

## Susanne Woods

### IS FREEDOM SLAVERY?

My mother, born in the South, was fond of the expression “free, white and twenty-one.” She said it with flair and conviction whenever she wanted to do something mildly adventurous, and for her it signified a blameless privilege. Martin Luther King and the 1960s taught me to hear it differently, with a kind of embarrassed horror at family complicity in America’s terrible racist history. Later I learned to add a more personal caveat: no woman, black or white, was as free as my mother liked to pretend. But whether it was the experience of the civil rights movement of the 60s or the women’s movement of the 70s, I have always been fascinated with the idea of freedom.

Freedom is the American religion. Like most religions it has its sects and schisms, its points of contact with different belief systems, its devoted adherents and lip service hypocrites. It also has its sacred texts, from the *Magna Carta* to Milton’s *Areopagitica* to the *Declaration of Independence*. One of the more recent sacred texts is George Orwell’s *1984*, published fifty years ago this year.

*1984*’s middle-class author was an unlikely prophet of international liberty. Born Eric Blair in India, destined for British Imperial service, he attended Eton on a scholarship and spent time as a guardian of the empire in Burma. He took his patriotic pseudonym from the patron saint of England and a river near the ancient city of Colchester. Yet he deplored England’s xenophobia, fought in the Spanish Civil War, argued for a peaceful release of India from British rule, and advocated a less isolated, more European England. His internationalism barely extended to America, whose soldiers he saw as an occupying army, barbaric and largely repellent though necessary during the latter days of World War II (see his wartime columns for the *London Tribune*, such as the one for 17 December 1943). In *1984* London is the “chief city” of “Airstrip One,” a principal part of the North American-European union Orwell calls Oceania, but its pitiful and dimly hedonistic proletarian economy is negotiated with dollars. Whatever Orwell’s attitude toward American soldiers, he admired our founding rhetoric and in turn *1984* remains a staple of our high schools and colleges, a cautionary nightmare that transcends the circum-

stances of its birth as a reaction against both Nazi fascism and Stalinist communism. Orwell's totalitarian state, dedicated to power for its own sake, systematically destroys history and logic. "Doublethink" replaces them, a willingness to contort reality and promote the great "Ingsoc" paradoxes that appear in "elegant lettering" across the soaring facade of the Ministry of Truth: "War is Peace," "Ignorance is Strength," and, the most mystifying, "Freedom is Slavery" (7).

Orwell's protagonist, Winston Smith, reads the explanation for the first two of these party slogans in chapters one and three of "Emmanuel Goldstein's" supposedly subversive book, *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*. We get no direct explanation for "Freedom is Slavery," probably because freedom is the central desire and danger that propels Winston to his pathetic conclusion. Slavery is the implicit condition of the middle class, the outer party members whose lives are wholly owned by the inner party oligarchs; it is also, on a lower level of party oversight, the condition of the large working class, the "proles," whose work the party owns and whose culture the party defines and directs.

If the third slogan were reversed, "Slavery is Freedom," its import would be clear enough from the course of the novel. Julia, Winston's competent and experienced lover, knows exactly how to keep the thought police at bay. She participates with feigned eagerness in the activities of the Junior Anti-Sex League, appears to break none of the major unwritten codes (there are no written ones), and is left largely alone to pursue her sexual adventures. Her apparent acquiescence "paid, she said; it was camouflage. If you kept the small rules you could break the big ones" (107). But which are small, and which are big? As Winston discovers to his dismay, her mind willingly accepts the erasure of history, to him a very big issue. To Julia it doesn't matter who Oceania is supposed to be fighting. She may "dimly recall that at one time Eastasia and not Eurasia had been the enemy, but the issue still struck her as unimportant. 'Who cares,' she said impatiently, 'It's always one bloody war after another, and one knows the news is all lies anyway'" (128). When Winston accuses her of being "only a rebel from the waist downwards," her response is to find this "brilliantly witty" and to fling "her arms around him in delight" (129).

