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WRITING AND REWRITING OF POLITICAL HISTORY THE NOVEL "1984" BY GEORGE ORWELL

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to depict the making of "1984", a novel by George Orwell as re-writing of the political history as prevalent in some of the parts of the world during the first half of the 20th century. Along with historical aspects, some of the sociological and psychological impressions of such government are also focused upon. How the concerned authors of those days, tried vividly to express the same theme, can also be noticed through the cross references.

Key words: history, political analysis, fascism, totalitarianism, socialism.

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Orwell was a dispassionate witness of his age, passionately involved in social and political issues. This appears to be a contradiction in terms: but it is not. It expresses the genuine honesty of the man who fought for his convictions, and yet retained a degree of objectivity in his assessment of a situation or an issue. In an age dominated by political ideologies, he steered clear of them; he often tried to get inside a situation but did not at any stage surrender his right to think and to criticize. Though his political analysis was often naïve, his intuitive grasp of a situation was normally sound. It is because of this quality that his work has transcended the self-imposed confines of political writing to influence the writers and thinkers of the present time. Orwell's work is perhaps more relevant today than it ever was for his own generation, a relevance increasingly obvious now that it is possible to view him and his work outside the limits set by the biographical perspective. He has a very down-to-earth practical approach and has no

sentimentality to expand on issues like war, bombing or poverty. He almost has a ruthless attitude at times, like a surgeon who feels that a drastic measure is required to prevent the disease from spreading. He explodes many myths – not only at an ideological level but also at the level of ordinary life. He was one of those who liked to work from inside a situation – not to identify them with it, but to understand it more fully and objectively. There is a great deal in Orwell which is motivated by aesthetic considerations. Orwell, though not a philosopher, was led to examine a number of issues with philosophical dimensions. The questions he asks and the answers he provides place him within a philosophical tradition – the tradition of the moralists. The issues which he examined are of a recurring nature, and the process of examining them a continuing one.

The importance of language not only to man and communication, but to the origin and development of ideas; the need for an equation and

a balance in the relationship between the individual and society, between the "I" and the other; the need for understanding not only the nature of men but the world they inhabit – these and several other related matters concern Orwell and are constantly being reflected in contemporary writing. In turning to them and responding at both the personal and artistic level, Orwell was truly the witness of his age. He was a witness not only in the sense that he brought his intuitive response to bear upon the events, his understanding to help him analyse them, but in several other ways as well. He looked for a kind of objective reality which could be label led "fact" or taken to be "truth" in the singular, and he pressed for the recognition of the inward testimony of conscience. The controversy which surrounds his motives and ideological beliefs, the claims which opposing political camps make on him, the paradox which critics have received in him, all point out to the truth basic to the man and his work : he had the courage to stand alone.

Orwell was not the only rebel or a non-conformist. Several of his contemporaries were outside the mainstream. But whereas they turned to an alternative commitment, he persisted in holding on to his own, not against one but both mainstreams: the official and the rebellious. It has to be recollected that the age of Orwell roughly coincides with the two world wars and their aftermath. The young Orwell had to struggle with the aftermath of the first and the ailing man had to live through the aftermath of the second. In *Inside the Whale* (1940), Orwell provides his own view of the literary history of the period and how the writers of the thirties were increasingly turning towards communism. Richard Gossman in the introduction to *The God that Failed* (1949), writes: "Their conversion, in fact, was rooted in despair – a despair of western values". Socialism, in its various forms, was a word filled with promise for the young intellectuals, and the attempt of the Russians to set up a just society attracted them. Marxism filled up the vacuum in their world caused by the decline in religious faith. C. Day Lewis admitted in his autobiography, *The Buried Day* (1960). "My communism had a religious quality". (Jain Jasbir: 6)

There was also a desire to lose the burden of self-hood in the anonymity of a unity in a crowd. Their attraction towards communism was motivated by a sense of disillusionment with the capitalistic society. This was an attraction shared by many European intellectuals including Sartre and Koestler and Ignazio Silone. But this faith, for many, was a short lived one. Orwell in his *Literature and the Left* (1946) observed that these intellectuals were received with suspicion and when it was found that they would not or could not turn themselves into gramophone records, they were thrown out. Most of them retreated into individualism. The decline in the values of the past, or this search for new values coincided with a loss of faith in liberalism, and in the results of industrialism. The utopia that many had planned and hoped for had eluded them. The problems still remained the same, though the perspectives were changing. The best one could do was to concentrate on remaining sane. The thirties have often been described as the years that the locusts hath eaten; there seemed to be a death-wish prevalent everywhere, a feeling that there is nothing that will do well, a sense of futility. In fiction, the dystopian mode was fast catching on. It was a war on all idealism. But Orwell, though a rebel in his own way, was not the man to reject all aesthetic and moral codes. In an essay entitled, *Orwell as an old Etonian* (1975), Martin Green wrote:

