The author of 1984 *was wrong about sex, right about politics, and right, then wrong, about the future*

Growing Up With Orwell

by Paul Wilson

ONE of the first translations I ever made was of a short article by George Orwell called "A Farthing Newspaper." At the time I came across it in 1966, in the Orwell Archives at the University of London, the article was only available in French because Ian Angus, who was assembling the archives, hadn't traced the original yet. For the sake of completeness, I decided to try my hand at turning it back into English.

Orwell had written the piece in 1928 when he was still Eric Blair and living in Paris. It was about a new Paris daily called *L'Ami du peuple* that sold for a few centimes and was beginning to offer serious competition to the more established papers. What remains interesting, even after all those years, is the way the piece seems to contain the genetic materials – the worries, the attitudes, the way of thinking – that dominate much of Orwell's later work. He was archly sceptical about the paper's claim to be the little man's champion, pointing out that *L'Ami du peuple* was owned by a wealthy industrialist who was also the proprietor of several large newspapers, including *Le Figaro*. It was, he said, the symptom of a larger trend towards "always bigger and nastier trusts," and it anticipated a day "when the newspaper will simply be a sheet of advertisement and propaganda, with a little well-censored news to sugar the pill." It was George Orwell's first public prophecy.

I FIRST read Orwell when I was about fourteen. One night, while babysitting at a neighbour's, I was poking around the bookshelves looking for something to kill time before the parents got back, and one book caught my eye. It was a cheap paperback with a shiny, laminated cover showing a buxom woman with sullen but enticing eyes and full red lips. She was wearing coveralls tied tightly around her waist with a scarlet sash and her enormous bosom seemed ready to burst out of its unnatural confinement. Perched on one of her breasts was a garish button that said: "Anti-sex League." Behind her, as I remember it, was a bleak city street with a crowd of demonstrators carrying banners with slogans on them. A large poster of someone who looked like Edward G. Robinson was stuck on a wall. "Big Brother is Watching You," the poster said.

It seems ridiculous now, to think of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as what we used to called a "skin book," but that is how I first remember it. I skimmed rapidly, though not without a horrified fascination, through the preliminaries, scanning the pages eagerly for signs of what the cover promised: sex. The strange world that Winston Smith inhabited, the diseased squalor, the regimentation, the induced hysteria, the hopelessness, the fear, a world where no one could move without being observed or speak without being heard, where newspapers and history could be rewritten, where there was perpetual war and low-grade atomic bombs rained down at random – all of this seemed like a horrible nightmare.

The story of Winston and Julia, on the other hand, made a lot more sense. Being shy myself, I thought I understood how a man could long for a woman and yet be afraid to speak to her, how he would then, in desperation, make contact and arrange a secret tryst, how he could believe that his love – his passion – for her would undermine the terrible machinery of a society bent on thwarting them.

After some literary foreplay, the Big Moment finally comes on page 103 (you had to remember the page references to save your friends the trouble of wading through boring exposition) when Winston, having overcome his fear, meets Julia alone near a secluded country lane: "She stood looking at him for an instant, then felt at the zipper of her overalls. And yes! ... Almost as swiftly as he had imagined it, she had torn her clothes off, and when she flung them aside it was with that same magnificent gesture by which a whole civilization seemed to be annihilated."

Tastes in erotica are more jaded these days. It seems strange, now, that I could have thought of Orwell as a sexy writer. But I knew then that after reading the book, I felt differently about the world; my horizon had shifted and I felt the strangeness of this new perspective for a long time afterwards.

AT Victoria College in Toronto a few years later, though I majored in English, George Orwell never cropped up on the curriculum. Back then we were exposed to literature in chronological, not thematic, blocks. The assumption was that we could deal with anything written after World War I – which meant most of Canadian literature as well – on our own. (The assumption is still a good one, but utterly antithetical to current educational philosophy.) Orwell was too modern (he had died in 1950) to be included. He was also, I suspect, too political. Politics intersected with literature, it seemed, only in the past, and those long-ago struggles were presented to us as conflicting "world pictures," as literary wars between the "ancients" and the "moderns," and as changing trends in criticism. Eloquence, we were taught, was for delight and instruction; true literature stands above temporal frays. Later, when I read an unabridged version of John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* I discovered that some of the writers whose works we had studied as pure effusions of imagination had actually been up to their necks in politics, and sometimes their eloquence had been the very thing

that had saved them from the executioner's axe.

