Nineteen Eighty-Four: the failure of humanism

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* has always been a scandal. It was denounced as a surrender to the mysticism of cruelty, a weapon in the Cold War, an item in our own hate-week, a capitalist horror-comic whose author was another lost leader in the tradition of Wordsworth. Its special offence was its alleged renegade politics, its repudiation of all that 1917 stood for. Yet the scandal is in fact far greater, for the book transcends politics to repudiate not just the Revolution but humanism itself. It is not a capitalist horror-comic – the porn manufactured by Big Brother has found a cosier home in the capitalist West than behind the Curtain – but its enemies might well have described it as a religious horror-comic. It enacts a struggle between two religions, humanism, the religion of the past, with Winston as its last advocate, and totalitarian sadism, the religion of the present and, the book’s pessimism insists, of the future, with O’Brien its prophet-fanatic.

‘Struggle’ is, of course, obsequiously honorific. Winston’s humanism has as much chance of checking the new savage god as biscuits strewn before tanks. Suspense comes, if at all, not from wondering whether he can elude, far less overthrow, Big Brother, but whether he can sustain defiance to the modest extent of dying for the faith, winning the martyr’s crown: ‘the object is not to stay alive but to stay human’. Even this limited victory, Winston joining Spartacus and More, Hus and Bonhoeffer, is finally seen as a fantasy, as much a piece of wish-fulfilment as Jack the Giant-Killer. Here the Giant wins; the dissident loses everything except his life in the book’s appalling conclusion.

The privilege of heroic death is as obsolete as Shakespeare and the paperweight, and humanism is denied even a martyr. Right from the start Winston is a dubious candidate for the honour. His faith is less than rockfast. What he most fears as lunatic, heretic, minority of one, is that there is no truth to die for, and the book confirms his dread. Winston versus O’Brien, humanism versus power-worship, is an absolute mismatch which no self-respecting Board of Control would ever have sanctioned. Relying on the spirit of man, Winston might just as well have trusted in Poseidon or Thor or the exploded God of Christian mythology. The real affront to modern pieties is in the implication that the defeat of humanism is somehow disconcertingly related to the death of the God whose obituary the nineteenth-century humanists so authoritatively announced. Some, like Nietzsche and Feuerbach, hailed his demise, but even when regretted, it was not seen as
calamitous. George Eliot, having thrown her clod into the grave, consoles the bereaved: since heaven is no longer there to help us, we will, because we must, help and love each other all the more. It is this religion of humanity that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* consigns to the dustbin of discredited mythologies.

Three gods appear in the book: O'Brien's savage deity; the god of traditional religion that Winston rejects; and the god he claims to serve, the spirit of man that will, somehow, finally defeat Big Brother. Instead, Winston is demolished along with his humanist hopes. We can, if we wish, soften this conclusion by seeing it as the debacle of a very flawed individual and a defective creed whose failure leaves the true doctrine intact, thus wrenching the text away from the despair-of-a-dying-man view to that of a cautionary tale for progressives, an optimistic exhortation to those who share the faith not to repeat the blunders. Yet the inadequate Winston is the only liberal champion textually present, the last of his kind, as O'Brien taunts him—is that in itself an implied judgement on the kind he represents? Orwell denounced *Gulliver* as a reactionary, pessimistic book, though Swift did at least include Don Pedro as an exception, a partial corrective, to his vision of universal corruption. There is no Don Pedro in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, simply torturers and victims, who sometimes switch roles, perplexing us as to which is the more revolting.

We may describe Winston as inadequate humanist, provided we do not assume on Orwell's behalf, in defiance of the text, an implied adequate humanism which Winston unfortunately mislaid, importing into the book another tougher strain (our own, naturally) which would have sustained Winston if only he had found it. Poor, misguided Winston—why couldn't he be like us? The fallacy is the graver when we reflect that he is like us, that he is the universal representative, his defects not those of an individual or group, but, at crucial points, of humanity itself as seen by Orwell. The quotation from Lermontov's preface to *A Hero of our Time*, annexed by Camus to describe his own 'hero' in *The Fall*, could just as easily precede *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 'It is in fact a portrait but not of an individual; it is the aggregate of the vices of our whole generation in their fullest expression.' Where *Animal Farm* merely shatters the hopes of Revolution, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* shatters those of autonomous man, lending itself easily to the religious view that atheism inevitably leads to the worship of Big Brother.