If slavery, or at least the appearance of slavery, is freedom, Julia's mistake is to pursue Winston Smith, who cares about the past and who entices her to

join him in the dangerous romantic adventure of old-fashioned, passionate pairing. But the phrase in *1984* is “Freedom is Slavery,” a difficulty worth exploring. Orwell crafted a dystopian vision whose language continues to resonate across the Atlantic in a land where legal slavery is a more recent memory and lurking presence, like land mines buried at various depths across the scarred cultural landscape. The tenets and hypocrisies of America’s religion of freedom, fifty years after Orwell challenged its great English tradition, make the semantic difficulties of *1984* a good occasion for meditation.

“Freedom” in Western culture has from ancient times served to define the position of the citizen as distinct from the slave. The English term, like the Greek *eleutheria* and the Latin *libertas*, quickly acquired meanings and connotations that signaled behavior available or appropriate to the free person as opposed to the slave. So Chaucer’s Franklin asks, at the end of his Canterbury tale, which of his characters was “moost free”: the noble husband Arveragus who permitted his wife, Dorigen, to keep an adulterous assignation rather than go back on her word, the squire and suitor Aurelius, who released Dorigen from that obligation, or the poor scholarly clerk who released Aurelius from the debt he incurred for the clerk’s magic which in turn obligated Dorigen to Aurelius. Traditionally the one most free would be Arveragus, who possesses the highest social position and therefore the most power and greatest range of choices. But the poor scholarly clerk who can ill afford to forgive a debt is arguably more free than either Arveragus or Aurelius. Generosity and lack of self interest are the marks of true nobility and true freedom. (Dorigen’s freedom is not even an issue; her only honorable options are to submit to her husband’s will or commit suicide.)

In its broadest sense, “freedom” as it applied to individuals has historically meant the citizen’s freedom of movement and ability to make knowledgeable decisions, as opposed to the slave’s servility and confinement to his master’s land. From early in English-speaking culture freedom appears as both a proud cultural self-definition and a stubborn blindness. Feudal villeinage, or serfdom, disappeared in practice long before a court case during the reign of James I declared the last villein free, a man named Pigge. English common law, with its supposed protection from tyrannous authority, was a cultural pride at least two centuries before American colonists challenged its currency in the 1700s. But cultural pride was also cultural self-delusion. Women were not free, a sad fact acknowledged as early as 1621 in *The Laws Resolution of*

*Women's Rights*. Poor people were considerably less free than rich people, as the amazing generosity Chaucer gave his clerk in the fourteenth century indirectly attested and the property test for suffrage until well into the nineteenth century directly confirmed. Slaves, by definition, were neither free nor were they English, though slavery never had the cultural and economic hold on England that it developed in America. Yet if freedom in Tudor, Stuart and Hanoverian England did not extend equally to all residents, the English believed in their particularity as a free people. By Milton's time, theories of free will from St. Augustine through Erasmus registered freedom as knowledgeable choice, which the English assumed they possessed.

Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) was among the first English works to argue openly for the free circulation of ideas even though not all choice would be knowledgeable. Milton consistently hedged his idea of freedom, distinguishing true "liberty" from a less restrained "license." Nonetheless, his attack on prior censorship is generally taken to be an early beacon toward a modern free press—though, as Orwell was fond of noting, control of the media by a few wealthy people makes reliance on a free press part of the English self-delusion ("it is a fact that the much-boasted freedom of the British press is theoretical rather than actual," *The English People*). In *Areopagitica*, Milton saw no problem in burning wicked books once they were published and exposed. As it happened, he himself was to serve as a censor in Cromwell's government. The effect of Milton's essay, however, was eventually to provide rhetorical fuel for the movement to extend free speech past the confines of parliament and into the rights of ordinary citizens, a movement that reached incendiary levels during the French and American revolutions.