Partly as a reaction against this kind of thing, I wrote my senior year thesis on William Butler Yeats. I interpreted his work as a response to the rise of the Irish nationalist movement, hardly a novel approach, but I had just returned from three months in a newly independent African country that had a poet-president, and I was interested in this business of a writer getting embroiled in a political struggle for independence. As I discovered, Yeats ended up having his doubts about it. One day he saw Maude Gonne, the Irish Joan of Arc with whom he was desperately in love, lead forty thousand school children through the streets of Dublin and then, in a field outside the city, make them all swear undying hatred for England. Yeats was horrified. "I count the links in the chain of responsibility," he wrote later, "run them across my fingers and wonder if any link there is from my workshop."

Two other university memories, both *bons mots* uttered in passing by the great Northrop Frye: "Democracy is the only truly revolutionary creed," he said, or words to that effect, "because it alone recognizes that change is a constant factor in human affairs." His other *bon mot*, something of a corollary to the first, was this: "Even the human heart is slightly left of centre."

These were the biases I left the University of Toronto with. A year and a half later, I took a boat to England.

LONDON was teeming with life. It was 1964, and you could live modestly on about five pounds a week. Movies were plentiful, the theatre was good and cheap, and in the warm pubs the British would shed their reserve and become garrulous and friendly. They were in love with words, spoken or printed. Besides the literate mainstream newspapers and the sub-literate tabloids, there were dozens of small papers and magazines representing every point of view, all battling for your attention in the bookstores and newsstands along Charing Cross Road. Public lectures were a form of popular entertainment. Pamphleteering, which had a long tradition in the British Isles, was still one of the lively arts. The sun had almost set on the Empire, but in the twilight, London was still drawing people from all over the world. It was a haven to refugees, a cauldron of ideas, an ante-chamber to governments and oppositions in exile, dictators in waiting. It also had some pretty good rock and roll, and passable jazz. For anyone interested in the world, it seemed an ideal vantage point.

I had come to London saddled with a purpose: to get a post-graduate degree. I got myself a reader's card to the British Museum Library, devised a field of study related to my interest in writing and politics – British left-wing literature of the twenties and thirties – then went to the library to delve for a subject.

Under its bright blue dome, the British Museum Reading Room was a magic place. Though nearly always crowded, it had a quiet, muffled ambience that hummed with invisible activity. Graduate students, professors on sabbatical, writers, people doing casual research, fact-checkers from magazines, Third World revolutionaries gathering evidence for their case, eccentrics and lunatics: none who had a valid card were ever turned away unless there was nowhere left to sit.

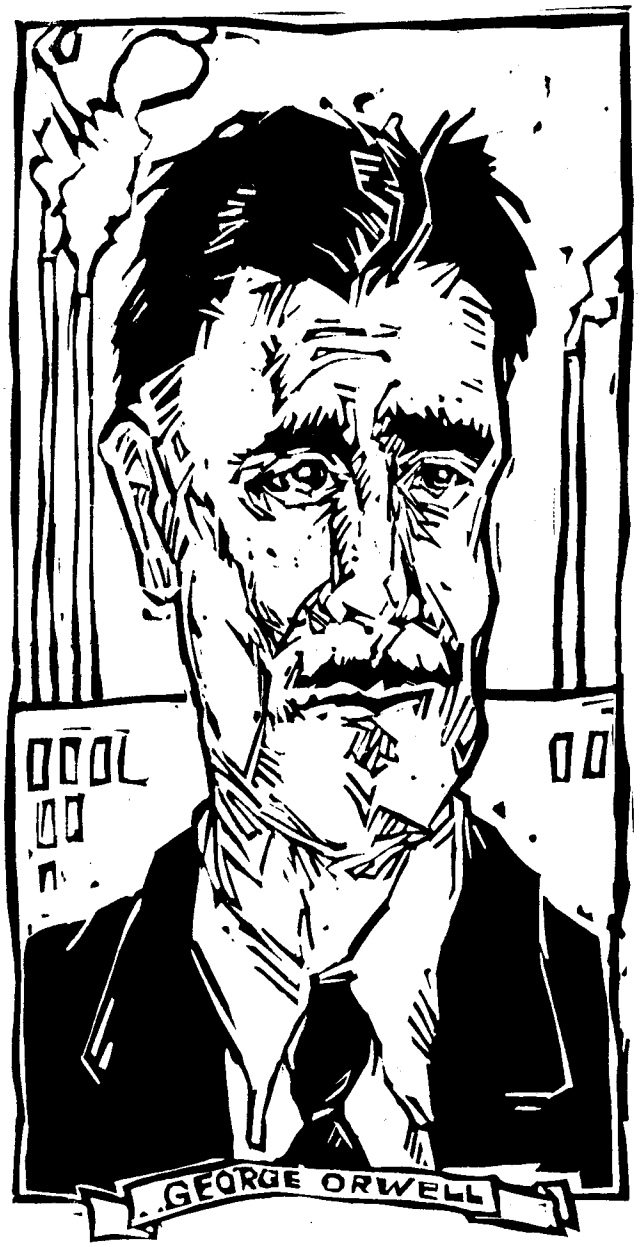
The glory of the British Museum is the ease of cross-referencing. Everything printed in the English-speaking world from the mid-nineteenth century on is there, and much from before that, and each book you read can, through a network of footnotes, lead to a dozen more, and they to others, and so on. The pathways through the library are infinite, and each path will take you through different adventures and lead to a different outcome. You can also become hopelessly, irrevocably lost. My journey took me on a wild goose chase through a maze of left-wing writers, men of letters, theorists, poets, and critics. Then it dumped me on George Orwell's doorstep.

