

NEARING 1984

SINCE 1948, we have been living with the idea of 1984 — living with Newspeak and Big Brother and the promise of Eternal Bureaucracies. We have joked about the possibility of them Happening Here, and always truly identified them with what is Already Happening There, and never entirely agreed on what “here” and “there” mean. And we have secretly equated the onset of the terrible bureaucracies with the actual year: if we survive 1984, we tell ourselves, and still don’t feel threatened — if Big Brother *isn’t* watching us and we still have access to history books and newspapers — then we’re home free, untouched by events, as in a child’s game.

But Orwell was writing about 1948, of course, and what could follow on from postwar constructions of order. It was no game he ritualized, but the ruthless machinations of politics, religion, industry, all wearing the disguise of benevolence. Why wear such a disguise? Because people — those ordinary individuals who make up the democratic mass — would like to believe the best of others, and at the same time would like to be left to lead their separate lives as comfortably as possible, would like not to be disturbed by ideas, would like to believe that Authorities are looking after their best interests. But if such “authorities” are looking after their own best interests first — if a ruthless amorality guides the governors and a moral apathy invades the governed — the “benevolence” is false and government guarantees of freedom are subverted. Paradoxically it is not chaos that results, but order, false order. In *Gringo*, his recent South American travel journal, the Canadian journalist Dennis Gruending writes of his own political education in Chile: eager to uncover tales of rebellion and resistance, he instead found people complacent about dictatorship — complacent because it supplied the appearance of order, and because the threat of uncertainty was apparently more frightening to them than the restriction of their freedoms: for them, the form the order took, and the reasons that allowed a restrictive order to take power in the first place, were of less moment than the illusion of security they currently enjoyed. And how is this illusion projected? Through systems of

privilege and punishment, both covert and observable, and through language. As Orwell knew, a rhetoric of benevolence, repeated often enough, will be accepted, because the terms of the rhetoric will become stock phrases in peoples' vocabulary: the words will be *used*, and words in use carry the cachet of authority, as though they had real meaning. (What words have the politics of the last forty years custom-framed? "imperialist," "liberated," "law-and-order," "flexibility," "restraint." "Game plan" has come to mean *military strategy*, as though war were child's play and would leave us untouched.)

What lessons are there to learn from such matters — "Here" — in Canada, where we profess our belief in "peace, order, and good government"? One is cautionary: to remember that this trio is a *unit*, that "order" without "*good government*" may not be admirable, that "*bad government*" can emerge here as well as elsewhere and impose an order that serves itself and its friends more than it protects peace and the people. A different lesson is Machiavellian: to learn that there is power in rhetoric, and that repetitive advertising can sell people and beliefs as well as it can market products. A third is advisory: how to persist in maintaining freedoms — by learning to resist the rhetoric as well as to battle the apathy. Freedoms are not lost because others take us over; freedoms are lost when we passively give them up. And we give them up the moment we lose our facility with language, our desire to know more, our willingness to question, challenge, doubt. We give them up when we lose our language and our history to the *news-makers*, the *news-shapers*, the publicists, and the priests of fad. And we resist *through language*: by valuing literacy and asserting the importance of education. It is because literacy is such a force in society that usurpers of power try always to control the young; by limiting people's desire or ability to challenge what they have been told, they diminish the threat to their own hold on power. Their power depends upon others' passivity, and in order to defuse any articulate opposition to their own rhetoric, they make scapegoats of anyone who *can* use words effectively — writers, teachers — by attempting to ridicule the importance of the arts and to imply that artists and intellectuals are merely children at play.

Language, we must remember, is an inheritance and a freedom — it should give life to our society, not restrict it. (Our official bilingualism should open opportunities for us in the world at large, not be received as a Protestant punishment.) In this context it is interesting to read two fine recent works on the range of the English language alone: Robert Claiborne's *Our Marvelous Native Tongue* (Times Books) and Richard Bailey and Manfred Görlach's *English as a World Language* (Univ. of Michigan Press). Bailey and Görlach have brought together fourteen parallel essays on the cultural and formal variations that characterize English in Great Britain, the Commonwealth, and the United States; they analyze sound systems, vocabulary differences, structural and grammatical features of the language in the separate societies that use English, and they com-

ment on the history and social implications of English usage as well. Claiborne writes a more personal book, about his own love affair with the language and American society, and through both of these with the cultural inheritance he derives from England. Bailey and Görlach emphasize multiplicity and variation and the richness that variation creates; Claiborne emphasizes tradition and the richness of a linear descent. The contributions to *English as a World Language* make clear how phonetic and structural variations record peoples' separate histories — the diversity of their experience and attitudes — and show how language is therefore a sensitive medium for communicating the subtleties of cultural values. Claiborne is at his most fascinating in tracing the root meanings of words, the hidden metaphors and attitudinal assumptions that often rest within the current structures of the words we use. But no subject could illustrate more clearly the difference in authorial expectation that marks the two books than the subject of language in Canada. Claiborne, the enthusiast for a single tradition, writes that the

English spoken by most Canadians differs little from General American, apart from one fairly widespread trait: the diphthong in words like “out” and “about” shifts toward /oo/, yielding something like Scots “oot” and “about”. . . . Otherwise . . . Canada is too close to the United States . . . to be more than an extension of its large neighbor, linguistically speaking — always, of course, excepting Quebec, most of whose inhabitants continue to speak their own rather archaic dialect of French.

Claiborne, that is, speaks of *dialect*, of variation from a presumed norm that is held in the command of a central authority. Bailey, who writes the excellent chapter on Canada in the other book, speaks of a cultural difference in *language*:

From the earliest times, the English language in Canada has taken a distinctively Canadian form, a combination of mutually intelligible but differing regional and social dialects. . . . Today, regional differences still exist in the English of Canadians, but they have become more alike in their speech and, at the same time, more and more distinct from the other Englishes of Great Britain and North America. . . .

What is distinctly Canadian about Canadian English is not its unique linguistic features (of which there are a handful) but its combination of tendencies that are uniquely distributed.

No one else, that is, talks like us, *pace* Mr. Claiborne. That may not be a sufficient buttress against national disintegration, but it should remind us that we *can* be comfortable with our speech because our speech still gives us the freedom to be who we are.

Interestingly, it is Claiborne who reminds us directly that the freedoms that speech gives us are repeatedly under pressure; he offers government secrecy, “para-government” rhetoric, and irresponsible censorship as the three current

threats, and he does not idly promise that language and freedom will survive them. A knowledge of history is the defence he seems by implication to champion; one could wish him as informed on his facts as Bailey is, and as appreciative of cultural differences. But there remains a political urgency about the threat he feels, the need he wants satisfied. Imposed systems of order can disenfranchise us, more easily than we like to think, and in 1984, before, or after. But if we value our independence enough, we will continue to value our differences. We will reject systems that rule by fear, and retain control over the words we use. By keeping our language alive, we can retain some controls over opportunity, over the history we have inherited and made, and over the memories that are our own to possess. We can perhaps in the process even give ourselves a little room in which to think, in which to create and, as we used to do as children, also to play.

W.N.

PROLOGUE

Doug Fetherling

When the heart skips a beat
the lights begin to falter in a show
of solidarity

This is not the apocalypse, it is
not even morning
but only a reminder
of what's obvious and basic:

We have forgotten nature so
nature, perhaps, has abandoned us

If this is the forest then we
must be the animals