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ORWELL'S "SECOND THOUGHTS ON JAMES BURNHAM" AND *1984*

by R. B. Reaves

The controversy resulting from Norman Podhoretz's recent article "If Orwell Were Alive Today" has at least had the salutary effect of drawing attention to the complexities of Orwell's political thought and writings.¹ Podhoretz's article is no doubt the latest instance of a tendency among political conservatives to claim Orwell as one of their own. However, it is not really germane to argue whether or not Orwell today would consider himself a socialist or a neoconservative. What is important is to examine his political insights and the artistry of his work through the evolution of his thought and craft. And an inquiry into the nature of Orwell's political thinking, particularly as it relates to his last novel, *1984*, is indeed an important undertaking. The result of such an inquiry makes the assigning of labels to Orwell much more difficult and it confirms an observation made by Christopher Hitchens in his rebuttal of Podhoretz: "The chief lesson of Orwell's life, though, is that what counts is not *what* you think but *how* you think."²

It has long been recognized that much of the detail and many of the images of Orwell's *1984* can be found in different form in his essays. Decades ago Harold J. Harris, in an article entitled "Orwell's Essays and *1984*," asserted that "the essay served his creative work in much the same way that notebooks served more self-conscious literary artists like James and Hawthorne," and more to the point that "in his essays can be found many of the raw materials which were later to be reworked—or in some cases carried over without real reworking—into the fictive world Orwell called *1984*."³ Harris' point is no doubt a valid one, but the kind of material he examines is not particularly central to the novel. What should be demonstrated is not that certain images, figures, turns of speech, and spe-

cific details found in the essays reappear in *1984*, but that the central theme, the motivation that underlies the desire for political power, is a dominant issue in much of his expository writing, and in one essay in particular—"Second Thoughts on James Burnham." In the last decade critics like William Steinhoff, Alex Zwerdling, and, most recently, Michael Harrington have examined the influence of Burnham on Orwell. But they all stop short of recognizing or indicating just how the Burnham influence is incorporated into Orwell's satiric vision.

Before examining the central question of *1984* it is necessary to review the three-part organization of the novel, in order to trace the Burnham influence coherently. In the first part of the work the reader is introduced to the fictional realm of Oceania and the London of 1984. It is a world of Thought Police, telescreens, political slogans, and mass hypnotism. The inhabitants of this world (of crowded apartment houses that reek of boiled cabbage, of foul smelling Victory Gin, of Victory Cigarettes that fall apart) cannot know how truly bleak their lives are since they have no means of comparison. All knowledge of the past has been altered; so there is no way of discovering whether life had been better previously. Winston Smith, the protagonist, was born before the Revolution, and even though he has no clear remembrance of the past, he does have a vague feeling that things were not always so bad.

In the first section of the novel Smith makes several abortive attempts to uncover the past. In his diary he addresses himself to a "*time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone—to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone.*"⁴ This *time* that Winston addresses is the looking-glass opposite to his own. The act of acquiring the diary, the pen, and the glass paperweight, the searching of his own memory and his questioning the old "prole" in the pub are all futile attempts to learn about the past. That "the past not only changed, but changed continuously" is well known to Winston. "What most afflicted him with the sense of nightmare was that he had never clearly understood *why* the huge imposture was undertaken. The immediate advantages of falsifying the past were obvious, but the ultimate motive was mysterious. He took up his pen again and wrote: *I understand How: I do not understand WHY*" (p.68). In the first part of *1984* Orwell has presented a general view of the ultimate in totalitarian government and something of the methods used to maintain absolute power. We are shown the external workings of this regime, but we, like Winston, are not privy to the motives.

The second part of *1984* provides a closer look at and a systematic explanation of the world of 1984. The chapters from the book which Winston reads, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* by Emmanuel Goldstein, explain the ideological and theoretical bases for such a regime. In addition, Winston's incipient rebellion against Big Brother in the beginning of the novel is developed as he engages in a love affair with a fellow rebel, Julia. Together they continue either to attempt to bring about a change in the existing order by joining the alleged underground movement called the Brotherhood, or to find what happiness they can before they are caught by the Thought Police. But Winston, having read Goldstein's book, is no closer to discovering the motives for such a political system. He still does not "understand *why*" (p. 179).

