

GEORGE ORWELL

Edited by

COURTNEY T. WEMYSS

and

ALEXEJ UGRINSKY

Prepared under the auspices of Hofstra University



Contributions to the Study of World Literature, Number 23



Greenwood Press

New York • Westport, Connecticut • London

Contents

Preface	
<i>Courtney T. Wemyss</i>	1
Part I The Man of Letters	3
1. G. K. Chesterton and <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> <i>Louis C. Burkhardt</i>	5
2. Past and Present in <i>Coming up for Air</i> and <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> : A Comparison with Rex Warner's <i>The Aerodrome</i> <i>Maria Teresa Chialant</i>	11
3. "Sugarcandy Mountain": Thoughts on George Orwell's Critique of the Christian Doctrine of Personal Immortality <i>James Connors</i>	19
4. Beyond Orwell: Clarity and the English Language <i>Madelyn Flammia</i>	27
5. The Rhetoric of <i>Down and Out in Paris and London</i> <i>John P. Frazee</i>	35
6. Orwell: From Clerisy to Intelligentsia <i>Jasbir Jain</i>	43
7. <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> and the Spirit of Schweik <i>Michael Orange</i>	51
8. Orwell, Self-Taught Student of English History <i>R. L. Patterson</i>	59
9. "A Monument to the Obvious": George Orwell and Poetry <i>Rosaly DeMaio Roffman</i>	65
10. George Orwell and the Problematics of Nonfiction <i>Howard Wolf</i>	75

1.

G. K. Chesterton and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

LOUIS C. BURKHARDT

Scholars of the works of both G. K. Chesterton and George Orwell agree that Orwell was well-read in Chesterton. As a schoolboy Orwell reportedly quoted Chesterton frequently. As late as 1945 Orwell remarked that Chesterton was "a writer of considerable talent."⁽¹⁾ But at the same time Orwell also criticized Chesterton's tendency to allow Roman Catholicism to suppress "both his sensibilities and his intellectual honesty." The following year, in a letter to Herbert Rogers, Orwell objected to Chesterton's naive political program, which entailed distributing a small piece of private property to every man.⁽²⁾ At the time Orwell wrote Nineteen Eighty-Four he still appreciated the imagination of a writer in whom he reveled as a youth, but he could no longer tolerate Chesterton's political optimism. Orwell's ambivalent feelings toward Chesterton generated a tension toward him that seems to be discernible in several striking parallels between Nineteen Eighty-Four and three early Chesterton novels, The Napoleon of Notting Hill, The Ball and the Cross, and The Man Who Was Thursday.

Scholars who have commented on parallels between Chesterton's writings and Nineteen Eighty-Four commonly begin by observing that The Napoleon of Notting Hill opens in the year 1984.⁽³⁾ Published in 1904, The Napoleon of Notting Hill proclaims, "When the curtain goes up on this story, eighty years after the present date, London is almost exactly what it is now."⁽⁴⁾ This statement is modestly proposed to explain Orwell's choice of the year 1984 as his title, although there is no proof Orwell read The Napoleon of Notting Hill. All we know with certainty is that Orwell read much of Chesterton and that Orwell's remark that "Chesterton, in a less methodical way, predicted the disappearance of democracy and private property, and the rise of a slave society which might be called either capitalist or Communist,"⁽⁵⁾ best describes The Napoleon of Notting Hill, which states, "Democracy was dead; for no one minded the governing class governing" (NNH, p. 25).⁽⁶⁾

More significant than the use of the year 1984 are the political problems portrayed in The Napoleon of Notting Hill. Although these problems prove solvable, whereas those in Nineteen Eighty-Four are not, both governments at the outset are similar collective despotisms. The England of The Napoleon of Notting Hill has become a "great cosmopolitan civilization," absorbing all cultures and societies. Since absorption entails the abolition of individuality, freedom means nothing. As Adam Wayne, the heroic liberator of Notting Hill, remarks,

What a farce is this modern liberality. Freedom of speech means practically in our modern civilization that we must only talk about unimportant things. We must not talk about

religion, for that is illiberal; we must not talk about bread and cheese, for that is talking shop. (NNH, p. 149)

Oceania also suffers from a lack of liberty, including the loss of freedom of speech, as is evidenced by the constant chatter concerning the lottery. The Thought Police, moreover, enforce great suppression, but the effects in both societies are essentially the same: the people do not know enough to realize their predicament. As Kierkegaard often emphasized, the only thing worse than being lost is being lost and not knowing one is lost. Orwell asserts this truth in "Toward European Unity," where he writes: "The greatest difficulty of all is the apathy and conservatism of people everywhere."

