering an admiralty or municipality to exercise certain functions. In its current usage, to *empower* typically means to promote the self-actualization of an individual or group of people, as in empowering women to advance their careers or transgenders to affirm their identity. That need or desire for empowerment not only betrays a lack of power (the powerful do not fuss about being empowered any more than the rich fuss about being enriched), but a fixation with it. It is not just the word's increased usage that signals as much. Consider also how malapropos it would be to use some other word—a word that might have been apropos in some other day—in its stead. How ridiculous would it sound in this age of oppression to advocate that instead of empowering some marginalized group of people, the goal should be to ennoble or enlighten them? But nobility and enlightenment were the watchwords of a bygone age for which there is no safe space in the present one.

## THE TRIUMPH OF EVIL

In a day when brute power becomes the nexus of human relations, barbarism will find a welcome home. A window into such a world, as well as the souls of those who occupy it, was furnished by Orwell so that those safely removed from it may safely peer into it. Those who would shrug off such premonitions as being but the outgrowth of a tortured and overactive imagination or the kind of horror from which liberal peoples are immune (owing to their longstanding commitments to civil liberties, limited government, due process, and so forth) would do well to recall Solzhenitsyn's admonition that evil cuts through the heart of every human being. It would also behoove them to comprehend that the sorts of depravities Orwell entertains are prominently on display today, not just in the illiberal corners of the world, but in the very liberal parts as well, and one might add, in the breasts of the putatively liberal denizens who reside there. In this regard, the events of October 7th are revealing not only because they allow, if not compel, one to peer into the depths of human depravity, but because they expose the profound degradation of man in a world where life is reduced to little more than a power struggle.

The response in many parts of America, not least in those places that once were concerned more with enlightening and ennobling human beings than empowering them, was, as mentioned above, not only to condone those horrors, but to celebrate them. And what is more, to wish them on others. That response stems neatly if not inevitably from the Manichean mindset that has made oppression the lynchpin of human existence and power the means to human redemption. An illustration of that mindset that is as illuminating as it is alarming was afforded by Jodi Dean, professor of politics at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, who defended Hamas in her Orwellianlly entitled piece, "Palestine Speaks for Everyone." Lest anyone be reluctant to judge a piece by its title, Dean does her readers a service by summarily dispelling any room for ambiguity with her opening sentence: "The images from October 7 of paragliders evading Israeli air defenses were for many of us exhilarating." And well they should be for those who view the world through the lens of oppression and who are (pre)disposed to see everywhere "two sides and no alternative." From this Manichean standpoint, there can be "no negotiation of the relation between oppressor and oppressed."

As was made promptly and painfully apparent, Dean's is not some isolated voice in the wilderness. The throngs of students, effectively empowered without being effectively ennobled and enlightened, that poured out across college campuses to share and convey the sort of joy and exhilaration that Dean exuded, left no room for doubt just how deep-seated and widespread the moral rot has become among Orwell's "English-speaking races." Those students may be poor ethicists, but they make for passable logicians. For if the quality of their ethical reasoning leaves much to be desired, who can dispute that they reason and, given the classrooms in which their minds have been molded, do so soundly? In viewing the world as they have been

taught to view it—through the lens of oppression—life is reduced to a Hobbesian struggle in which, as Dean professes, "oppressed people fight back against their oppressors by every means necessary." As in Hobbes's state of nature and Karamazov's godless universe, so too in Dean's Manichean weltanschauung: everything is permitted. Only in such a world where humans have been parceled out between good and evil—invidiously and unconditionally—could the wanton rape of women and butchering of children be so seamlessly and shamelessly equated with justice. Only in a day in which, to turn once more to Solzhenitsyn, men have lost God, could the reduction of humans to bags of filth elicit cries of joy and exhilaration.

## ORWELL'S WINTRY MIND

Orwell's fiction is the stuff of non-fiction—yet one more element to compound the weight of a work that has no further need of it. Bleak as the book may be—arguably, it is as bleak as they come—it affords hope, however dim, all the same. That may appear an incongruous conclusion to draw in view of the foregoing remarks, rendered all the more injudicious by the fact that every glimmer of hope that materializes in that hateful apocalypse is pitilessly dashed asunder in the end. With a lingering sense of gloom and doom hanging over the reader's soul, the more valid verdict would seem to be the one reached by V. S. Pritchett in his review of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: in Mr. Orwell's wintry mind, hope has died.

But it did not die. And the novel that evokes overwhelming despair is the proof. Why would Orwell write a book, particularly with death knocking impatiently at his door, if hope had expired before he did? Why bequeath that book to posterity if the boot forever stamping on the face of humanity was a fait accompli?

Like Hell, Oceania is a world whose residents are enjoined to abandon hope. So long as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continues to find an audience, readers should be enjoined not to abandon hope. Orwell wrote a book bereft of hope to give hope, not exhaust it. He defied death to complete that book precisely because in the winter of his life, hope had not died.

One does not conquer one's demons by condoning them, but by confronting them. That is the hope that this utterly hopeless book affords: Orwell shows his readers the monsters that lie before them, that lie within them, and exhorts those readers to face those monsters and defeat them, lest they be defeated.

A party bent on promoting this book might affix to it the slogan: despair is hope. A more palatable alternative for a readership too logical to indulge such paradoxical excess would be: in despair there is hope. The absence of despair does not signal the triumph of hope but of resignation. These are despairing times. They are not hopeless ones.

As such, they are times for which Orwell remains indispensable. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will always have a place in a world where the promise of a radiant tomorrow continues to seduce even the brightest of minds; a world where the radiant tomorrow has yet to be reached and the nightmare it is bound to be has yet to be realized. May Orwell never lack for readers who are willing to peer unflinchingly into the future and into themselves. A darkness, blinding and oppressive, awaits them there. But it is a darkness that, as Orwell illumines, is not wholly devoid of light.

Caveat Lector: let the reader despair. And hope.