It is not until the final section of the novel that Winston discovers the underlying reason. This third and last part of *1984* is concerned principally with the torture or "brainwashing" which Winston undergoes at the hand of his inquisitor-confessor O'Brien. It is from O'Brien that Winston learns the motives for this totalitarian state. O'Brien, a fanatic Inner Party member, considers Winston's rebellion to be a result of a mental derangement. O'Brien seems truly to believe that whatever the Party says must in fact be so, and in the end convinces Smith of this too. The question of the Party's motives, the *why*, is introduced by O'Brien: "'You understand well enough how the Party maintains itself in power. Now tell me why we cling to power. What is our motive? Why should we want power? Go on, speak,' he added as Winston remained silent." After some consideration Winston responds: "You are ruling over us for our own good. . . . You believe that human beings are not fit to govern themselves, and therefore—" (p. 216). Winston is not allowed to complete his answer for O'Brien is enraged at such a response and supplies the correct answer:

The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness; only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all the oligarchies of the past in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. 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. (p. 217)

This revelation by O'Brien is essentially the climactic point of the novel. In this encounter with O'Brien, Winston learns not only that the lust for pure power is the sole motive for the Party's rule, but also that the Party en-

visions an even more brutal and inhuman future: "But always—do not forget this, Winston—always there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever"(p. 220). Once a regime recognizes that its only motive for existence is pure power, then such a future is a logical consequence. In the closing pages of the novel Winston's torture is not completed until he is at last transformed into an automaton. In the closing lines of the novel we are told: "He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother"(p. 245).

The source for much of this material which constitutes the satirical core of the novel is found principally in Orwell's essay "Second Thoughts on James Burnham," first published in 1946, a few years before the publication of the novel. The importance of this essay has not been fully explored, although two early commentators noted a connection. Laurence Brander observed that "the broad political and economic background of Oceania against which the action is set is *prefigured* in . . . 'Second Thoughts on James Burnham.'"⁵ John Atkins has a bit more to say: "Orwell discovered this conception of the political future in James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*. Although he was critical of much of this book he found it the most fruitful of all modern books of political speculation."⁶ However, there is much more at work in *1984* than either Brander or Atkins recognizes. The most detailed examination of the question appears as a chapter in William Steinhoff's *George Orwell and the Origins of 1984*. Steinhoff ably traces the development of Orwell's fascination with *The Managerial Revolution* and other works by Burnham. That Orwell followed Burnham's career and made frequent mention of him in his writings over a period of years is well documented. And although Steinhoff overstates what he identifies as Orwell's ambivalence toward the description of the emerging managerial state, he is quite correct in his assertion that *1984* was written, in part, as a refutation of Burnham's views.⁷

In "Second Thoughts on James Burnham" Orwell analyzes Burnham's political thought as it evolved in three works by that author, who was later an editor of *The National Review*. The works are *The Managerial Revolution*, written in 1940, *The Machiavellians*, written in 1942, and an article, "Lenin's Heir," published in the *Partisan Review* in 1945. Burnham's views, as Orwell explains them, are essentially these: "Capitalism is disappearing, but Socialism is not replacing it. What is now arising is a new kind

of planned, centralized society which will be neither capitalist nor, in any accepted sense of the word, democratic." This new order will be controlled by a class of technicians and bureaucrats that Burnham calls "managers"—that is to say those in control of the means of production. Furthermore, the managerial society will consist of "great super-states grouped round the main industrial centres in Europe, Asia, and America." These super-states will not only be constantly at war, but also in a kind of stasis. "Internally, each society will be hierarchical, with an aristocracy of talent at the top and a mass of semi-slaves at the bottom."⁸

It takes little imagination to see that Orwell is using Burnham's predictions as the basis for the nightmare world of *1984*. Also Orwell tells us that Burnham sees politics as merely "the struggle for power." The course of history, in his view, is a series of power struggles. Orwell's discussion of Burnham's views sound strangely familiar, for O'Brien could very likely have spoken these lines: "Every great social movement, every war, every revolution, every political programme however edifying and Utopian, really has behind it the ambitions of some sectional group which is out to grab power for itself. Power can never be restrained by any ethical or religious code, but only by other power" ("Burnham," p. 176). Orwell finds it particularly significant that Burnham ignores the point that modern technology has virtually destroyed the pragmatic need for a slave state:

The question he ought to ask and never does, is: Why does the lust for naked power become a major human motive exactly *now*, when the dominion of man over man is ceasing to be necessary? As for the claim that "human nature," or "inexorable laws" of this and that, make Socialism impossible, it is simply a projection of the past into the future. In effect, Burnham argues that because a society of free and equal human beings has never existed it never can exist. By the same arguments one could have demonstrated the impossibility of aeroplanes in 1900, or of motor cars in 1850. ("Burnham," pp. 177-178)

Burnham's views then, according to Orwell, are not really carefully reasoned political judgments because they are at various points falsified. Burnham's vision is a "variant—an American variant, and interesting because of its comprehensiveness—of the power-worship now so prevalent among intellectuals." Furthermore, Burnham's theory of the rise of the managerial state "for all its appearance of objectivity, is the rationalization of a wish." Orwell sees no evidence that Burnham's managerial revolution is either inevitable or eternal: "There is no strong reason for thinking that it tells us anything about the future, except perhaps the immediate future. It merely tells us what kind of a world the 'managerial' class themselves, or at least

the more conscious and ambitious members of the class, would like to live in" ("Burnham," pp. 178-179). Unless some evidence can be offered that would indicate that Orwell repudiated these views or else that he did not mean what he said, it seems that the conclusion is inescapable. Oceania is not a prediction of what Orwell believed to be inevitable: it is a projection of a future implicit in Burnham's thesis. In conclusion, Orwell finds Burnham's views distressingly symptomatic of the kind of thinking "now so prevalent among intellectuals." And he notes his disappointment: "[T]hat a man of Burnham's gifts should have been able for a while to think of Nazism as something rather admirable, something that could and probably would build up a workable and durable social order, shows what damage is done to the sense of reality by the cultivation of what is now called 'realism'" ("Burnham," p.181).

That Orwell used Burnham's ideas in *1984* needs, I think, no further demonstration. The significant point to see is that Orwell believed Burnham's theory to be symptomatic of a cult of power worship. It is not specifically the world view set forth in *The Managerial Revolution* or *The Machiavelians* that Orwell wished to satirize. Although an exaggerated version of Burnham's works is clearly intended, it must be remembered that Orwell believed that Burnham's views were dangerous because they appeared at first glance to offer an astute analysis, but on closer inspection are shown to be shallow and reductive; worst of all, they foster a kind of power worship that could lead to an open advocacy of totalitarianism. His target is the hypocrisy of those who consider themselves "realists" or "pragmatists" and who ridicule the naivete of idealists, and yet fail to recognize their own intellectual dishonesty or prejudices. Orwell as satirist uses Burnham's views to project a kind of modest proposal for the future shaped and controlled by such "realists."

In the first two parts of *1984* Orwell creates with day-to-day detail a totalitarian state along the lines implicit in Burnham's theory of the managerial revolution. The second section introduces the theoretical basis of the society of 1984 through the pages of a book written, not by the mythical Emmanuel Goldstein, but by O'Brien and his co-workers. This book is, of course, a parody of Burnham's works. In the third section of the novel Orwell exposes the insane motives at work in such a world. James Burnham's frank and "realistic" assertion that politics is a struggle for power becomes, in the mouth of O'Brien, the utterance of a madman, a maniacal "priest of power." Orwell remarks that "in all his talk about the struggle for power, Burnham never stops to ask *why* people want power." Alex Zwerdling, in *Orwell*

and the Left, discusses briefly what may be the single most important question concerning the relationship of Orwell's last novel to the writings of James Burnham. Zwerdling asserts that much of Orwell's criticism of Burnham "could also be leveled against his own vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*." He notes that Orwell remarks that "Burnham never stops to ask *why* people want power, but that "the question is precisely the same one which stops Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and which the book does not really answer." Zwerdling concludes that "the closest thing to an answer is O'Brien's long speech about power, which is treated as the crucial revelation in the book. Yet nowhere in that speech does O'Brien explain *why* some people want power and, more particularly, why this hunger for power should assert itself so triumphantly in the twentieth century." But this complaint fails to recognize that O'Brien's speech, like Burnham's writings, is not a rational argument but a tautological one. That Winston does not recognize the banality of this evil vision should not come as a surprise, for he has come to accept O'Brien's perspective just as earlier he had betrayed his own values and decency in subscribing to the terrorist oath of the mythical Brotherhood. The surprise comes when readers insist on seeing Orwell's novel as a prediction of the future rather than as a satire on some profoundly disturbing aspects of intellectual and political currents in modern Europe and America. As Michael Harrington has phrased it, "Orwell was right about *a* tendency, which he turned into the *only* tendency in his novel, simplified and projected to the nth degree."¹⁰