Both Adam Wayne and Winston Smith become distinguished in their efforts to rise above this state of apathy -- Wayne by lifting his sword; Smith, his pen. It is fitting that Winston Smith resorts to the isolated act of writing a diary instead of urging revolution among the proles. They knew so little history and so much propaganda that the likelihood of a prole-based revolution was as slim as the possibility that Winston Smith would obtain a satisfactory answer from the old man in the pub. Whereas apathy in Orwell's book results primarily from ignorance, in Chesterton's book it results in belief in social evolution. People felt that if they must change, they must "change slowly and safely, as the animals do" (NNH, p. 21). It is noteworthy that Wayne, who resorts to violent means, succeeds in altering the spirit of the age, whereas Smith, who only contemplates the use of violence, fails altogether.

Winston Smith's inertia may partly result from Orwell's disdain of Chesterton's apparent delight in bloodshed. Chesterton easily lets his characters die, as in the following instance: "The banner of Notting Hill stoops to a hero," and with the words he drove the spear-point and half the flag-staff through Lambert's body and dropped him dead upon the road below, a stone upon the stones of the street" (NNH, p. 243). Yet armed with knowledge of Chesterton's gentle temperament, a sympathetic reader understands that fighting is symbolic of caring. After battling, Adam Wayne sincerely exclaims, "We have won. . . . We have taught our enemies patriotism!" (NNH, p. 243) It was better, according to Chesterton, for one to lose a limb than for one's whole mind to be cast into hell. Orwell, though, lacked the sympathy to read Chesterton's use of violence as an expression of human decency. His antipathy toward the unrestrained shedding of blood by Chesterton's heroes perhaps contributed to his portrayal of Winston Smith's revolutionary impotence. Orwell endowed the Party with the monopoly of power, as is evident by the inquisitorial nature of the tortures Smith received, thereby ensuring the book's fatalistic conclusion.

In allowing Winston Smith to fail, Orwell departed not only from Chesterton's symbolism and plot but also from the latter's metaphysical suppositions. Smith foresees his doom from the beginning because his entire world is against him -- from the neighborhood children to the Thought Police. Only Julia supports him as a person. Wayne, on the other hand, realizes his hope because transcendental powers assist him. The book ends with him walking off into the twilight of some cosmic afterlife.

On the surface the conclusion of Nineteen Eighty-Four appears to be much more believable than that of The Napoleon of Notting Hill, yet Nineteen Eighty-Four is so dependent on causality that once a reader detects a fault in the sequence, the entire vision is rendered unbelievable. Being structured around the syllogism that (1) no individuality can exist with the Party; (2) Winston Smith becomes an individual; (3) therefore, Winston Smith ceases to exist, Nineteen Eighty-Four is only as credible as its major premise. The Napoleon of Notting Hill is fantastic from the start (with such phrases as "When the curtain goes up on this sto-

ry . . ."), but the supposition that a man's love for the particular is capable of transcending all political obstructions is certainly more palatable than Orwell's major premise and is also easier to verify historically. The Napoleon of Notting Hill depicts a revolution that fits a historical pattern long established by occurrences such as the American and French revolutions; Nineteen Eighty-Four depicts a reign that cannot be documented: the unending domination of mankind by a totalitarian government.

One weakness in the major premise is the means of the Party's success in blotting out history and in mesmerizing citizens through propaganda. Once the possibility of such technological control is doubted, Orwell's syllogism totters. None of this is to say that The Napoleon of Notting Hill is free from stumbling blocks. A belief in Fairyland, as Chesterton called it, is required of the reader. Fairyland is presumably that place or state where spiritual values such as love and courage are found. It is both what is being threatened by modern materialism and what enables Adam Wayne to defeat materialism. Being enigmatic and flexible, Fairyland sustains the hopeful plot of The Napoleon of Notting Hill; being systematic and rigid, the technocracy sustains the fateful plot of Nineteen Eighty-Four.

This tendency in Orwell to glean from Chesterton valuable conceptions while rejecting the hope Chesterton offers is also apparent in The Ball and the Cross, a book in which MacIan, the theist, battles Turnbull, the atheist, only to discover their common enemy is modern indifference. Recall the comic scene from Nineteen Eighty-Four in the pub where Winston Smith attempts to get a "truthful account of conditions in the early part of the century." The old man with "pale blue eyes," a strong appetite for beer, and an inability to think abstractly frustrates Smith with meaningless responses such as "The beer was better," and "'Lackeys . . . Now there's a word I ain't 'eard ever so long.'" In a similar episode from The Ball and the Cross, MacIan also seeks what is "right" from a common man, a half-tipsy yokel with "bleared blue eyes." As was Smith's man, this old man is incapable of coherent dialogue; when asked about the invisible Church, he refers to an abandoned church building. Similar as the two scenes are, Smith and MacIan reach contrary conclusions. Smith realizes that the crucial question, "Was life better before the Revolution than it is now?" is "unanswerable even now, since the few scattered survivors from the ancient world were incapable of comparing one age with another." (7) This mental impotence of the proles adds credibility to the bleak conclusion that the party will never be overthrown. Conversely, MacIan is encouraged by the yokel's final incoherent response: "'When I sees a man, I sez 'e's a man.'" (8) MacIan believes that the yokel understands something modern thinkers have failed to grasp: that man is a man, not an animal, an angel, or anything else. This emphasis on the supremacy of the common man resonates throughout the book. In the end, M. Durand, the man who lights the saving fire, is described as "merely a man" (BC, p. 138).