READING Orwell this time round was a much more orderly business. I read all his books, and all the journalism that Ian Angus had managed to track down for the Orwell archives. The British Museum had his pamphlet collection. It was a strange experience, handling the political flotsam that Orwell had taken the trouble to gather and save thoughout his life. Most of the pamphlets were by now of limited historical value, the spent squibs of arguments that had once taken place on the margins of long-dead debates. But gathered together the collection was a living thing, an outward manifestation of Orwell's habits of mind, and it brought me closer to him than I had ever been simply reading his books.

Being in London brought me closer too. Orwell had lived in a great city. He had belonged to a literary community, queer fringes of which still survived in the British Museum Reading Room. But what made that community – the generation that came to maturity between the two World Wars – different from the ones before them, was the presence of an agenda, an overwhelming question that writers of his time felt obliged to answer. There was general agreement that the old order of the world was breaking down; the question was, What should the new order be like? Two apparently different answers already existed: the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, both children of the First World War, both based more or less on the destruction of the old order by violence and the creation of a new one from scratch. A writer was judged, in part or entirely, by what attitude he took to those two regimes. Orwell came to realize that it didn't much matter which side you thought would "win"; both of them were loathsome and offensive, and the intellectual who admired or condoned either was in effect worshipping pure power, since power was all those regimes represented, power utterly stripped of what Orwell called "common decency."

As I read, and as I got to know London better, I discovered that Orwell's visions of a future in which poverty and lies prevail and history is rewritten were not revealed to him by some paranormal clairvoyance. They were extensions of what he saw around him. The squalid, bomb-damaged London of *Nineteen Eighty-four*, with its dilapidated buildings, grimy streets, and the grinding poverty and ignorance of its underclasses, is not far from the London Orwell knew and described in his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. The Ministry of Truth was said to have been modelled on the B.B.C., where Orwell worked during the war, and he learned much of what he knew about the re-writing of history by observing how partisans of both sides in the Spanish Civil War deliberately lied about it. In Newspeak, the party jargon of Oceania and one of Orwell's most original and lasting inventions, there are satirical reflections of the thirties craze for a simplified version of the language called Basic English, which Orwell vehemently opposed. And in Doublethink, the capacity to hold two contradictory opinions at once, Orwell satirizes the mind habits of what he called "the

russophile intelligentsia," people who disguised their worship of totalitarian power beneath an ideology that made them feel virtuous about it. This became a recurring theme in his later essays, and in one of them, "The Prevention of Literature," Orwell makes the startling and still relevant observation that "to be corrupted by totalitarianism one does not have to live in a totalitarian country. The mere prevalence of certain ideas can spread a kind of poison that makes one subject after another impossible for literary purposes. Wherever there is an enforced orthodoxy – or two orthodoxies, as often happens – good writing stops."



But my reading of Orwell was made more complicated because, like thousands of others around me, I was succumbing to the lure of left-wing ideology. Part of it came to me in the popular, potted forms touted by the intellectual gurus of the "counter-culture"; the rest of it, in a purer form, came through my reading of the classic left-wing scriptures. This made me, even as I studied Orwell, into the kind of thinker he was most critical of.

One of the powers that ideology confers on the would-be adept is a technique for dealing with objections: you reject everything that calls your new belief in doubt. If the objections come from a class friend, a "fellow-traveller," someone who means well, you reject them as being inappropriate or politically incorrect. If they come from a class enemy, you reject them as being false or deliberately misleading. Either way, your main job is to protect the sanctity of the belief. The paradox of this way of "thinking" is that, although born of the urge to question everything, it ends by eliminating doubt. Once inside the new frame of reference, you're too busy applying it to everything under the sun to notice that your questioning instincts have suddenly been stilled, or diverted. Your energy no longer goes into challenging the "old" system, but into constructing a "new" one in which the imperatives of the "old" are neutralized.

