Jesse Matz, “Regarding the Real World: Politics” in *The Modern Novel* (2004)- Chap. 5.

Did the novel’s new dispersals and dissolutions make it impossible for the novel to deal responsibly with social and political problems? Some people thought so – George Orwell, for example, who noted in 1940 that “in ‘cultured’ circles art-for-art’s-saking extended practically to worship of the meaningless. Literature was supposed to consist solely in the manipulation of words. To judge a book by its subject matter was the unforgivable sin.” Had the modern novel become so concerned with art that it had become “meaningless” to the wider world? (p.78.)

[...]

Orwell had always been something of a critic of the aesthetic bias of the modern novel. To him, extreme experiments had always seemed precious: detachment from reality, radical skepticism, and playing around with language looked to him fairly self-indulgent. Moreover, such tendencies seemed to him not idealistic, but just a privilege of wealth. Wondering about the causes of the modern attitude, Orwell wrote: “Was it not, after all, because these people were writing in an exceptionally comfortable epoch? It is in just such times that ‘cosmic despair’ can flourish. People with empty bellies never despair of the universe, nor even think about the universe, for that matter.” And yet in the 1930s Orwell also disliked the way things had gone too far in the other direction. He noted that the highly politicized atmosphere of the decade had made good fiction impossible. People were all too concerned to write sociological works and to pamphleteer; imaginative prose, as a result, became barren, and (according to Orwell) no good fiction got written: “No decade in the past hundred and fifty years has been so barren of imaginative prose as the nineteen-thirties. There [91] have been good poems, good sociological works, brilliant pamphlets, but practically no fiction of any value at all ... It was a time of labels, slogans, and evasions ... It is almost inconceivable that good novels should be written in such an atmosphere.” What Orwell thought necessary was some kind of middle ground, between political responsibility and imaginative freedom. He himself achieved it, in his great imaginative works of political criticism: *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949). In these books, he found creative means to argue political points, most notably in the choice of the form of the dystopia – the vision of a bad future world.In Orwell’s bad future world, totalitarianism (the threat presented in the 1930s and after by Communism and Fascism) has come to dominate the world and to mechanize every aspect of people’s lives. No freedom is possible – not even the freedom to think. Language itself has been remade, in “Newspeak,” to rule out the possibility of subversive thought, as we learn when one of its creators describes it: Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year? .... Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it .... The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect.Even the truths of history are subject to revision, all in order to guarantee full subjugation of the individual mind. Had Orwell simply meant to argue that these could be the results of totalitarian politics, he might have written an essay, or

documentary fiction, but then he would have been giving in to the "barren sociology" of the fiction he disliked. Instead, he chose an imaginative form for his polemical content; dystopia was the ideal brainchild of the conflicting political and aesthetic demands of the day. Moreover, 1984 carried on the experimental tradition of the modern novel in other, indirect ways: "Newspeak" is an experimental language exactly opposite to what the modern novel had tried to develop; "thoughtcrime" is a psychological possibility exactly opposite to what the modern novel had wanted to discover. Dramatizing these negations, Orwell indirectly championed the innovations of the modern novel, at a time in which history seemed to have no time for them. [92]

To get right to *1984*, however, is to skip over the political fictions of earlier years. By 1945, Orwell had come up with good ways to be both political and aesthetic. Earlier, it was more difficult both to try for modern innovation and yet to be politically realistic, and so the achievements of those writers able to do so are well worth noting.Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), for example, is an earlier attempt to do what Orwell would do fifteen years later: combine the experimental outlook with social responsibility. Another dystopia, *Brave New World* also dramatizes social dangers not by exposing them directly, but by imagining a world in which they have come fully to dominate. The new scientific approaches to cultural organization – in Fascism, in Communism, and also in the attempts in England and America to engineer a fairer distribution of wealth – are presented here in their most extreme form, as a system in which human beings are scientifically produced and systematically administered. As Huxley would later say, the book is about "the nightmare of total organization," in which "modern technology has led to the concentration of economic and political power, and to the development of a society controlled ... by Big Business and Big Government," and in which "nonstop distractions of the most fascinating nature ... are deliberately used as instruments of policy, for the purpose of preventing people from paying too much attention to the realities of the social and political situation." Because this last problem – of brainwashing, of propaganda – seemed to him most fundamental, Huxley felt he could not just speak against the "nightmare" straightforwardly. He wanted to sound a political warning, but could not do it directly, if he wanted to compete with the "fascinations" at work in the brave new world of modernity. He had to do some "hypnopaedia" – some hypnotic teaching – himself, for "unfortunately correct knowledge and sound principles are not enough." A real "education in freedom" would require "thorough training in the art of analyzing [propaganda's] techniques and seeing through its sophistries." The key word here is "art": an aesthetic power over language was what the world needed, and this perhaps is what Huxley provides by couching his political warning in an aesthetic form. But the main trick, for the modern writer wanting also to be a responsible political writer, was to find some way to make the documentary voice an artful one – some way to make realism a transformative style of seeing. Politics would then not reduce fiction to [93] preaching; art could advance even as the fiction advanced its ideas; the "dialectic" could continue to enrich life and art alik[.] (pp.91-94.)