By the mid-nineteenth century the English legacy of freedom had come to mean the right of all citizens to move freely and speak freely, without being tied to the land or arbitrarily arrested, and all men of a certain age to be voting citizens, with minimal regard to their wealth. The American Bill of Rights codified many of the written and unwritten features of English common law, transferring to this side of the Atlantic much of freedom's power along with much of its self-congratulatory delusion. In the pretentious bombast and commercial piety of July Fourth celebrations we forget that the tragedy and shame of America's legacy of freedom was and remains its reluctance to let go of slavery. In many of these United States the wealth that allowed freedom in the pre-Chaucerian sense was built on the backs and brains of African slaves.

Real slavery—the ownership of human beings as if they were cattle—was not very long ago in American history. Those of us over fifty have grown up while the last African Americans born into slavery slowly died off, often with stories still to tell before the final dark. We have watched Civil War veterans fall from twelve to none, and now the youngest Confederate brides are the oldest widows, one or two remaining to tell us that their aged husbands did not like to talk about the war. Above all, the attitudes and assumptions that fed and followed slavery are alive and viciously propagating, in newspaper stories focusing on a black underclass as the “real” African Americans, on websites devoted to the chalk-headed nonsense of white supremacy, and, alas, even in anonymous graffiti written on the walls of college dormitories.

Slavery was and remains a potent signifier of American freedom. As Orlando Patterson has argued, “we the politically free body of men, always, it would seem, tragically require the *them* who do not belong . . . who demarcate what *we* are, the domestic enemy who defines whom *we* love” (*Freedom*, 405; emphasis Patterson’s). With the emancipation and then suffrage of male former slaves, otherness that defined community bifurcated into resentment of African-American freedom on the one hand and resistance to female emancipation on the other. Recently these definitions of the other have been joined by a visible active hatred of gender difference and variant sexualities. Black men and homosexuals are subject to beatings and murder, women of all colors and sexual orientation are subject to rape. This has not changed since slavery was abolished, though the laws are in place to deny it and every once in awhile some particularly ugly murder or rape will generate a flurry of outrage.

In 1903 one of this century’s greatest intellectuals, W.E.B. DuBois, argued that the way to put slavery into America’s past and make freedom general was to assure all Americans three things: the right to vote, “civic equality,” and “the education of youth according to ability” (*Souls of Black Folk*, 38). Born free in Massachusetts but a scholar of slavery and astute observer of its aftermath in the South, he speaks the language of freedom with eloquent passion: “The power of the ballot we need in sheer self-defense—else what shall save us from a second slavery? Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek—the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together. . . .” (8). Not until 1964 was the right of Black

people to vote legally assured in the South, over sixty years after DuBois's plea and almost a hundred years after the fifteenth amendment to the constitution. But DuBois had died the year before, in 1963, a citizen of Ghana, effectively harassed out of the country he loved by the McCarthy era purges. Big Brother would have been proud.

Perhaps the fate of DuBois offers one explanation for what Orwell's tyrannical state means by "Freedom is Slavery." Free, Black, and twenty-one, DuBois bought into the tradition of freedom as it descended from Chaucer and Milton and Jefferson and Lincoln. But for him to speak of freedom and culture, and to seek to exercise equally the freedoms of the ballot box and of speech and print that the American constitution seemed to promise, made him visible. The more visible he became, the more he became a target for those who had too long defined their own freedom in terms of others' slavery. Like Winston Smith, he became a danger, a bad example, too free. His every word was monitored, scrutinized, and eventually shackled. His freedom became his slavery.

Smith's search for freedom and concomitant descent into further slavery begins with a sheet of paper. He is fatally attracted to an object from the past, a blank diary with inviting cream-colored pages, and with it he begins to formulate the past, express the present, and address the future. Time drives him. As he feels his body decay, his memory grabs onto history both personal and communal. When Julia's ahistorical love of sex energizes Smith's sense of the immediate, the book posits a Keatsian tension between present passion and permanent memory, between life and art. With every transgressive move toward exercising freedom—the purchase of a diary, a meeting in the country, the renting of a secret room, the approach to O'Brien—Winston becomes more acutely aware of his mortality and more urgent in his need to reclaim personal and collective memory. The more freely he acts, the more slavishly he pursues freedom, even in the face of death.