So I found myself in a dispute with Orwell, trying out all the arguments orthodoxy could provide: he didn't know his Marx, or if he did, had rejected it without really understanding it; he was trapped in his bourgeois origins, his scruples were those of the Edwardian era; his writing was humourless and sexless (so far can ideology induce one to deny his own experience); his characters were shallow and his plots creaked. And in any case, the novel was a bourgeois art form, and Orwell hadn't managed to escape from that either. Moreover, his best works had been "surpassed" by events: *Animal Farm* was a satire of Stalinism, and Stalin was dead, and as for *Nineteen Eighty-four*, it could apply to the West even more than to the Soviet Union.

But arguing against Orwell like this felt like shooting pucks into an empty net. I could never quite get rid of the uneasiness he made me feel. There were too many echoes in what he said of things I had once believed myself.

In the midst of all this, a festival of Czech films came to London. I was enchanted and mystified. I loved the sophisticated artlessness of the films, the sly humour, the way they could make ordinary situations seem chilling and sinister. They were slow and careful, but there was a barely suppressed exuberance about them, as though the film-makers had gotten away with something naughty. At the same time, I felt excluded; there was a mystery here that I wasn't a party to. It wasn't just the strange musical language they spoke, or the leaden subtitles, that excluded me. The Czech and Slovak film-makers seemed to be telling their audiences stories that were special to them. But I didn't know what it was.

Then I met two Czech engineers, Peter and Milos, who were visiting London. In the course of one drunken evening, we had a heated discussion about communism. None of my arguments about the merits of Marxism could stand up to their onslaughts. They were talking from experience and I was not. I said that theoretically, there was no reason why socialism shouldn't work; they replied that practically, there was no way it *could*. The premisses were all wrong, and besides, everything turned out differently from what was expected. There was no connection between the theoretical intentions of communism and the results.

I began instead to listen to what they had to say about life in Prague. There was plenty of it, and not much was flattering. Yet beneath their litany of complaints I could sense that they were excited by something, that they were not as pessimistic as they sounded. "So what is it?" I asked them. "First you tell me communism won't work, that it's never going to change. But you're telling me this here in London. A few years ago you couldn't have come. So things *are* changing, aren't they? And you're going back home. So who's right?"

Milos's reply was, "If you want to know the answer, why don't you come to Czechoslovakia and see for yourself?"

"But I'd have to live and work there, and if things are as bad as you say, they'd never let me."

"Maybe," said Milos slowly, "things are getting a little

bit better. Maybe you could get a job teaching English."

My response was not politically correct. I accepted the challenge.

I ARRIVED in Czechoslovakia in the late summer of 1967 on a dirty white bus with blue trim belonging to the Czechoslovak state bus lines, in the company of some dumpy, sour-faced old women carrying large sacks of Austrian food and clothing. We were let out onto a vast cobble-stoned square in front of the main railway station in Znojmo, the women disappeared into the night, the bus drove off, and the square was empty again under street lights so dim that they seemed to intensify the darkness around me. It felt like the end of the world.

I spent the night in a long, narrow room over the station with sixteen army cots in a row along one wall. A window at one end overlooked the station platforms, and all night long, steam engines shunted back and forth underneath. The air inside the room was acrid with the smell of coal smoke. On a shelf above the beds sat one of the most bizarre radios I had ever seen. It looked like an old wooden table-top console, except that it had no dial, and a single knob which, as I discovered when I tried to stop the stream of music coming from the thing, controlled only the volume: like the telescreens of Orwell's Oceania, it could be turned down, but not off. All through the night, as I drifted in and out of sleep, I could hear the other lodgers settling into bed, engines huffing, couplers clattering, dispatchers shrilling their signals to the engineers, carriage doors slamming, and, in moments of silence, the soft strains of some kind of strange Central European pop music drifting down from the absurd contraption above my bed.

When I got up the next morning at five o'clock to catch the only bus going to Prague that day, it was still dark, but the square in front of the station was now teeming with people, most of them in dark nylon slickers, and wearing little fedoras or berets on their heads, each one with a fat briefcase, a silent crowd of shadows fanning out across the square to the buses now lined up around the edge. There was not a sound, only the shuffle of feet and the occasional rumble as one of the buses would cough into life and wheel out of the square. I got on the bus to Prague, paid for my ticket, and we headed off into the darkness.

My first bleary impression of Prague, at nine o'clock in the morning, was of a dusty, unkempt city of an impassive antiquity, shrouded in scaffolding, a maze of winding streets. I took a streetcar to Milos's place. He was at work, but his parents gave me a warm welcome, and while Mrs. S. fussed in the kitchen over her *buchty* (a kind of sweet bun) and made coffee, Mr. S. pulled out the morning paper and, in broken German and English, tried to give me the gist of a front page article about Tomas Masaryk, who had led the Czechs and Slovaks to independence and become their first president in 1918.