The ritual of the Two-Minute Hate, hell-fire sermon and *auto-da-fe* combined, exhibits the power of the new religion, as the woman responds to the telescreen image of the Saviour, like St Teresa to Christ, while Winston hides from the other face of God—Jehovah, ineluctable avenger. His defiance is as futile as that of Marlowe's Faustus; the Thought Police will get him whether he writes or destroys the diary—God is not mocked. What the old religions
only aspired to, the new one has achieved. Big Brother is infallible to a degree undreamt of by the most fervid of ultramontanes. He can annihilate and create too, as Comrade Ogilvy demonstrates when called into existence as miraculously as Adam, hagiographic equivalent of the legendary saints, an example of total dedication, a eunuch for Oceania's sake. Julia, by contrast, is a sexual heretic, rebel from the waist downwards, with sex for its own sake the extent of her particular non serviam. Winston also commits sexcrime, but his root sin is ownlife, the heresy of individualism, depriving him of the faith to see that London is a thriving city, laden with provisions. Both lovers are like the obsessed sinners of traditional religion, feverishly digging their own pits, for, as Julia says, every sinner confesses; confession, however, as O'Brien insists, is as good for the soul in the present religion as Catholic apologists have claimed it to be in the old.

The new god spurns loveless obedience as inefficacious unto salvation. The function of Room 101 in Oceanic theology is to eradicate every possible competing passion, in line with Christ's insistence that to love father or mother is to hate him: thou shalt love the lord thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole mind, no corner, however tiny, reserved for inferior loyalties. In Room 101 one learns to value God above all else, to devote one's whole life ad maiorem gloriam dei. Winston, loving Julia as Milton's Adam loves Eve, wilfully rejects creator for created, and the sinner must be taught to detest his error, for what good is a forced obedience? Satan could have been barred from Eden, Winston arrested the moment he bought the diary, but to what purpose? How is the sinner to be redeemed unless first permitted to sin? Charrington's shop, like the tree in Eden, is placed in the sinner's path and he falls that he may be cleansed.

Mere outward conformity is a scandal to the puritans who control Oceania; one must love God because he chastises - Winston, miscasting himself as Prometheus, must be schooled to his proper role as Job. Areopagitica is obscenely parodied in the argument that good only comes via evil, that only a loving obedience is worthwhile. The moment of expulsion from Eden is terrifying, as is that moment when the bliss of Winston's room is shattered by the accusatory voice from behind the picture, but no more for Winston than Adam is paradise irretrievably lost. O'Brien, playing Michael to Winston's Adam, describes the three stages in the sinner's regeneration - learning, understanding, acceptance - and warns that the first two are necessarily painful. But the pain is purgatorial, God being cruel to be kind. O'Brien receives Winston with all the sad reproach of a father forced to chastise an erring child, calling him affectionately by his first name, employing the classic opening gambit of every father so situated: 'You knew this, Winston... Don't deceive yourself. You did know it - you have always known
it. The only omission is the assurance that this is going to hurt him even more than the culprit.