The post-war generation, to which Eric Blair belonged, turned away from the fathers, away from the old styles of manliness and seriousness towards brilliant and playful modes of art. Eric Blair could not belong to a generation which defined itself by such a gesture. (Volume 21, Ed. Margaret Church)

Thus, he was the odd man out, cultivating an old style of manhood when others had rejected it, holding on to an outdated concept of patriotism, and to a sense of the individual self when the race was on for merging with crowds.

In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell described this period as a queer time for England, when the country was on the verge of a change: Throughout almost the whole nation, there was running a wave of revolutionary feeling which has since been reversed and forgotten, but which has

left various deposits of sediment. Essentially, it was a revolt of youth against age, resulting directly from the war. Spain attracted a number of young minds. Orwell was also one of those attracted. But here again he refused to be one of a system. His courage was of the kind, which thrives on independence. He fought in the war, was injured, wrote about it and found the experience a valuable "object" lesson for it taught him, how easily totalitarian propaganda can control the opinion of enlightened people in democratic countries. With the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August, 1939, and the increased hostilities on the part of Germany, on 1st September, 1939, Britain was compelled to declare war.

Orwell found it necessary, at this juncture, to define his loyalties. He continued to be a critic of the government, remained a dissenter, but also refused to be unpatriotic. The revolt, where he was concerned, had to be "against the left as well as the right". Two years at the BBC, freelancing and the writing of *Animal Farm* (1945) brought him almost to the end of the war. There is, in Orwell's works, his essays as well as his novels, a strong turning toward the past. Orwell inherited a great deal from the two strands of the nineteenth century liberal tradition, and responded to the ideas in various forms and in different ways – as a study of his work will show. He took the idea of non-conformism far beyond its original scope and had begun to see the cracks in the concepts related to freedom and equality. He was wary of state control – especially in its non-humanistic attitudes. He was wary of imposition of all kinds even if it was directed towards education or cleanliness. Heir to the tradition, he had grown up in, he rejected it by trying to move outside it. Yet, a residual element remained and this grew in its own different way.

Orwell was a rebel – but perhaps not in an ordinary sense, because to Orwell, society was not one but two or three or more depending on the divisions of classes and ideas. And his rebellion was not against tradition as much as it was motivated by a need to understand the value of human life, and of human mind. Orwell's political views shifted over time, but he was a man of the political left throughout his life as a writer. In his earlier days, he occasionally described himself as a "Tory anarchist".

His time in Burma made him a staunch opponent of imperialism and his experience of poverty while researching *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) turned him into a Socialist. He wrote in 1946, that every line of serious work that he had written since 1936 had been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism, and for democratic socialism, as he understood it. Although he was never either a Trotskyist or an anarchist, he was strongly influenced by the Trotskyist and anarchist critiques of the Soviet regime and by the anarchists' emphasis on individual freedom. He wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) that he worked out an anarchist theory that all government was evil, that the punishment did always more harm than the crime and the people could be trusted to behave decently if one would only let them alone. It was the Spanish Civil War that played the most important part in defining his socialism. Having witnessed the success of the anarcho-syndicalism communities, and the subsequent brutal suppression of the anarcho-syndicalists and other revolutionaries by the Soviet-backed communists, Orwell returned from Catalonia, as a staunch anti-Stalinist and joined the Independent Labour Party. At that time, like most other left-wingers in the United Kingdom, he was still opposed to rearmament against the Nazi Germany, but after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the outbreak of the Second World War, he changed his mind. He left the ILP over its pacifism and adopted a political position of "revolutionary patriotism". He supported the war effort but detested a mood that would lead to a revolutionary socialist movement among the British people.

We are in a strange period of history in which a revolutionary has to be a patriot and a patriot has to be a revolutionary.

- (Tribune)

He canvassed for the Labour Party in 1945 General Election and was broadly supportive of its actions in office, though he was sharply critical of its timidity on certain key questions and despised the Pro-Soviet Stance of many Labour Left-Wingers.

In his magnum opus, *1984* (1949), he showed the Party enlisting anti-Semitic passions in the Two Minutes Hates for Goldstein, their

archetypal traitor. Orwell was also a proponent of a federal socialist Europe, a position outlined in his 1947 essay *Toward European Unity*, which first appeared in *Partisan Review* (between 1941-46).