"Something is happening," Mr. S. said. "This is first time I see his name in newspaper in good – no, not in good, in neutral way, since 1948."

To reinforce his point, he went to a desk and pulled a type-written document from a drawer. "This," he said, "is speech that one our writers gave at writer's congress – Ludvik Vaculik." And then he translated a passage that went something like this: Reforms are all very well, but where are the guarantees? When will they become law? We tried to publish an article about the proposed laws on freedom of association and assembly and our magazine was confiscated. Where are the guarantees?

"This is Communist writer, yes?" Mr. S. said. "I tell you, this is first time I agree with something Communist says. And I tell you, his question – every Czech is asking it."

That night, in a bar, I went to the rudimentary pissoir, acrid of urine, and saw among the indecipherable graffiti on the wall, a hammer and sickle and a swastika, joined by an equal sign. Orwell's heretical discovery had become common knowledge.

THE year that followed was one of the most intense of my life. I taught English to several classes of young girls at the Language School in Brno, who subjected me to a delightful barrage of tricks and temptations all year long. With the help of my evening students, I began to learn Czech. We would go to a restaurant after classes and argue and tell stories and sing songs until closing time, then go back to someone's flat and continue. One of the students was a dour, middle-aged man who spoke in a slow, ponderous English; he got up every morning at three to catch the bus to some distant mine, where he had to be by six, when the whole country was expected to be at their posts. Not surprisingly, he would nod off to sleep in my evening classes, yet he always managed to drink until midnight. Once, he told me:

"Mr. Veelzon, socialism is a very fine idea, but it's for angels, not for human beings."

Every week I commuted to Prague to teach at one of the universities. In the fall of 1967, more things were happening in Prague than in Brno, and my students kept me informed. The signals were very mixed. There were student demonstrations, followed by crackdowns. People told me that there was more freedom of expression than before, but then suddenly a popular magazine would be banned. Wherever I went, though, people seemed happy, or at least expectant. They told me horror stories, but the stories all seemed to refer to the past. Hope had begun to cast its glow everywhere. It was as though the natural optimistic exuberance of the young people I taught in Brno and Prague had infected the whole of society. Whatever was going on, it did not *feel* like *Nineteen Eighty-four*.

Oddly enough, though, the visible features of *Nineteen Eighty-four* were almost all there: the elevators that didn't work, the drab clothing, the dismal public art, the chronic shortages of basic goods like toilet paper and potatoes, the rot-gut local rum, the cold filthy trains and crowded trams, the dimly lit streets, the vile cigarettes that spilled their tobacco whenever they were tipped vertically, the banners and signs flaunting boiler-plate slogans that celebrated the gains of socialism. In the prevailing optimism, however, such things seemed like temporary inconveniences to be borne with sporting good humour until things got better. I didn't understand that they were not symptoms of a disease, but the disease itself. Nor did I appreciate the grinding humiliations of everyday life, which were largely invisible to me.

The Prague Spring of 1968, if anything, delayed my enlightenment. Had I arrived fresh in a society as openly repressive as Czechoslovakia had been in the fifties, or as subtly repressive as it was to become in the seventies, I hope I would have understood sooner what was happening. But in 1968, it seemed reasonable to believe that Soviet-style socialism was reformable and that the system could be made more democratic. Moreover, the real processes at work were hidden behind the scenes, invisible except to those involved, and the general public only got

wind of them when a new magazine, or an interesting book, play, or movie would appear.

Then early in 1968, the Party, now under Alexandr Dubcek, abolished censorship and allowed freedom of association. The general public rapidly became involved. For a few months, Prague was in ferment. There were public meetings everywhere, and everyone seemed to have strong opinions about how the country should be run. Formerly dull newspapers became lively, informative, and argumentative. Political groups sprang up – associations of former political prisoners, clubs for politically minded non-Communists. The Party itself, once a conduit for instructions from above, became a conduit for impulses from below. Politics became everybody's business. Teaching English conversation was a dream: everyone was eager to have their say, if only in broken English.

In many ways, the Prague Spring was like a democratic socialist's dream come true, and it was not surprising to find the city crawling with New Leftists from the West eager to find confirmation of their theories. I knew some Czech student activists and was present at meetings with people from "the Movement" in the West. Invariably, the Westerners would worry out loud that the Prague Spring meant a return to capitalism. Invariably, they would be told that the new dispensation would remain socialist and that "fraternal obligations" to Vietnam and other Third World countries would be met. These reassurances were often echoed in the mass media like a litany, and I believed them myself. But for most of the Czechs I knew, socialism was something to be endured, and transformed, and if it withered away, who would care? It was not something to be inflicted on another country by force, which is how they saw the Vietnam war. Yet no casual visitor to the country – not even those who spoke to members of the opposition – ever seemed to pick up the deep, inchoate resentment and mistrust people felt towards the regime and all it stood for.