The new God declines to lose a single soul, like Origen's deity rather than the more orthodox figure of the Last Judgement. Hell has no place in the theology of Oceania, for hell is God's shame, his admission that there are wills too stubborn, evils too obdurate, even for his love to overcome—every hellbound soul is the devil's victory. The devils of Nineteen Eighty-Four, own-life, sexcrime and the rest, win no victories, are indeed permitted to exist simply to demonstrate the futile folly of seduction, in exalting God the more by their humiliating impotence. Winston, misinterpreting himself as rebel, is really acting out his role in an Oceanic felix culpa. The Christian God (it is perhaps the chief accusation against him) is a committed liberal who allows Satan to compete by refusing to coerce men into heaven. The new, unscrupulous God rejects this puerile notion of fair play as another vestige of gutless liberalism, repudiating the public schoolboy image for that of a surgeon cutting out a cancer with no nonsense about giving it a sporting chance. The operation is always successful. Winston dreams he hears, perhaps does hear, O'Brien's consoling voice assuring him that he is at last in the hands of the omniscient, infallible healer; O'Brien refers to Julia's perfect conversion as a text-book case—redundantly, since there is no other kind in Nineteen Eighty-Four: 'Everyone is washed clean'. No one is lost in this perfected model of Christian salvation, this chilling parody of Origen's father so loving that the devil himself is rescued.

The penitence of sinners is simply one facet of this transforming power. An enormous, drunken woman is thrown into Winston's cell: prole, foul-mouthed, vomiting copiously, hugging him to her great, tumbling breasts in a reek of beer and sickness. Her name is also Smith and she reflects sentimentally that she might be his mother. Winston still dreams of his mother, purged when he was a boy, 'a tall, statuesque, rather silent woman with slow movements and mawcent fair hair'. Anyone less like the drunken harridan embracing him would be hard to imagine, for, all else aside, his mother is as unmistakable middle-class as his present companion is prole. Class, for Orwell, is an imperishable imprint, and he knew, despite his own heroic efforts to identify with the poor, how incurably bourgeois he remained. Yet in Oceania the miracle is achieved: Winston thinks it quite possible that the sprawling, promiscuous slum-woman may well be the dignified lady of his boyhood: 'It was probable that people changed somewhat after twenty years in a forced labour-camp.' We recall Swift's flayed woman whose appearance was changed for the worse, and the calculated understatement with its suppressed bitterness, its deadpan intensity, reveals the Swift in Orwell. With God all things are possible, even to the extent of an
intractable like class becoming malleable as putty – not the heavens but the cellars of the Ministry of Love declare his glory.

The new religion's power is most frighteningly displayed in its disciples' fanaticism. The tired, ageing O'Brien is transfigured as he chants his paean to power. Winston cowers before the enormous face 'filled with a sort of exaltation, a lunatic intensity', the face of the mystic as seen by the bewildered, fearful outsider. The new creed totally repudiates the whole Christian-humanist ethos. 'Above all we do not allow the dead to rise up against us', and the vetoed resurrection makes unpersons of Christ, Shakespeare and all the other champions of man's allegedly unconquerable spirit. Humanism is as dead as the Galilean and the implication is that the two deaths are related. O'Brien denounces hypocritical totalitarians like Dostoievsky's Grand Inquisitor who pretend that power is only a means to happiness, incurring the guilt of power like Christ assuming sin so that men may be happy, claiming absolute freedom for themselves on the pretext of bringing absolute happiness to others. O'Brien lambasts this along with the doublethink of the liberal totalitarians, those willing, like Winston, to commit atrocities in order to set men free. O'Brien's honest totalitarianism is by contrast, based on de Sade, power as an end, exercised for its own sake: 'We are the priests of power . . . God is power.' The agape gives way to a vision of a boot forever crushing a human face.

Even as O'Brien rhapsodises, Winston is struck by the tired, ageing face of the speaker, impotence in its most absolute form of death overcoming the power-worshipper. But, by allowing O'Brien an insight into the cruel discrepancy between his words and his state, Orwell deliberately renounces the opportunity for ironically subverting the rhetoric as absurd. O'Brien, as always reading Winston's mind correctly, dismisses his own approaching dissolution as trivial when set against the immortality of his adored collective; who cares about individual decay when 'the weariness of the cell is the vigour of the organism'? Winston, by contrast, collapses when forced to confront his physical ruin – his God fails where O'Brien's triumphs.