Orwell does nothing to indicate in *1984* that the regime he depicts is *not* inevitable—a point of view Orwell the essayist and political apologist did hold. Orwell makes this view quite explicit in "Second Thoughts on James Burnham." But just as Swift leaves Gulliver in the barn to find his ideal home among the horses, Orwell leaves Winston Smith sitting in the Chestnut Tree cafe reconciled to Big Brother. This dark fictional vision has led some critics to think that Orwell had despaired of all hope, and they have offered various theories to explain what appears to be a change in his outlook. But the world of *1984* is a satirist's vision, an exaggeration. Bernard Crick in his biography of Orwell mentions that he "learned consciously from Swift how colloquiality and formality can be mingled both for comic and polemical effect." Crick adds that many readers underestimate Orwell as an artist and fall into the error of identifying "the final and utter pessimism and defeat of Winston Smith with the milder pessimism of the author."¹¹ The genetic fallacy has for long led to misinterpretation of Swift; it appears to continue to plague Orwell criticism. A new variant of this insis-

tence on seeing the despair at the conclusion of *1984* as a reflection of Orwell's private despair has recently been analyzed as resulting not from his failing health, or his dismay at world events, but in fact arises from his own intellectual failure to "analyze the dynamics of the pursuit of power," together with his uncritical acceptance of "masculine destructive patterns as facts of nature."¹² Although this thesis offers an illuminating description of the "dynamics" of Winston Smith's and O'Brien's game of chess, it is clearly mistaken in identifying the protagonist with the author or with explaining Orwell's views on the pursuit of power. The apparent discrepancy between Orwell's own hopes and fears for civilization and the dark vision of the novel can be resolved when the genetic fallacy is identified and Orwell's satiric method is acknowledged. Orwell's essay on Swift is instructive, for his commentary on Swift's approach to his material might well be an apt description of his own method in *1984*:

Swift falsifies his picture of the world by refusing to see anything in human life except dirt, folly and wickedness, but the part which he abstracts does exist, and it is something which we all know about while shrinking from mentioning it. 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.¹³

Similarly James Burnham's vision of a future of efficient super-states ruled by efficient managers is transformed by Orwell's satiric vision into a nightmare world of totalitarianism.

NOTES

- 1 *Harper's*, Jan. 1983, pp. 30-37.
- 2 "An Exchange on Orwell," *Harper's*, Feb. 1983, p. 57.
- 3 Harold J. Harris, "Orwell's Essays and *1984*," *TCL* 4 (1959), 156-157.
- 4 George Orwell, *1984* (1949; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1961), pp. 26-27. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
- 5 Laurence Brander, *George Orwell* (London: Longmans, Green, 1954), p. 187.
- 6 John Atkins, *George Orwell: A Literary Study* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1954), p. 238.
- 7 William Steinhoff, *George Orwell and the Origins of 1984* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), p. 54.
- 8 This essay first appeared under the title "Second Thoughts on James Burnham," in *Polemic* No. 3, May, 1946, and was reprinted as "James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution," in *The Collected Essays, Journals and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. IV, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New

York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968), pp. 160-161. Hereafter cited as "Burnham," parenthetically in the text.

- 9 Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 103-104.
- 10 Michael Harrington, "Nineteen Eighty-Four Revisited," in *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism*, second edition, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 435.
- 11 Bernard Crick, *George Orwell, a Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), p. xxi.
- 12 Daphne Patai, "Gamesmanship and Adrocentrism in Orwell's *1984*," *PMLA*, 97 (1982), 868-869.
- 13 "Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of *Gulliver's Travels*" in *The Collected Essays* . . . , IV, p. 222.