In the course of the Prague Spring such feelings, which had incubated for decades, began to find expression. Demands were made for changes that had not been cooked up in the liberal Communist think-tanks, demands for a pluralistic society with competing political parties and free elections, for a neutral foreign policy, and an economy that could experiment with different types of enterprise. The regime countered with an "Action Programme," but even at their most liberal, they could offer little more than the prospect of a new-style Communist hegemony, one based on "example and merit" (I still can't decide whether the phrase is incredibly naïve or utterly cynical) rather than brute force. It was not an effective answer. Other members of the Warsaw Pact were upset, because they thought – probably correctly, from their point of view – that things were getting out of hand. The Kremlin decided that "socialism with a human face" meant the end of "proletarian internationalism" and had better be stopped.

I was on vacation in Yugoslavia when the Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia, but I took the first available train back to Prague. Arriving late at night on August 26th, after curfew, I stepped out onto the empty square in front of the station where the only signs of life were two sentries walking up and down and some helicopters throbbing in the dark above the city. It was drizzling, and across the boulevard in front of the station, I could see two tanks squatting among the bushes of a small park. The barrels of their cannons were capped.

That same day, the Czechoslovak leadership, which had been hijacked to Moscow and held hostage there, had finally (all but one of them, Frantisek Kriegel) signed the so-called Moscow Protocol, legitimating the invasion, and also taking some of the tension out of the confrontation between a leaderless, weaponless people and an army of a hundred thousand men. The next day, August 27th, the leaders were back in Prague. Dubcek went on the air and, with great physical difficulty, read a prepared statement promising that the reforms would continue and appealing for support in "normalizing" the situation. People who heard it said he wept.

ALTHOUGH the end was clearly in sight, there was a lot of spontaneous activity through the fall of 1968 and the spring of 1969. Censorship was gradually reintroduced, but there were still open public exchanges over the meaning of the "entry of the troops," as the invasion now had to be called. There were student strikes and demonstrations, but none could stop the gradual freeze. In January, 1969, a young student called Jan Palach set fire to himself on Wenceslas Square and died a few days later. His funeral, attended by thousands of people, was the last large peaceful public manifestation of any kind for many years to come. Unlike similar funerals in Iran, or South Africa, or China, it marked the end, not the beginning, of public resistance.

In the following months, newspapers were gradually brought to heel, renegade magazines were shut down, the political discussion clubs were banned, the artistic unions were purged, and habits from a time older than my experience of the country began to come back. There was one last outburst of popular outrage, in the guise of street celebrations after the Czechoslovak team beat the Soviets at the World Hockey Championship. Amid rumours that Soviet tanks were once again moving towards Prague, Gustav Husak replaced Dubcek as First Secretary of the Party. The Prague Spring was officially declared winter. During the Husak era, all those who had been active in any way during the reform era and who refused to recant their views were purged from public life. Ideologists came up with the expression *realni socialism* (which means, roughly, "socialism as it really is") to describe the new "normalized" order. The word socialism stopped appearing in print by itself, and there was no more discussion about what socialism might be, only about what it was. I had moved to Prague and was now teaching English in the high schools, the university, and at night school. It felt as though a grey veil had been drawn over everything. The Czechs, oddly enough, still found things to laugh at but the laughter was bitter, and their optimism took an ironic twist: people now began looking forward to the worst.

It was also a symptom of the times that people began reading Orwell again, or at least talking about him more. The worse things got, the more his name came up in conversation. It was the older people, those who could read English and remembered the Stalinist fifties, who were most fulsome in their praise. For them, Orwell was a great prophet who had foreseen everything, right down to the lousy cigarettes. They found it significant that Orwell had written *Nineteen Eight-four* in 1948, the year the Communists seized power in Czechoslovakia. The younger generation had heard of Orwell, of course, but lacking readily available translations of his work, they tended to know less about him. But by the mid-seventies, expressions like "newspeak," "thought police," and "doublethink"

(untranslated, in English) were part of everyone's vocabulary. Of course nothing of Orwell's had been officially published in Czechoslovakia, and the only reference I ever saw in print to Orwell was in a high-school text, published about 1976, in which he was dismissed in less than a sentence as "a pessimistic bourgeois satirist and author of anti-utopian novels."