We are on the fringe here of what Orwell referred to as the major problem of our time: the tragedy of human finitude. He has been rebuked for avoiding in his work this paramount problem of lost faith, but a careful reader will often detect it lurking below the secular surface. On his own testimony he feared the traditional alliance of metaphysics and reaction, the extent to which religion and philosophy had supported or condoned injustice by teaching its victims to look to the next world for restitution. To investigate directly his major problem would have struck him as a callous indulgence, even a betrayal, while so many people still went in fear of hunger or the police. The poem in which he pictures himself a happy vicar two
centuries ago, but born instead, like Hamlet, into 'an evil time' which imposes politics as a duty, is not just a joke, for he is in a sense a conscript to politics as Hamlet is to vengeance. The Brechtian priority of erst essen – 'first grub, then ethics' – is endorsed but in a way revealing a secret sympathy with the lonesco view that, however necessary, the abolition of social injustice will do little to solve life's real problems. He joins Brecht because it would be a disgrace not to, but in his heart he hankers after lonesco.

Nevertheless, to a degree insufficiently recognised, his last book does deal with his major problem, and its darkness is inseparable from his failure to solve it in a way he could endorse, and, worse still, its solution in a form he finds totally abhorrent. Winston's humanistic solution is brushed aside contemptuously by O'Brien as Gulliver's jingoistic nonsense by the Giant King. O'Brien tackles and 'solves' the problem where Winston conspicuously fails. 'Alone - free - the human being is doomed to die, which is the greatest of all failures.' So asserts O'Brien, solving Orwell's major problem by denying the value of the individual, for the body survives though the cell dies. However repugnant to Christian-humanist principles, O'Brien's solution works, enabling him to transcend his personal weakness, giving a sense of purpose to individual existence. Orwell knew that men live by myths as long as they believe them true, like the British after Dunkirk, still irrationally assured of their invincibility. O'Brien's fanaticism is akin to this atavistic patriotism, and it makes him, like the British, an opponent difficult to resist, far less overcome. His adversary will require an equivalent fervour to survive.

It is easy to expose Winston's limitations, harder to determine why Orwell cooperates with O'Brien in doing so. It looks as if Orwell has sold out to power, except that Winston is attacked as a member of a group detested by Orwell: the power-worshipper posing as freedom-fighter. When O'Brien, catechising Winston, asks him, like a schoolmaster coaching a star pupil, how one man asserts his power over another, Winston, freely and after reflection, gives the scholarship answer: 'by making him suffer'. It is a compromising answer, betraying an innate authoritarianism, and Winston does pass from adversary to pupil, learning, albeit painfully, the facts of life. O'Brien similarly changes from draconian instructor to protector and father, to whom Winston clings with all the trust of a suffering child. Winston is, finally, as much a power-worshipper as O'Brien, though his devotions are performed in the catacombs of his mind while his teacher's are those of the established church. Orwell uses O'Brien to force Winston to burn in public the incense to the God he secretly, unconsciously, adores - for it is Winston's discovery that 'if you want to keep a secret you must also hide it from yourself'.
This explains the passage where Winston agrees to commit all manner of atrocities to help overthrow Big Brother, the very atrocities which make Big Brother so detestable in the first place. It is easy to condemn Winston’s doublethink, harder to select someone entitled to throw the first stone, for Dresden, Hiroshima, Vietnam, the whole urban guerrilla sprawl, all in some way represent a deal with our own O’Brien and we are all, in some degree, Winston. Making this deal, Winston has, the book demonstrates, already lost the moral chess-game awaiting him in the Ministry of Love. O’Brien has him taped and, at a crucial point in their confrontation, explodes the claim to moral superiority by playing back the diabolic commitment agreed by the purportedly moral man. Defeated intellectually, Winston protests that something in the universe, ‘some spirit, some principle’, will never succumb to Big Brother. O’Brien, for once misreading (deliberately?) Winston’s mind, proposes God as the likeliest candidate, only for Winston to repudiate the transcendent God of traditional religion. The God he means is the God of nineteenth-century humanism, the God in man, totally immanent, reclaimed by Feuerbach from the heaven where his creator, man, in an immature act of self-alienation, has mistakenly exiled him.