This perhaps explains the curious asymmetry of the three mottoes in the world of *1984*. Ignorance and war, historically negative, evolve into strength and peace. Since ignorance requires less crimestop ("the faculty of stopping short, as if by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought") than knowledge, its "protective stupidity" is strength both to the orthodox person who pursues it and the power structure it is meant to enforce (174-75). Since war against an external enemy unites the internal populace and stabilizes the

interactions of the three global powers, it achieves a Hobbesian stasis something like peace.

Freedom's history of positive connotations offers a different problem and the heart of Orwell's story. The goodthinker, or naturally orthodox person, shuns freedom, accepting instinctively and emotionally every word and world the Party constructs. Like religious fundamentalists who believe the Bible was written in English and literally true according to a current group definition of literal and truth, goodthinkers treat each new pronouncement of the Party's constantly changing story as timeless gospel. Predestination within a vast and powerful empire is enough. Free will, free movement, knowledge, reason, choice (Milton: "reason is but choosing"), all the elements of freedom, are addictive and dangerous.

Winston Smith's slavery to freedom leads inevitably to Room 101 in the Ministry of Love, as Winston and O'Brien both know it will. It is not enough for Winston to will obedience, to learn through O'Brien's torturous nurture that he does not have the freedom to say two plus two equals four if the party says it is five. He must be exposed to what he fears beyond death, breaking the last hold of his own emotional freedom, his love for Julia, and turning him into a condemned, sentimental drunk who, at last, loves Big Brother (206, 230-45).

Applying Ingsoc doublethink to Isaiah Berlin's "Two Kinds of Freedom," Winston is finally free *from* his slavery to freedom, and free *to* love Big Brother. Perhaps most terrifying about *1984* is its illustration, however exaggerated, of the ways in which our desperation to escape our fears and find affirmation in group identity is at war with the traditional definition of freedom as knowledgeable choice. Reason requires information, information requires a free press, a free press requires an indulgent power structure and a common belief in ascertainable fact. Winston yearns for a stable history, a foundation of fact, and risks everything to record one true life. Orwell, who when he wrote the book was already sick with the lung cancer that would kill him two years later, confessed that his vision might have been less bleak had he felt better. It seems to me that its very bleakness redeems the book from its didactic prose and occasional brush with sentimental nostalgia. Aldous Huxley was confident (in *Brave New World Revisited*) that his soma-laden world was closer to a real future than Orwell's *1984*, and he was probably right but beside the point. *1984* remains the stronger wake-up call and its central enigma, "Freedom is

Slavery,” moves in elusive epicycles around the orbit of what we call “the free world.”

Two news stories dominated the year’s events fifty years after Orwell’s cautionary tale. In the Kosovo crisis, Oceania in the form of NATO bombed a small portion of Eurasia on behalf of an even smaller segment of Eastasia, if the Middle Eastern heritage of the Kosovo Albanians can bear that weight. At the same time, a series of school shootings, culminating in Littleton, Colorado, challenged second-amendment fundamentalism. Considerable punditry and editorial handwringing saturated the American press over both of these topics. Each in a different way illustrates how freedom can become slavery to freedom, and how difficult it is to make knowledgeable choices.

The school shootings present the easier case. While multiple and various factors contribute to the aggression and despair that leads children to violence, easy access to guns is a major and preventable efficient cause. The NRA and its minions sit belligerently on the second amendment to the constitution, which says, in full, “a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” We forget history while constitutional lawyers debate what the second part means and survivalists enslave themselves behind barbed wire compounds in a misunderstanding of the first. There was a time in Anglo-American culture when only nobility and landed gentry could bear arms, their heraldic signs legitimizing them and the soldiers they sponsored, and so a wider democracy extended that right in the interests of a more democratic militia. Even so, it takes a person with gunpowder for brains to think that “a well regulated Militia” requires a system that allows citizens to prey upon each other, or that it forbids intelligent regulations on selling and handling firearms. In 1999 Big Brother had Charleton Heston’s face, assuring us that freedom is slavery to the gun lobby.