ABOUT 1973, someone sent me the four-volume edition of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* – the fruit of Ian Angus's labour in the Orwell archives. I'd read Orwell's occasional pieces before, but now, in the light of "normalization," I noticed other things. I had once felt that *Nineteen Eighty-four* was the final distillation of all that Orwell had thought and written; I now saw that his vision of the future had been mercifully incomplete, and that the real centre of gravity of his work lay in his journalism, his reports from the fronts of poverty and civil war, and his essays on English literature, politics, popular culture, and intellectual life.

Orwell's original title for *Nineteen Eighty-four* had been *The Last Man in Europe*, and reading it now, in Czechoslovkia in the seventies, I saw it as a book about the end of history: that is, the end of history as the story of individuals acting to change the course of events. Winston Smith lives in a society where everyone is isolated from everyone else by fear and fanaticism. The only way Winston can act independently is secretly and alone, and even then, he puts his life at risk. He begins his revolt by starting to write a clandestine diary; he then breaks out of his isolation by having a clandestine love affair with Julia, and together, they make the leap of faith and join the clandestine opposition. Unfortunately for both of them, the opposition turns out to be government-sponsored. When Winston is tortured and broken, we are meant to feel that the game is over for ever. The circle of secrecy and fear has not been broken. Big Brother has triumphed.

As the seventies wore on, no matter how many Orwellian symptoms reappeared, there were too many signs of serious resistance to the regime to allow me to believe that the game was over. It was not so much an open manifestation of dissent, but rather a profound feeling everyone seemed to share, and one which therefore acted against the sense of isolation the regime tried to create. Socialism was dead. The politics of "normalization" forced most people to pay lip-service to it, but the system was no longer fuelled by anything remotely resembling belief. It was held together, not by terror, but by a dull, existential fear that was kept just below the threshold of tolerance. Revolutionary hysteria, with its orchestrated witch hunts backed up by labour camps, had been replaced by a species of bolshevik spin control. The people the regime jailed now were not "agents of imperialism" or "class enemies," but "hooligans" and "disturbers of peace and public order."

Orwell had understood, perhaps better than any other Westerner, what repression looks like and feels like and how it uses words as well as force to keep itself going. But he did not remain alive long enough to experience, as Hannah Arendt had, the revolt of Eastern Europe; and therefore he never saw any real evidence of how change can work its slow way inside a system designed to eliminate it.

He hadn't seen, for instance, that totalitarianism would not have to create a new language like "newspeak" to supplant the old one. Instead, it would simply invade the old language and take it over, like the body snatchers in the movie. A totalitarian attack on language leaves the outward forms of words and syntax undamaged but sucks the old meanings out and replaces them with new ones of its own, making the syntax rigid and predictable. Old concepts like democracy, freedom, initiative, enterprise, peace, justice, honour, truth, right, wrong, and so on, remain in the vocabulary; but for insiders, they have a specific meaning that is often the contrary of their original meaning. Frequently, this new meaning is made more rigid by the addition of another word, creating oxymorons, pleonasms, and the like. "Revolutionary truth"; "the freedom of necessity"; "fraternal assistance"; "proletarian internationalism"; "democratic centralism"; "socialist justice"; "real socialism"; "the right to work" – these are familiar examples of totalitarian rhetoric. Each of the examples contains two conflicting elements, but the contradictions are hidden and so they appear to stand for a single idea. These rhetorical units are the D.N.A. of "doublethink." The ability of totalitarian language to absorb the existing language and pervert it to serve its ends makes any kind of dialogue extremely difficult. It is impossible for an uninitiated person to understand what an ideologue is talking about, precisely because the ideologue uses familiar words in unfamiliar ways.

But the same quality that make post-Orwellian language powerful also makes it subvertable. "Doublethink" and "newspeak" were devices to keep the intelligentsia in line, but among the proles, of whom Winston despaired, they are constantly ridiculed. The absurdities of a centrally planned and policed economy and culture are great generators of common sense, which finds expression in anecdotes, stories, and jokes. People's perceptions are kept sharp. Orwell hadn't counted on the subversive power of humour, or on the power of language to renew itself. This process is partly spontaneous and partly conscious, but in any event it appears to be unstoppable. It is no substitute for organized political opposition, but at the same time, no political opposition can afford to ignore the down-to-earth wisdom in this popular revolt.

A FEW weeks before the Czech police expelled me from Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1977, I had a discussion about Orwell with Jan Lopatka. Lopatka is a literary critic who made a name for himself in the sixties by digging out the original manuscripts of popular Czech authors and publicly comparing them with the published versions. He persuaded a publisher to put out a collection of Bohumil Hrabal's early, uncensored manuscripts, but the Russians arrived before the book could be released and all but a hundred or so copies went into the chopper. Now, in the spring of 1977, he was a signatory of Charter 77 and about to lose an office job he'd held down since the early seventies. I asked Lopatka why he thought Orwell hadn't foreseen a popular rising against Communism. He replied that as a socialist, Orwell had no faith in people. Socialists believe that the quality of human life can be improved by improving the social and economic environment around them. But to believe that, Lopatka said, you also have to believe the flip side, that human life can be limitlessly corrupted, degraded, and manipulated. Orwell left us with the vision of a human boot stomping in a human face, for ever. Lopatka, who had just endured several weeks of on-again, off-again interrogation by the secret police, not to mention years of not being able to

publish, was convinced that Orwell was wrong.