The trap is set when O’Brien lures Winston into declaring that he too, as man, participates in godhead – if humanity is God, all men are divine. But, as the tape recording makes plain, there is nothing, morally, to distinguish Winston from O’Brien, nor, presumably, his God from O’Brien’s savage deity. No need to dispute Winston’s rhetoric when the enemy has on tape the voices of the last, self-proclaimed man swearing to throw acid in a child’s face and a full-length mirror to reveal the revolting bag of filth that is the alleged last guardian of the human spirit. Winston’s faith, however attractive, fails, the humanist ethos crumbles under pressure: animal rationale is the consoling dream, Yahoo the sickening reality. Instead of Blake’s human form divine, there is a stinking animal, and all three defeats, moral, intellectual and physical, are interrelated. Winston weeps uncontrollably at the sight of his ruined body because, broken intellectually and morally, he has only the body left, and it is here that the hazard of rejecting a transcendent God becomes so evident.

Certainly, O’Brien would have to evolve a different strategy confronting, say, an Augustinian Christian, who, already knowing himself more corrupt than his most inventively malicious enemy dreams – a bag of filth and permanent traitor to God – is presumably insulated in some measure against Winston’s traumatic experience; to destroy him you have to surprise him, tell him what he doesn’t already know. Unlike Winston, he can hurl O’Brien’s reply at the mirror – that his personal ruin leaves his God as majestic as ever. What makes for pessimism is that these parallel solutions,
O'Brien's and the Christian's, are not Orwell's, that of the book's three gods, Winston's (and Orwell's) is exposed as the plaster sham. The physical demolition would be relatively trivial if Winston were morally equipped to handle it – Orwell defines tragedy as man defeated in a way that shows him nobler than the forces destroying him, Pascal's thinking reed, infinitely superior to the brute universe that can so easily crush it – but Winston's anti-cathartic ruin is sacramental, outward sign of a total inward capitulation. Nineteen Eighty-Four, as much as A Handful of Dust, records the defeat of humanism and the tragedy is that it is not a tragedy.

But we know why Waugh destroys Tony Last. Tony is decent but humanist, hence programmed for disaster among predators like Brenda and Beaver and senseless events like his son's death. Behind the inadequate individual is an inadequate creed and Waugh is warning us to get properly kitted out for the jungle. Tony is last because humanism is finished; man without God won't make it. Winston might just as appropriately be called Last – but why does Orwell conspire his hero's destruction? Is he condemning humanism per se or merely exposing a backslider betraying a creed which, far from dead, is, for Orwell, still efficacious unto salvation?

From the outset Winston laments his locked loneliness, sees himself as lost in a monstrous world where he, appallingly, is the monster. The book ends by defining both the nature of his delusion and the uniqueness of his abnormality. He believes in the freedom of the mind, the inviolability of those few cubic centimetres palisaded impregnably within the skull against the oppressor's coercion. It is the view of the Lady in Comus, blessedly ignorant of Pavlov and brainwashing, deriding the enchanter who has paralysed her — 'Fool, do not boast, / Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind'. The Italian soldier he met in Barcelona inspired in Orwell a similar certitude –

But the thing that I saw in your face
   No power can disinherit;
   No bomb that ever burst
   Shatters the crystal spirit.

His last book exposes it as a complete delusion, as untenable as a belief in Jupiter or the risen Christ.

Winston's final bankruptcy suggests how frail are his beliefs in an age of fanaticism, and, paradoxically, it is precisely their rationalism that convicts them of ineptitude. Few readers of Mann's The Magic Mountain leave the long debate between the violently irrational Naphta and the liberal humanist Settembrini convinced that the latter has won, and the confrontation, minus the intellectual high jinks, recurs in Winston versus O'Brien, with humanism even more clearly the loser. True, O'Brien, unlike Naphta, can use torture to
boost his arguments, but it would be wrong to ascribe his victory simply to this. Winston very soon senses his own intellectual inferiority, is convinced that his opponent 'was a being in all ways larger than himself.' Feuerbach's humanism, Winston's own argument, is ironically turned against him: 'nothing exists except through human consciousness – outside man there is nothing.' The God in man is steadily humiliated as Winston struggles in vain to resist not the torturer but the logician, is reduced finally to intellectual tantrums, a childish insistence that Big Brother cannot endure because Winston could not endure it, that things must get better simply because they are so bad now, an argument anticipated by Rupert Brooke's fish — 'This life cannot be all,' they swear, / 'For how unpleasant if it were!'"