If the gun control debate has paid too little attention to history, the crisis in Kosovo is dense with histories ancient and modern. No outside force can handle ancient tribal feuds, particularly when a brutal cynic like Slobodan Milosovic has control of a substantial war machine. He is a perfect Orwellian figure, by all accounts: a former communist functionary who used ethnic hatred to get and maintain power and whose first act when he felt threatened was to abolish a free press. If the fifteenth century created the Balkans and paved the way for a Milosovic, the twentieth century has turned them into a



jittery symbol of Europe's explosiveness. Memories of Archduke Ferdinand and then Nazi atrocities provoked NATO to intervene in what most Yugoslavs thought was an internal problem: conflict between Serbs and ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo. Memories of Vietnam made the United States reluctant to commit ground troops to the intervention. Instead, Yugoslavia endured eighty days of bombing, mostly military targets as far as we know, but also the occasional hospital, housing tract, and Kosovar refugee. The bombing also produced one of the century's best pieces of grim irony since Vietnam: the CIA misplaced a military target and got NATO bombs to pinpoint the Chinese embassy in Belgrade instead. So much for central intelligence.

At the same time Orwell was writing *1984*, the new United Nations was drafting its "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." It passed despite hesitations from the Soviet Union, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, and several other states whose cultures varied from the Anglo-American traditions the document embodied. According to the *United Nations Yearbook* for 1948-49, "The representative from Yugoslavia expressed the fear that, through lack of real substance, the Declaration might be forgotten even before the ink of the signatures affixed to the document had dried. For that reason, he urged the members of the Third Committee 'to exert every possible effort to draw up a text which would fulfil the legitimate aspirations of the people'" (529). The Kosovo crisis brings to mind Article 9 (among others): "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile." I wonder how the Yugoslav representative would describe "the legitimate aspirations of the people" in the face of mass acts of "ethnic cleansing," in Kosovo? Yet it was not, finally, the United Nations who stepped in the Yugoslav mire, but NATO.

Milosovic is a Hague-certified war criminal, his policy of ethnic cleansing just a step short of genocide. What was one to do? The truth is, there was no easy answer, and any course of action would be in some degree wrong. I once took a year-long course in international relations at UCLA from William Gerberding, who went on to lead the University of Washington for nearly three decades. I don't recall what examples were in front of us, but I will never forget Gerberding's conclusion: "some means justify some ends." Freedom's perfect dilemma is *which* means justify *which* ends. Knowledge is never complete. History leads and misleads. Assuming its best intentions, the NATO effort still suggests slavery to a manipulable idea of freedom, one that often enough confuses the right to live in peace with the right to build shop-

ping malls. For the record, I have no idea whether fear of a larger European war or support for the ideals of the UN Declaration of Human Rights justified bombing Yugoslavia. I do know that war is not peace and ignorance is not strength, and that conflicting lessons from history often signify difficult decisions.

Is freedom slavery? Not exactly, but neither is it the self-willed impulsiveness that teenagers most often call freedom, nor the super-individualistic dogmatism of the anti-tax brigade, nor the militaristic imperialism that wraps itself in cultural self-righteousness. As John Milton and John Stuart Mill and George Orwell and Toni Morrison and the whole line of Anglo-American discourse on freedom emphasizes, freedom begins with attention to language. In his Appendix to *1984*, "The Principles of Newspeak," Orwell explains that "it would have been quite impossible to render [the preface to the Declaration of Independence] into Newspeak while keeping the sense of the original. The nearest one could come to doing so would be to swallow the whole passage up in the single word *crimethink*" (256). But forming that word would only force Winston Smith, and ourselves, to tease it apart again.

Though Orwell did not write elegantly nor analyze character with any particular brilliance, his passion for meaningful language remains compelling. Long before the sometimes fanciful games of deconstruction, he pushed attention to language, demanding that we notice disjunction and disorders between signifier and signified. His invitation to discover the missing connections within "freedomslavery" is nothing less than an invitation to make knowledgeable choices, to accept our own agency, to exercise our freedom.