Orwell's Waste Land

Eliot is a complex and often elusive poet and Orwell a polemicist, concerned to state his ideas as clearly and forcefully as possible; it is hard to think of two modern writers whose works seem less alike. Nor is there any evident correspondence in their personal beliefs: Eliot's famous statement that he was classicist, royalist, and anglo-catholic[1] in itself indicates how much they differ in politics and religion. Eliot does not appear to have had a high opinion of Orwell's writing and in fact he refused to publish *Animal Farm* because "the effect is simply one of negation"—in part a political judgement but also a literary one.[2] However, Orwell's opinion of Eliot's poetry, at least the earlier poetry of "glowing despair," was very high, and he includes Eliot among the three modern writers he "cares most about."[3] In the light of this, it is less surprising that he was influenced by Eliot's poetry and, in particular, that *The Waste Land* appears to have had a direct influence on *Nineteen Eighty-Four:* there are significant resemblances in theme, organization, and imagery. Orwell had absorbed Eliot's poetry so thoroughly that it is hard to say how far he was consciously responding to it, but *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems to be in part a reply to *The Waste Land,* in particular a reply to the hope in the supernatural that the poem tentatively espouses. Orwell's conclusion parallels Eliot's, but with very different implications.

The obvious similarity between the two works is that both describe a dismal and unchanging world in which the inhabitants have lost energy and sense of purpose. At the beginning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston turns from the telescreen only to find himself facing the towering Ministry of Truth, and this monument to falsehood prompts him to consider what the real truth is, what kind of society he lives in and why things have come to be as they are.

> He tried to squeeze out some childhood memory that should tell him whether London had always been quite like this. Were there always these vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses, their sides shored up with balks of timber, their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron, their crazy garden walls sagging in all directions? And the bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air and the willow-herb straggled over the heaps of rubble; and the places where the bombs had cleared a larger patch and there had sprung up sordid colonies of wooden dwellings like chicken houses?[4]

Like Tiresias, Winston looks for meaning in the "stony rubbish." He begins his diary on a "bright cold day in April" and later it is the "balminess of the April air" (p. 82) that tempts him to venture out into the London slums. Both he and Tiresias are stirred by spring to mix "memory and desire," to remember the past and desire

[1]Preface to *For Lancelot Andrews* (London: Faber, 1928).

[2]See Eliot's letter to Orwell (*Times,* 6 Jan. 1969). Eliot does praise *Animal Farm* as a "distinguished piece of writing" and it is arguable that his reasons for rejecting it were merely political. However, much of the praise can be discounted as propitiatory courtesy—he is, after all, refusing to publish Orwell's book—and Eliot seems to misunderstand the tenor of *Animal Farm.* He takes "the positive point of view" to be "generally Trotskyite," which presumably means that Snowball is to be regarded as the hero—certainly not Orwell's intention.

[3]*The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell,* ed. Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968) II, 24 & 239.

[4]George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt, 1949), p. 5.

something different from the present. Although entirely without supernatural insight, Winston resembles Tiresias in his ability to recall a totally different age. The days of his childhood, before Big Brother took control, are at least as different from the present as Elizabethan London is from early twentieth-century London.

One is continuously made aware of the past in both works. The references in *The Waste Land* are frequently ambiguous, but in general the past seems considerably better than the present. In "The Fire Sermon," the "sweet Thames" of Spenser and "inexplicable beauty" of the church of Magnus Martyr suggest order and liberality. Elizabeth and Leicester's dalliance may be sterile but, in the scene describing them, there is color, animation, and hope—especially in contrast with the modern Thames. Oars beat, bells peal, wind ripples the water, and this southwest wind is the usual source of rain. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there is no doubt about the status of the past; it provides the standards by which the world in 1984 is judged and found entirely wanting. The glass paperweight, "belonging to an age quite different from the present one" (p. 95), and the rhyme "Oranges and Lemons," which recalls "the bells of a lost London" (p. 99), suggest the beauty and vibrancy of life before Big Brother. But the past is most insistently present through Winston's childhood memories of his mother. At the beginning of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* all he can remember of his childhood is "a series of bright-lit tableaux occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible" (p. 5), which sounds rather like a first impression of *The Waste Land.* But the scenes from Winston's memories, which recur throughout the novel, do become coherent and intelligible. Most of them concern his mother. "He did not suppose, from what he could remember of her, that she had been an unusual woman, still less an intelligent one; and yet she had possessed a kind of nobility, a kind of purity, simply because the standards that she obeyed were private ones. Her feelings were her own, and could not be altered from outside" (p. 165). She represents the values of the past, and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* these are in direct contrast to the values of the present and are unequivocally positive.