Rehabilitation begins long before Room 101. Winston starts as heretical mind disguised as conformist; his session with O'Brien ends with his mind now orthodox but the inner heart still recalcitrant and, as he believes, inviolate. Room 101 ensures the transition to perfect orthodoxy of mind and heart together, when, having lagged behind emotionally, he finally catches up with his completely cured intellect. The humanist is destroyed and it is pointless to fault human nature rather than his creed, since religion has always attacked humanism for its wild overestimation of fallen man, like expecting a cripple to sprint. Pascal argues that to know one's corruption without knowing God means despair; Nineteen Eighty-Four promotes such despair in its exhibition of human wretchedness, man's inability under stress to be other than sickeningly selfish.

It strikes Winston that 'in moments of crisis one is never fighting against an external enemy, but always against one's own body,' and it is the pain-shunning body, swelling to fill the universe, that betrays the would-be idealist. In battle the great, noble issues give way to brute preservation; self-transcendence is restricted to comfortable armchairs. Winston dreams of his mother and baby sister looking at him unreproachfully from a sinking ship, aware that his decision to sacrifice them is part of 'the unavoidable order of things.' The dream derives from the incident when the boy, still hungry after receiving almost the whole chocolate bar, snatches from the dying baby the one piece she has between her and starvation. He feels ashamed afterwards, but it is the shame of being human, for act and guilt are inescapable. Mistaking Julia for a spy, he considers crushing in her skull; plagued by a troublesome colleague, he meditates smashing a pick-axe into the 'silly blond face'. We are not meant to dismiss all this as the fantasies of a psychopath – in these gusts of fear and rage, Winston is the universal representative. In the Ministry of Love a skull-faced man, dying of starvation, is given some bread by a fellow-prisoner, who is at once brutally beaten by a guard for his act of charity. The skull-faced man, ordered to Room 101, begs
obscenely to be reprieved, and, searching frantically for a substitute victim, naturally fixes upon his benefactor, hysterically accusing him of having whispered treason as he gave the bread. Orwell’s modern rendition of the parable focusses less the charity of the Good Samaritan than the degradingly selfish fear of the recipient. If the greatest proof of self-transcendence is to die for another, the nadir of selfishness is to use the benefactor’s body as a shield.

Nor is the skull-faced man to be regarded as a monster of depravity, for he is a normal man acting as all men do when put to the test, as the Good Samaritan will act too when he is summoned to Room 101 – we may feel ashamed only on condition of recognising the guilt as universal. Room 101 is where humanity is exposed, not where cowards are separated from heroes. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there are no heroes, simply pain, and ‘nothing in the world was so bad as physical pain’. Martyrs are simply the mistakes of an inefficient penology, of blundering executioners who take them at their word that they prefer death when they are really like fake suicides, inadvertently killing themselves through obstinacy or an over-prolonged attempt to make it look real. It is essentially a matter of chronology, of being on hand at the inevitable moment when the martyr is screaming to be saved from himself. Nothing is finally more important than one’s own skin. ‘All you care about is yourself’, says Julia, explaining her treachery as a single instance of a universal law, and Winston, taught by his own experience, agrees. Peter weeps and reforms, Judas hangs himself; Orwell’s characters act as they must and despise themselves for it. Gulliver concludes his long list of human depravities by remarking that all this is ‘according to the due course of things’ and is ready to overlook these ‘natural’ defects, provided man renounces pride. Winston and Julia meet, finally, the Gulliverian stipulation. They are the deed’s creatures and what they have done makes the erstwhile lovers despise themselves in despising the human animal.