Depiction of history in the novel *1984*

The most common cliché of Orwell criticism is that *1984* (1949) is a 'nightmare vision' of the future. *1984* is not only a paradigm of the history of Europe for the previous twenty years but also a culmination of all the characteristic beliefs and ideas expressed in Orwell's works from the Depression to the Cold War. The origins of the novel can be found in Orwell's earliest books, and its major themes, precise symbols and specific passages can be traced very exactly throughout his writing. Orwell characteristically expresses the poverty and isolation that oppresses the characters in his novels in terms of personal humiliation.

Orwell felt he had to frighten people into a painful recognition of the dangers that threatened their very existence. His statements about *1984* reveal that the novel, though set in a future time, is realistic rather than fantastic, and deliberately intensifies the actuality of the present.

Orwell writes that "*1984* is a novel about the future that is, it is in sense a fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel, it is intended 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 Totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical sequences".

Irving Howe gives opinion that the world of *1984* is that of totalitarianism after it conquers the world. It would be more accurate to say that *1984* (1949) portrays the very real though unfamiliar political terrorism of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia transposed into the landscape of London in 1941-44. In *Prophecies of Fascism* (1940), Orwell discussed the idea of a hedonistic society and rejected it because he felt that a ruling class which thought principally in terms of a "good time would soon lose its vitality". (31)

A ruling class, he felt, has got to have a strict morality, a quasi-religious belief in itself a mystique. To some extent, the ruling class in *1984*

has a sense of this quasi-religious belief in itself, a belief that it will continue, that it can do no wrong. Power is the end for all political activity, and to maintain themselves in power they are prepared to go to any extent. Feelings, emotions, human relationships do not come into the picture at all. *1984*, as its title implies, is Orwell's version of the future awaiting mankind. The scene is England, now known as "Airstrip One", which forms part of "Oceania". A ceaseless, point less war goes rumbling on, a war in which Oceania is in alliance with Eastasia against Eurasia – at least that is the statement put out by the Ministry of Truth, however, nobody any longer feels certain about anything – and it is fairly clear that only four years previously Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia against the common enemy, Eastasia, by the end of the book the situation has switched back. The novel presents Orwell's final treatment of the themes of social revolution and progress; it is a grim warning to the twentieth century civilization, a vision of the terror that could invade the world if all the implications of totalitarianism were put into practice. Orwell paints a vivid picture of a soulless 'brave new world'. He says that he does not believe that the kind of society he describes necessarily will come into existence, but something resembling it could arrive. He argues that before writing of the totalitarian world as a nightmare that can't come true, it may be remembered that in 1925, the world of today would have seemed a nightmare that could not come true. The novel is clearly a prophetic nightmare of events in the future. The inferno atmosphere is convincingly created and maintained throughout. Besides painting a picture of the probable future that awaits mankind, Orwell principally fantasizes the fate of an already entrenched Communist dictatorship under Stalin, though in its last section. Hitler's Germany with its ghoulish anti-semitic holocaust is invoked as a parallel movement in tyranny. In fact, the whole atmosphere could only have been visualized by a writer of this century, Post-Russian Revolution, Post-Spanish-Civil War, Post-Second World War for the horror of *1984*, is experienced and not manufactured. Harold Rosenberg opines that the tone of the post war imagination was set by Orwell's

1984: since the appearance of that work, the 'dehumanized collective' haunts their thoughts. The actual date that makes the little of the novel seems to have been taken from Jack London's novel, *The Iron Heel* (1907) – a book which deeply impressed Anatole France, Trotsky and Aneurin Bevan, amongst others. Orwell praised this book for its theme – oligarchy's avarice for material wealth transformed into a lust for power for its own sake. He says that *The Iron Heel* (1907) – is a truer prophecy of the future than either *Brave New World* (1932) or *the shape of Things to Come* (1933). 1984 may also be compared to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, because both Orwell and Huxley are perturbed by much the same features and trends of the twentieth century – civilization. Commenting on the genesis of Orwell's novel, Isaac Deutscher tells that the basic theme, plot, chief characters, symbols and indeed the whole climate of 1984 were borrowed by Orwell from Zamyatin's, *We* (1920). In linking Orwell's 1984 with Zamyatin's *We*, both Deutscher and George Woodcock overlooked the fact that even before Orwell had heard of *We*, he was an anti-totalitarian writer. His indictment, in *Burmese Days* (1934), of imperialism, which is a form of totalitarianism, clearly shows this.