Lopatka's criticism of Orwell was based on reading *Nineteen Eighty-four* as his final testament to the world. In fact, the book, launched into a Cold War world, was such an immediate success that Orwell felt obliged to issue a modest disclaimer. "I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive," he wrote, "but I believe (allowing for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive." And in an essay written just a year before he began work on *Nineteen Eighty-four*, he had this to say: "If I had to make a prophecy, I should say that a continuation of the Russian policies of the past fifteen years – and internal and external policy, of course, are merely two facets of the same thing – can only lead to a war conducted with atomic bombs. The Russian regime will either democratize itself, or it will perish." Orwell believed that the only way to defeat Soviet Communism was to demonstrate, on a large scale, that it is possible to create a society where economic security can exist without concentration camps. He envisioned this happening in a United Socialist States of Europe and Africa. If such a scheme could be made to work, he said, the Soviet Union couldn't possibly compete and would have to change, or fail disastrously.

BACK in Canada after fourteen years away, I discovered that many of the ideas I had espoused in the sixties and then rejected in the seventies had become a kind of orthodoxy. Left-wing anti-Americanism (most of it doctrinaire and passionless) was now almost *de rigueur*, and the few who took the kind of left-wing anti-Soviet stance that Orwell had pioneered found themselves, if not voices in the wilderness, then at least isolated by cool silence and sometimes open suspicion. In Europe, and especially in France, the publication of Solzhenitsyn's annals of the Gulag had helped to undermine a whole tradition of pro-Soviet thought; but in Canada, very few left-leaning intellectuals seemed to have noticed, or to have realized, that the more we discovered about Soviet (and Chinese) reality, the greater the challenge to their articles of faith. By and large, the majority seemed comfortable with the very kind of doublethink that Orwell had condemned. This rendered them helpless to deal in any rational way with totalitarianism, whether it be in full bloom, rapid decline, or creeping into new life right under their noses.

Given this climate, it was perhaps not surprising that when the year 1984 came around and we were inundated with articles on Orwell full of predictable opinions about whether he'd been right or wrong, hardly any of them dealt with Orwell's anti-totalitarian socialism. One exception was an article called "Orwell: The Horror of Politics," by the sinologist Simon Leys, in the December 1983 issue of an Australian magazine called *Quadrant*. Leys, who lived for many years in China, remarks that Orwell commentaries too often reduce *Nineteen Eighty-four* "to the dimensions of an anti-Communist pamphlet," ignoring Orwell's left-wing convictions. "Orwell's chief accomplishment is his unique understanding of the singular danger that hangs over civilization in this second half of the twentieth century. In the Soviet Union, in China, in all of Eastern Europe, Orwell is being secretly read, and his readers marvel at the uncanny prescience with which he managed to describe, down to the minutest details, a political phenomenon that even some of our leaders have not yet begun to understand. The Soviet dissident Alexander Nekrich was merely summarizing general opinion when he wrote: 'George Orwell is perhaps *the only* Western writer who really understood the essential nature of the Soviet world' – and on this subject, one could quote endlessly similar witnesses from the East."

During the big anniversary year a Czech translation of *Nineteen Eight-four* was published in West Germany, with an afterword by Milan Simecka, titled, revealingly, "Our Comrade, Winston Smith." As I read the book in Czech, I found myself being carried back, through the suggestiveness of Czech, not to London, but to Prague and its ugly modern prefab suburbs, with high-rise apartments decaying before they are done. I could imagine someone in those suburbs, reading it at night in the relative safety of his or her own flat, savouring the delicious forbiddenness of Orwell's words as much as the bleak truth they speak. I imagined a Czech teenager, finding the book hidden in his parents' bookshelves, and racing eagerly through it, fascinated not by the strangeness but by the familiarity of it. I imagine him reading (page 108 in the Czech edition) this passage:

"Okamzik stala, divala se na nej, a pak namhatala zip kombinezy. Bylo to skoro jako v jeho snu. Skoro tak rychle, jak si to predstavoval, strhala ze seby saty a odhodila je velkolepym gestem, jako by rusila cela civilizace."

And I can imagine him saying to himself: "The sex is a little tame, but the man sure understands politics."