The second most striking similarity between the books is the prison scenes. Both MacIan and Turnbull are locked in a windowless building specially designed to cure mental problems, as is the case with Winston Smith. Just as in Nineteen Eighty-Four looms the dreaded room 101, so in The Ball and the Cross room A carries the same mystique: it is a cell without a door, and in it the monk, Michael, has been sealed by Lucifer, the scientist. The allegorical nature of Chesterton's writings surfaces in that the prison is admittedly representative of ideological bondage (BC, p. 212). Likewise, the naturalism of Orwell's book remains steady as he narrates Smith's experience in the Ministry of Love — solid concrete, blinding lights, and prolonged tortures. When Smith leaves the prison he remains a prisoner of himself, whereas the prisoners in The Ball and the Cross escape all ills, probably too easily, by the powers of Fairyland.

The intolerable confusion Smith suffered in prison is largely a result of his ambiguous relationship with O'Brien. He is haunted by ambivalent feelings toward O'Brien, even after he is sure O'Brien belongs to the Thought Police. "He was the tormentor, he was the protector, he was the inquisitor, he was the friend" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 247). He was most likely the man in the dark room who had promised Smith, "We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness." And there in the sterile white chambers of the Ministry of Love, Smith met his friend for frequent tortures. The cosmic irony of a dream about light leading him into darkness and of his ally turning out to be his mortal enemy worked on Smith's mind until he could no longer distinguish between good and evil, or between four fingers and five.

A similar eerie relationship exists in *The Man Who Was Thursday*, a book Orwell mentioned in a review. Syme, the protagonist, also hears a voice in the dark room, the voice of the "chief" who commissions him to oppose the anarchists. The terms of membership which the mysterious chief presents to Syme are echoed in O'Brien's initial meeting with Julia and Winston. Syme is told, among other things, "I am condemning you to death." (9) O'Brien states, "You will work for a while, you will be caught, you will confess, and then you will die" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 177). The parallel continues as Syme realizes that the voice he heard in the dark belongs to Sunday, the head anarchist. To Syme Sunday is at once a mortal enemy and an ally, as O'Brien is to Smith.

The similarities between O'Brien and Sunday stop when Syme realizes that inexplicably he had always seen Sunday from the back, and that unlike his hideous back, Sunday, who represents Nature, is filled with goodness. Hence the voice Syme heard in the dark room was genuinely good, whereas the voice Smith heard in his dream was deceptively evil. Once again, Orwell borrows certain dramatic elements from Chesterton but stops short of Chesterton's hope.

In connection with the chief who spoke to Syme in the dark lies a final example of Chesterton's limited influence on Orwell. Like O'Brien's connection with the Thought Police, this chief heads the philosophical policemen, whose job it is to discover mental crimes: "We discover from a book of sonnets that a crime will be committed. We have to trace the origin of those dreadful thoughts that drive men at last to intellectual fanaticism and intellectual crime" (*MWWT*, p. 42).

It is doubtful Chesterton considered the oppressive nature of such an organization. Far from detecting heresy in others, the philosophical police are bewildered about their relationship with Sunday throughout the book. Although they consider themselves a special task force, they actually represent the common man's temptation to despair of finding meaning in life. Only at the brink of despair do the philosophical police stumble upon the goodness hidden in Sunday. Chesterton said that when he wrote *The Man Who Was Thursday* he had recently developed a form of optimism based on a minimal amount of good. It could be charged that Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* out of a pessimism based on a maximal amount of evil. His omniscient Thought Police are a hardened, treacherous version of Chesterton's naive policemen. Instead of discovering the meaning of life for the common man, the Thought Police bar it from him forever, as is consistent with Orwell's major premise.

It is tempting, but not quite accurate, to conclude that Orwell was a pessimist and Chesterton an optimist. True, Orwell gleaned many scenes and settings from Chesterton while consistently rejecting Chesterton's redemptive themes. Nevertheless Orwell still believed life was worth redeeming. He lacked only belief in Fairyland, which for Chesterton included every imaginable possibility, whether natural or supernatural in origin. What Chesterton's concept of reality excluded was unimaginable events, as he explains: "You cannot imagine two and one not making three. But you can easily imagine trees not growing fruit; you can imag-

ine them growing golden candlesticks or tigers hanging on by the tail." (10) Nineteen Eighty-Four presents the antithesis of Fairyland. Not even the possibility of a political revolution is admitted, much less of trees growing golden candlesticks. The one thing excluded from Fairyland enters into Nineteen Eighty-Four: the mental impossibility of two plus two fingers equaling five. Miracles, no; absurdities, yes. For Orwell was convinced of man's almost infinite capacity for evil.

