

the “common wages” of lovers. He does not write for proud men, nor for those who think his art is a commodity, nor for those who praise his craft or art, but for those who are experientially affected by what he has to say, who understand why he is “sullen” and who respond to the situation by taking the griefs of the *ages* into their arms and loving *them*, thereby spending the “common wages” not on a work of art for the art’s sake but on the acts of love which Thomas’s art commends. It seems to me that Kafka is saying essentially the same thing about the writer’s concern for sufficient love among people and that he uses the narrator in “A Hunger Artist” to make essentially the same point he had made much earlier in his career in a letter to Oskar Pollack: “What we need are books that affect us like some really grievous misfortune, like the death of one whom we loved more than ourselves, as if we were banished to distant forests, away from everybody, like a suicide; a book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us. That is what I believe.”<sup>3</sup> Only readers can provide the food that would satisfy the hunger artist, and that food is found in a selfless commitment to the human agony of the world—a total immersion and not merely a spectatorial adventure.

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<sup>3</sup>*I Am a Memory Come Alive: Autobiographical Writings by Franz Kafka*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer and trans. Gerald Onn (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 7.

## “The Village Blacksmith” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Satire almost always involves characters with symbolic names. George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* conforms to this tradition in satire. The Irish name of O’Brien, the Inner Party member, implies the breakdown of the traditional English class system; and the Jewish name of Goldstein, the officially despised counterrevolutionary, recalls the historical role of the Jew as political scapegoat. The name of Julia, with whom the protagonist Winston Smith has an adulterous affair, may evoke history’s most notorious Julia—the daughter of Augustus who, like Orwell’s Julia, was exiled and eventually killed for violating the puritanical sexual laws of a dictatorial state. The names of Winston Smith and his neighbor Parsons are also symbolic, and in a way that heightens and helps define the novel’s historical irony. Their names evoke figures of a pre-modern, rustic society celebrated in Longfellow’s poem “The Village Blacksmith,” the opening of which is parodied in a short song heard twice over the telecreens at the Chestnut Tree Café: “Under the spreading chestnut tree / I sold you and you sold me.”<sup>1</sup> Orwell’s Smith and Parsons have their historic and literary counterparts in the blacksmith and the parson of Longfellow’s poem.

“The Village Blacksmith”<sup>2</sup> is written in praise of the virtuous, hard-working blacksmith at the center of a humane, communal life. As described by

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<sup>1</sup>*Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 236, cf. p. 65. Subsequent page references to this edition appear hereafter in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup>See *Favorite Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1947), pp. 372-73.

Longfellow, he seems the secular counterpart of the poem's parson. These two men, and the smith's relationship with his wife and with children, all seem to be reflected ironically in Orwell's novel.

In contrast to the rural village life of the past, the personal and social life of Orwell's fictional society—in London, chief city of Airstrip One in Oceania—is debased and dehumanized. The state deprives men of basic human rights, one of which is freedom of religion.

In 1984 no parsons "pray and preach" as in the rural village of an earlier era; all churches have "been put to other uses" (p. 82)—like St Martin's-in-the-Fields, which is now a military museum. But Parsons survives as a reminder of his absent namesakes.<sup>3</sup> In fact, he resembles a familiar sort of parson, keen and cheery, boy-scoutish, primarily a community organizer. Parsons collects subscriptions and orchestrates preparations for the annual liturgy of Hate Week, the antithesis of Holy Week. Despite his dedication to the state, Parsons is imprisoned after being betrayed by his children for a thoughtcrime spoken while asleep, which he regrets and earnestly denounces with a "slightly sanctimonious expression" (p. 187). Like Parsons, Smith in the novel is, through his evocation of the village blacksmith, a reminder of loss, a sort of absence visible.<sup>4</sup>

The blacksmith works at a forge; Smith works, as he says, at "forgery" (p. 36). The labor of each man is essential to their different societies. The smith's work makes possible agrarian life because he fashions ploughshares, other farm implements, and tools for other craftsmen. Smith's job is to falsify information in old newspapers according to the ever-changing specifications of the Party. His alteration of history is an integral aspect of doublethink, which "lies at the very heart of Ingsoc," the ideology of Oceania (p. 171). Because of his occupation, therefore, Smith, like the blacksmith, works at the center of his society. Smith's employment is sometimes intellectually challenging, and would have more social status than the manual labor of his counterpart, but in contrast to the blacksmith's honest toil, Smith's work has no inherent value.