We can, of course, protest that Orwell’s is a ferocious examination, its passmark fixed to ensure universal failure, and go on to redraft the questions to suit ordinary human beings rather than the moral senior wranglers he blames us for not being. But, after all, it is his examination, and if we think the despair comes from impossible expectations, we arrive too late to persuade him to change his mind. Winston’s reverence for the prole mother as the human image is finally as shattered as the glass paperweight broken by the Thought Police – such reverence, like paperweight and diary, humanism and God, Shakespeare and tragedy, belongs with all the other beautiful rubbish of the past, a mere rubbish heap of details, like the old prole’s memory. Instead, we have the present, disgusting but real. Wins-
ton’s fitful, irrational hope in the proles — *credo quia impossible est* — flickers against his more usual, ‘realistic’ view of them as urbanised Yahoos, animal rather than human (warned by a prole of an approaching rocket, he immediately takes cover, despite hearing nothing himself, because the proles possess an instinct denied to rational beings). He patrols the prole districts, like a behaviourist observing rats, fascinated by the teeming life of the slums, the sexual instinct in its most blatant form, noting the sordid, swarming life of the streets, the smell of urine and sour beer, watching the women rioting over a shortage of pans, the men squabbling over the one public event that engages them, the national lottery. It is not so much London in 1984 as any British city fifty years earlier. The attitude of reverence, spasmodic and fragile, cannot be sustained amid such reality without recourse to mysticism belonging to the past as much as the paperweight; and reverence gives way to a Swiftian disgust with the human animal, the prole mother to Parsons excreting into a defective pan, his stink polluting the whole cell.

Winston is, of course, not Orwell, is indeed a prime target of Orwell’s attack, but, in our anxiety to protect him from what for us is a discreditable association with his ‘hero’, to keep him, for his sake and ours, pleasingly on the side of the progressive angels, we avert our eyes from the book’s pessimism. Winston’s attitudes and revulsions, at least occasionally, are those of his creator; despite a deep sympathy with common people, an affection for the minutiae of everyday life, there are moments when Orwell exhibits the furious despair of the militant reformer outraged by the blind irresponsibility of ordinary men. The frustration of the militant moralist at the apathetic mass can so easily topple over into an elitist, embittered contempt, as Swift’s *Modest Proposal* demonstrates, and there is, paradoxically, a tinge of this antidemocratic contempt in Orwell himself, as when he attacks the common man for caring more about Manchester United than the fall of Spain in tones reminiscent of Winston condemning the proles for rioting over the Oceanic equivalent of Littlewoods, while indifferent to the political abomination of Big Brother. The final despair of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is surely shared by Orwell, since Winston’s inadequacy in Room 101 is the inadequacy of everyman.

It would be impertinent to apologise for Orwell; reading his life, we could do worse than treat him with the reverence Winston felt towards the prole woman. But reading his last book, we must acknowledge its despair — the real insult is to doctor what he writes in the interests of our own self-assurance. Yet life and art do seem here so strangely mismatched. The essay on Swift supplies the answer. Despite condemning Swift as a diseased writer, Orwell kept returning to the source of infection — clearly, there was a
Swift in himself that he found irresistible. However unbalanced or one-sided, Swift does, for Orwell, present a view of life which, if limited, is nevertheless true and is the more obligatory because we prefer to ignore it. It can even be occasionally invigorating—Orwell praises one of Swift’s most outrageous poems for exploding the fraud of feminine delicacy. There follows this revealing comment: ‘Part of our minds—in any normal person it is the dominant part-believes that man is a noble animal and life is worth living; but there is also a sort of inner self which at least intermittently stands aghast at the horror of existence.’ In Nineteen Eighty-Four the Swift in Orwell has taken over, the inner self, uncensored, records the horror of existence. God is dead, Nietzsche reported; Orwell’s last communiqué adds Man to the casualty list.

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