Yet Orwell was not simply a pessimist. In spite of his disbelief in Fairyland, he was exactly what Chesterton considered himself: a Patriot of Life. Optimistic and pessimistic thoughts alike were reasons to fight for the human race. For it is the only human race that exists, too good to abandon, too corrupt to accept passively. This universal patriotism explains an apparent inconsistency in Orwell: he condemned author James Burnham for his fatalistic predictions of the Communist threat, yet he allowed Winston Smith — and humanity with him — to expire under totalitarianism. For in Burnham's writings Orwell sensed something foreign to this patriotism, a spirit of compromise. Although he agreed with the grim realities cited by Burnham, he could not accept Burnham's proposed solutions, such as starting a preventive war. Neither could he trust Fairyland to make all things well. With his mind he agreed with Burnham, but with his heart he concurred with Chesterton. He was constrained to hand Winston Smith over to the Party, although he was not convinced Nineteen Eighty-Four represented the future. He wrote Nineteen Eighty-Four in an effort to bring Britain and Western Europe one step closer to uniting as a socialist state (the United States of Europe), hoping that men would dedicate themselves to the improbable alternative of undefiled socialism once they were faced with a clear picture of totalitarianism. Orwell, of course, derived his moral strength and his literary elements from many sources, but Chesterton's influence on his imagination and on his emotions is appreciable, to say the least.

NOTES

1. George Orwell, "Notes on Nationalism," in the Collected Essays (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), p. 285.
2. George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose, Vol. IV of The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus eds. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), p. 102.
3. Among those who noted and commented on the shared use of the year 1984 are Ian Boyd, The Novels of G. K. Chesterton: A Study in Art and Propaganda (London: Paul Elek, 1975), p. 16; Christopher Hollis, in A Study of George Orwell (London: Hollis and Carter, 1956), pp. 177-79 and in The Mind of Chesterton (London: Hollis and Carter, 1970), p. 111; and William Steinhoff, George Orwell and the Origins of 1984 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), pp. 16-17. Among those who found reason to contrast The Napoleon of Notting Hill to Nineteen Eighty-Four but made no mention of the shared date are Dudley Barker, G. K. Chesterton: A Biography (New York: Stein and Day, 1973); p. 41; and Kenneth Hamilton, "G. K. Chesterton and George Orwell: A Contrast in Prophecy," Dalhousie Review XXXI (1950), 198-205. Finally, Hollis noted similarities between Nineteen Eighty-Four and The Ball and the Cross in The Mind of Chesterton, pp. 94-95, and Steinhoff noted similarities between Nineteen Eighty-Four and The Man Who Was Thursday in George Orwell and the Origins of 1984, pp. 16-19.
4. G. K. Chesterton, The Napoleon of Notting Hill (Torquay: Devonshire Press, 1904), p. 20; hereafter cited in the text as NNH.

5. George Orwell, "James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution," in In Front of Your Nose, p. 163.

6. Of four other theories explaining Orwell's choice of title, the most obvious states that he simply inverted the last two digits of 1948, the year he completed Nineteen Eighty-Four. A second theory points out that a footnote in Jack London's The Iron Heel (a book Orwell reviewed) marks 1984 as the year Asgard, a totalitarian capital, was completed (David Richards, "Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: His Choice of the Date," The Explicator 35, No. 1 [1976], 8). The third theory, a highly speculative one, states that 1949, the year Nineteen Eighty-Four was published, lay halfway between 1914 ("a key year in twentieth-century history") and 1984 (Richard Frothingham, "Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four Part I, Chapter VIII," The Explicator 29 [1971], item 37). The fourth theory, also highly speculative, works on the assumption that Orwell titled the book in answer to the "time-honored refrain, 'What will the world be like in fifty -- or a hundred -- years?' or 'What will the world be like when he's my age?'" The latter question is then related to the date of Richard Orwell's adoption, June 1944 (Bernhard J. Sussman, The Explicator 38, No. 4 [1980], 32).

7. George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), p. 92; cited as Nineteen Eighty-Four.

8. G. K. Chesterton, The Ball and the Cross (Beaconsfield: Darwen Finlayson, 1910), p. 93; this book was serialized in part in 1905-1906 and is hereafter cited in the text as BC.

9. G. K. Chesterton, The Man Who Was Thursday (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1908), p. 47; hereafter cited in the text as MWT.

10. G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (New York: John Lane Co., 1915), p. 88.