In contrast to village communality, furthermore, the world in which Winston Smith lives diminishes human companionship and private emotional life. The blacksmith fascinates "children coming home from school," sits among his sons, and rejoices at his daughter's singing. Smith has no children, but if he had, they would belong, like Parsons' children, to the Spies, and be eager to betray him. The blacksmith thinks lovingly of his dead wife; in a sense, death has not ended his marriage. But, because Ingsoc forbids marriage for love, Smith's wife—who is still alive, but from whom he has been estranged for eleven years—means nothing to him. Smith does love Julia, but in the end this relationship leaves him no endearing memories, because, through the psychological expertise of those who work in the Ministry of Love, he ceases loving her. At the end of the novel, Smith is even able to deny the fond memories of his mother, which have done much to humanize him as a character.

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<sup>3</sup>The name Parsons is, in some cases, a form of "Piers' son" or "Parr's son," Parr being a short form of Peter. But in other cases the name does refer to the figure of the parson, and originally designated someone who worked for a parson or lived at a parsonage. It would not have been assigned, as some etymologies suggest, to a parson's son, because, before the Reformation, such a child would have been a bastard.

<sup>4</sup>The surname Smith was given only to blacksmiths, as distinct from goldsmiths, silversmiths, arrowsmiths, bucklesmiths, etc. This is why there is no such surname as Blacksmith. Because the blacksmith or ironworker was the commonest type of metalworker in England, Smith is the most common surname in every English village and city.

After their arrest, Smith and Julia meet by chance and admit having betrayed one another during their imprisonment (p. 234). Their mutual betrayal is recalled by the lyrics sung over the telescreens at the Chestnut Tree Café: "I sold you and you sold me." But the words also recall a mutual betrayal of broad social dimensions which contrasts with the deeply felt personal loyalties that unify Longfellow's village society. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the state betrays its citizens: "I sold you"—this is obvious. But it is also true that "you sold me"; Smith betrays society, and not simply by violating the unwritten laws of Ingsoc. When he and Julia think they are joining a conspiracy against the Party, they declare themselves willing "to commit murder. . . . To commit acts of sabotage which may cause the death of hundreds of innocent people . . . to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases . . . to throw sulphuric acid in a child's face" (p. 140). Because in principle they betray the members of society, Smith and Julia are not morally superior to the Party they despise. O'Brien forces Smith to realize this (p. 217). If Oceania is less humane than the rural village of Longfellow's poem, Smith is himself less virtuous than the "honest" blacksmith, however simplistic and unthinking the latter's perseverance in what seems largely the Protestant work ethic. The moral ratio between society and the central figure is, therefore, maintained. The point of Orwell's moral deflation of his protagonist seems to be this: that the dehumanization of an entire society, such as that of Oceania, begins in an individual person's willingness to abandon morality in a pragmatic subordination of means to ends.

The spiritual difference between Orwell's Smith and Longfellow's blacksmith has its symbolic physical dimension. The blacksmith has an impressive physique, while Smith is ashamed of his physical appearance.<sup>5</sup> The contrast is more marked in the case of the old revolutionary Rutherford—Smith's predecessor in betrayal to whom the song "Under the spreading chestnut tree" is first sung at the Chestnut Tree Café. Rutherford was once the physical equal of the "mighty" blacksmith, whose muscles are "strong as iron bands" and whose hair is "crisp, and black, and long." Smith remembers Rutherford at the Chestnut Tree Café before the blaring telescreens: "He was a monstrous man, with a mane of greasy grey hair. . . . At one time he must have been immensely strong; now his great body was sagging, sloping, bulging, falling away in every direction. He seemed to be breaking up before one's eyes like a mountain crumbling" (p. 65). The blacksmith's modern counterparts are, by comparison, underdeveloped and degenerate; the physical contrast underlines the more important, moral deprivation.

Orwell's repeated, explicit evocation of Longfellow's poem is given implicit but thoroughgoing extension by the surnames of Smith and Parsons. The poem and the novel exist, therefore, in a figure-ground relationship in which the dehumanized fictional society of 1984 figures against rural village society and the virtues associated with it. Our immediate Western democratic life is neither the figure nor the ground of this satire, but exists somewhere in between.

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<sup>5</sup>See Smith's self depreciation on pp. 98 and 100.