Spies in Nineteen Eighty-Four
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Notes on Contemporary Literature. 42.4 (Sept. 2012): From Literature Resource Center.
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Full Text:

In Nineteen Eighty-Four there are three kinds of spies--government surveillants, Thought Police and domestic informers--all based on contemporary conditions in Stalin's Soviet Union. The Telescreen, a reverse television that watches people instead of people watching it, cannot be turned off except by Inner Party leaders like O'Brien. Thoughtcrime cannot be concealed forever, and in the eyes of the Party there is no distinction between evil thoughts and actual deeds. Though Winston Smith writes in his secret notebook, out of sight in a hidden alcove, the delicate Telescreen can pick up his heartbeat and read the telltale expression of his Facecrime. Orwell writes that "The smallest thing could give you away. A nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself" (Nineteen Eighty-Four, NY: Harcourt, 1949, 62).

Orwell's Telescreen is directly related to methods the state employed to spy on citizens in Russia. As Robert Conquest writes in Stalin: Breaker of Nations (NY: Viking, 1991, 199), "When no overt expression whatever of disloyalty is possible, and opposition is confined to internal thoughts, these thoughts can only be observed in deeply concealed facial expressions, or tones of voice. And the intenser the terror, the more tenuous the signs become." Though Orwell connects intrusive surveillance to totalitarian regimes, omnipresent cameras are now generally (if grudgingly) accepted by society throughout the Western world and used to record driving offences, street crime and terrorist activities.

Winston and Julia hire a room for their secret sexual encounters above the nostalgic junk shop of the apparently kind Mr. Charrington, whose name combines Charing Cross, a terminus and thoroughfare in central London, and Islington, where Orwell was living when he began the novel. But Charrington, a member of the Thought Police, shatters their sense of security and sexual idyll, and betrays them to the authorities. The police arrest and torture Winston, forcing him to betray Julia and to feel genuine if abject love for the oppressor he'd feared and hated, Big Brother.

The young children of Parsons, Winston's neighbor in the crumbling Victory Mansions, are trained in the "Spies" to terrify their parents. Orwell writes that "hardly a week passed in which the Times did not carry a paragraph describing how some eavesdropping little sneak--'child hero' was the phrase generally used--had overheard some compromising remark and denounced his parents to the Thought Police" (25-26). Parsons proudly tells Winston that his children show the right spirit: "Mischievous little beggars they are, both of them, but talk about keenness! All they think about is the Spies." He's pleased that his son has denounced a man, who wore "a funny kind of shoes," as an enemy agent (57-58).

When they meet in prison, Winston asks Parsons who denounced him. "'It was my little daughter,' said Parsons with a sort of doleful pride. 'She listened at the keyhole. Heard what I was saying, and nipped off to the patrols the very next day. Pretty smart for a nipper of seven, eh? I don't bear her any grudge for it. In fact I'm proud of her. It shows I brought her up in the right spirit, anyway' " (237). Unconcerned that he's the victim and indifferent to the punishment he will suffer, Parsons feels his children have been well trained to protect society against dangerous subversives--like himself. His thoroughly indoctrinated daughter demonstrates loyalty to Party rather than to parents, and sees the betrayal of her father as an early opportunity to establish her political credentials and advance toward a position of power. Alex De Jonge quotes Isaak Babel's remark that the constant threat of domestic informers forced men to "talk only at night, to one's wife, with a blanket pulled over the head" (Stalin, NY: Morrow, 1986, 272).

Robert Conquest gives some well-known and widely praised examples of Soviet children denouncing their parents. When Stalin's brother-in-law and his wife were arrested, "their eight-year-old son shouted at them as they were carried off, 'You are enemies of the people, I disavow you!' " (292). In the 1928 trial of veteran engineers accused of sabotage in the Kazakhstan city of Shakhty, "the twelve-year-old son of one of the accused featured among those who demanded the death penalty" (153).

Orwell, well informed about tyrannical life in the Soviet Union, probably based Parsons' children on the most celebrated domestic informer. During the collectivization of agriculture, Pavlik Morozov, a young Communist Pioneer, denounced his father for hoarding grain. "The father was shot, and on 3 Sept 1932, a group of peasants in turn killed the son, at the age of fourteen. All the killers were themselves executed, and young Morosov became a great hero of the Komsomol." A Palace of Culture in Moscow was named after the hero and martyr, and as late as the Khrushchev era "the Soviet press celebrated the 'sacred and dear' Pavlik Morosov" (The Great Terror, NY: Oxford, 1990, 465-466). Conquest adds that "after Morosov, a whole cycle of delators of mothers and fathers was celebrated in the Soviet Press, and entered in the Pioneer 'Book of Honour.'"

The recurrent theme of denunciation and public exposure "is central to the idea of the Stalinist state" (Stalin, 167). Parsons' children in Nineteen Eighty-Four, hypnotized by the power of mass ideology, are both accomplices and beneficiaries of the totalitarian regime. Indoctrinated to intensify Big Brother's fear and oppression, they are used by the state to intimidate people and maintain absolute power.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Meyers, Jeffrey. "Spies in Nineteen Eighty-Four." Notes on Contemporary Literature, vol. 42, no. 4, 2012. Literature Resource Center, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&u=viva_gmu&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA367642315&it=r&asid=a91c508e38499e997da96bb901cb6bd3. Accessed 7 Nov. 2016.

Gale Document Number: GALEIA367642315