Beginning with *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and in his assorted prose writings over the following years, Orwell's hatred of totalitarianism recurs with conspicuous regularity. And the images of the boot stamping on the face of human love, and decency destroyed by political brutality had begun to appear in his writings long before he even conceived 1984.

1984 was recognized at once, as a work of impressive and haunting imaginative power. Today it is acknowledged as one of the seminal works of the 20th century, a novel which ranks with Camus's *The Plague* (1949) and Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940) as a searching commentary upon time and which, had Orwell written nothing else, will ensure him a permanent place in literary history. What Orwell has done in 1984 is to take a number of aspects of life in the 1940s – rationing, food shortages, the black market, stereotyped meals, uniformity, patriotic propaganda, rocket bombs and extrapolate them in a form of a satirical fantasy. In doing so, he depicts a world in which all those

aspects of twentieth-century life which he despised are writ large: indeed the book has been the culmination of all the tendencies which he deplored in his own time'. The ubiquitous radio sets, the increasing invasion of privacy, the corruption of language, the drabness and regimentation of war time England; all are here. Super imposed on these elements is an elaborate political framework derived from his experience in Spain: the one-party state, the denial of objective truth, the manipulation of the past, imprisonment without trial, torture, indifference to human suffering. A satire must by its very nature exaggerate. To see the book as a warning against totalitarian tendencies and attitudes is to recognize that it is not simply an anti-communist treatise – the society described is an amalgam of the worst features of both communist and Nazi regimes. Fascism and communism became permanently bonded in the theory of totalitarianism, and their correspondent realities merged into the composite horror of totalitarianism. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the theory of totalitarianism, which had primarily been a weapon of the libertarian Left, was appropriated, with suitable modifications, by the resurgent Right- in America, as the ideological cornerstone of the Pax Americana, the American Century, and more generally, by the restorative forces of the old Rother throughout Europe. The naturalistic setting of war time London is combined with brutal characteristics of eighteenth-century England to emphasize the moral and material regression under "Ingsoc". The people mollify their miserable existence with large doses of acidic gin, prisoners march through the streets in leg-irons and public hangings provide popular amusement. In 1984, "Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum; the Houyhnhnms have no word in their language to express lying, falsehood or anything evil. And state control of love, sex and marriage is similar in Houyhnhnm-land and Oceania: Love is deliberately excluded from marriage; which is an objective and dispassionate conjunction for the sole purpose of propagation. It is arranged by the state or parents on a pragmatic basis, and adultery

and fortification are forbidden or unknown. The weapons and inventions of Oceania, which show no material progress since 1949, are familiar and conventional: truncheons, and microphones, Dictaphones (speak –write), two–way television “telescreen”, when Orwell tries to be more sophisticated and imaginative about such things, he is rather unconvincing, as when police patrols snoop into windows with helicopters, and concealed microphones in the vast country-side not only pick-up but also recognize voices. Orwell fascinates East Europeans through his insight into details they know well, they are amazed that a writer, who never lived in Russia, should have so keen a perception into its life. In *1984*, the enormous face on the posters, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome feature’, and the caption, “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU” , is based mainly on Stalin, but it also suggests the famous recruiting poster of 1914 with the picture of Field–Marshal Kitchener and the Caption “Your Country Need You”. As in contemporary Russia, the people are called comrade, the three–year plans are exceeded as the staggering figures of production output are announced, and women wear overalls and produce children for the State who are trained as informers and cause extermination of their parents. The atmosphere of overpowering fear is reinforced by the well-known characteristics of the Nazi regime: the underground resistance cells, hysterical Nuremberg like demonstrations, sadistic attacks on Goldstein and other Jews. History is completely rewritten, often in imitation of Stalin’s military and pedantic style and his trick of answering his own rhetorical questions. It is not clear, however, whom the Party is trying to convince by its enormous historical revisions. Since it controls all books and media, it would seem more effective to destroy the old books and write the new ones. Winston’s contention that the publication of the suppressed photo would be enough to blow the Party to atoms seems highly unlikely. The genesis of *1984* becomes even clearer when the evolution of three symbolic images is traced. The most famous and frequently quoted symbol is O’Brien’s picture of the future: Imagine a boot stamping on a human face forever. This image of merciless sadism is one that Orwell