At the conclusion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* one year has elapsed and spring is again anticipated; in *The Waste Land* the protagonist waits for the rainy season, the tropical equivalent of spring. The important difference is that in *The Waste Land* there is good hope that the rain will fall and the land become fertile, whereas the conclusion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is entirely pessimistic. Winston's final meeting with Julia is an ironic complement to their romance in the golden country, Orwell's equivalent of the Hyacinth garden. "It was in the Park, on a vile, biting day in March, when the earth was like iron and all the grass seemed dead and there was not a bud anywhere except a few crocuses which had pushed themselves up to be dismembered by the wind" (p. 293). Winston and Julia are like the crocuses, encouraged to blossom out by spring weather and then destroyed. The whole episode emphasizes the deceptiveness of the hopes roused the previous spring.

Many of the images in "What the Thunder Said" are echoed in the conclusion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* But whereas the former have both positive and negative connotations, the images in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are unambiguously negative. In *The Waste Land* the "third who always walks beside you" (1.359) may be an omen of death or Christ resurrected. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston learns that he and Julia have been watched from the beginning; the "third" who has always been present is a member of the Thought Police (p. 279). The "hooded hordes swarming over endless plains" (1.368) are paralleled in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by the vast armies of Oceania and her enemies. One is made aware of them in various ways, notably by the ubiquitous posters showing: "the monstrous figure of a Eurasian soldier, three or four metres high, striding forward with expressionless Mongolian face and enormous boots, a sub-machine gun pointed from his hip" (p. 150). However,

whereas the "hooded hordes" at least offer hope of change, the war Oceania's armies are engaged in is endless and, far from offering hope of changing the existing state of affairs, serves to perpetuate it. The jeering song from the telescreen in the Chestnut Cafe is, like the cock's crow in *The Waste Land,* a reminder of betrayal: "I sold you and you sold me" (p. 296). Unlike the cock's crow, the song does not also suggest the coming of dawn and banishment of evil spirits, except in emphasizing that Winston, and others who rebelled against Big Brother, have betrayed each other and will soon be vaporized; they are "like ghosts fading at cockcrow" (p. 297).

Like Tiresias Winston has shored fragments against his ruins, but the paperweight is smashed and the rhyme "Oranges and Lemons" has been supplied by the Thought Police. Tiresias's "London Bridge" and "Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie," a reference to the tradition of the troubadors, suggest at least that memories survive, that there is some continuity between the ages. But Winston is "outside history," "non-existent" (p. 273). Tiresias's other two fragments concern the purifying fires of purgatory and the question from *Pervigilium Veneris:* "Quando fiam uti chelidon?" Both offer hope; the refrain of *Pervigilium Veneris* is "Tomorrow he will love who never loved before," and this suggests that the inhabitants of the waste land may be capable of obeying the commands of the thunder. Winston cannot even hope for purgatory, only the torments of Room 101, and the novel's final answer to the question "When shall I be as the swallow?"—"When shall I find freedom and love?"—which has been asked throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as throughout *The Waste Land*—is of course "never."

At the opening of *The Waste Land* April is the cruellest month because it stirs men towards living and hoping again when, apparently, there is no hope. But by the end of the poem spring is not necessarily cruel for regeneration is possible. The waste land has lacked a God but there is hope in the search to rediscover him, to obey his will and thereby attain "the peace which passeth understanding." The conclusion of *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* however, reaffirms, savagely and finally, the theme that all hopes are delusive. The trumpet announcing victory in the last scene is, more certainly than the thunder in *The Waste Land,* the voice of God: for the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* indubitably has a God in its all-seeing and all-powerful ruler, Big Brother, and it is this very fact that eliminates all hope. In a bitter parody of the conclusion of *The Waste Land* Winston, unlike Hieronimo, becomes "sane." He capitulates to his God and thereby attains peace. "He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother."

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