could never exorcise from his mind, for it symbolized the connection between brutality, power worship, nationalism and totalitarianism. The tenements and slums of the proles, and the warmth and vitality that flourish amid this economic deprivation are derived from Orwell’s experience in Paris and Wigan as well as from his portrayal of war time London. For the working class district of Paris where Orwell lived in 1928-29 is reproduced almost exactly in the opening pages on *1984* (1949); and the nineteenth century slums of the industrial Midlands are still standing in Oceania. There were puddles of filthy water here and there among the cobbles. In and out of the back doorways, and down narrow alleyways that branched off on either side”(82).The simple comforts of working class life - Your pipe drawing sweetly, the sofa cushions are soft underneath you, the fire is well alight, the air warm and stagnant” (98) are also praised in *1984*, when Winston enjoys the privacy of the old arm-chair and fire place in Charrington’s room above the antique shop that he associates with ancestral memories of “pre-revolutionary times”. And these somnolent and ignorant proles represent the same revolutionary hope as the exploited beasts of *Animal Farm*. An idea that he frequently repeats and adopts for *1984* is that in the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it. This idea appears as early as 1939 in his review of Bertrand Russell’s book on power: It is quite possible that we are descending into an age in which two and two will make five when the Leader says so. Mr. Russell points out that the huge system of organized lying upon which the dictators depend keeps their followers out of contact with reality (Orwell: 376). In Orwell’s novel, the regime is so repressive that it is able to disintegrate totally the personality of those who resist and to make the Winston Smiths believe what they know to be false. Orwell’s belief that “history has stopped” and is being rewritten first appears in 1943, and is reaffirmed by Winston, “History stopped in 1936” If the leader says of such and such event, “It never happened” – well, it never happened.... . This prospect frightens me much more than bombs. The past was dead; the future was unimaginable (26). Orwell paints a detailed and vivid picture of the

telescreen civilization under the dictatorship of Big Brother. Everything is controlled, which is itself controlled by the secret Inner Party: the Party's three slogans are:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH (4)

All apparatus of government is concentrated into four Ministries:

1. The Ministry of Truth: it concerns itself with education, news, and the arts – all boiling down in practice to propaganda.
2. The Ministry of Love: it maintains law and order, largely through dreaded Thought Police.
3. The Ministry of Plenty: it keeps everyone down to the barest necessities of life, continually
4. Announcing increases in rations which are actually reductions.
5. The Ministry of Peace: It is occupied with conduct of war Oceania is ruled by Big Brother – the personification of state power – and his portrait is continually being shown on the telescreen, although nobody has ever seen him. But he is omnipresent, and the force of the poster, "The Big Brother is watching you", assumes horrible implications as the story proceeds. (2)

The novel wants to demonstrate that the lust for power is an absolute and therefore ultimately inexplicable desire. It is all mastering, and irreducible to reason. Power is desired for its own sake since power lust is inexplicable, then it doesn't make sense to try to make sense of the ways in which the power – hungry, seek to maintain their power". (Ed: Daniel Lea: 121)

With the destruction of the past goes the destruction of the old language. To conquer the past and destroy the humanistic, moral and poetic world, Oceania has invented Newspeak. The function of Newspeak is to make a heretical thought literally unthinkable, and thus to restrict the range of thought, clip the wings of imagination and destroy the dignity of emotion through repulsive abbreviations and simplifications. In fact, Newspeak is nothing but a plot against human consciousness.

The aim of the Inner Party is summed up by the word double think ... in Newspeak, which means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. Doublethink lies at the very heart of Ingsoc, since the essential act of the party is to use conscious deception while retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty. To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them Even in using the word double think, it is necessary to exercise double think. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of double think one erases this knowledge: and so on indefinitely, with the lie, always one leap ahead of the truth to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out knowing them to be contradictory to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it. The doublethink in Orwell's view is practiced as much by the communists as by Fascists.

If *1984* is treated as a warning rather than a prophecy or, as a satire on the contemporary tendencies rather than a forecast of the future, it can be seen that its effect has been wholly salutary. Today such terms as 'doublethink', 'newspeak' and 'thought crime' have passed into accepted usage, the book has come to be regarded as a standard treatise on the growth and influence of totalitarian trends. As a critique of the corrupting effects of the accumulation of power in the hands of the state of the book is unrivalled in this century: indeed one suspects that future generation will rank it with Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) and Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) as one of the cardinal works on political theory. Its value as a warning of corruption of language, the abuse of power, the invasion of privacy and the regimentation of society has been inestimable and for these reasons alone the book merits an honoured place in the history of this time. The image of Orwell as a prophet is remarkable in that it results almost exclusively from wide and impassioned response to one work—*1984*. George Elliott opines:

.... he is sort of prophet – at least he is viewed as one, the secular prophet of socialismthe truth, the experienced and reasoned – upon moral truth, the truth

behind the confusion and lies of events, the steady truth.

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