

In a Country Cemetery

*Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible Sun
within us. A small flame sufficeth....*

—Sir Thomas Browne, *Urne-Buriall*

*From the gate, here under the Norway pines,
the sweet curve of the cemetery wall
describes a perfect arc that separates
the high burial ground above from the broad
swale of green that slants down, then up
again to the road that, in its turn,
recapitulates the river's arc.*

*The patient art (that conceals art) of the country
mason who built this wall is a silent rebuke
to some of the monuments, the wilde enormities, it contains.
The granite courses are set into the bank
along a slight declivity, and the rings
for chaining and winching the stone from the quarry uproad
by sledge and ox are still set in the tops.*

*This is a place, Sir Thomas might have said, that invites the soul;
a piece of pure music dropped here and forgotten
outside of the world's cacophony: What songs the Syrens sang...
though puzzling...are not beyond all conjecture.
Is this as close to Elysium as we may get
without dying for it? The Abode of the Blessed
and Perfect Delight, in a harmony of birdsong and flowers?*

*At the outermost edge of the oldest stones, a small
dog, cut into bleached stone, attends the grave of a child.
The stones here are unadorned, bleached and weathered,
the inscriptions in stages of obliteration.
Grave stones-tell truth scarce fourty years....
old Families last not three Oaks....In vain
do we hope for...any patent from oblivion.*

*At the wall's end, the road dwindles in perspective
and takes an ess turn to follow the river's
meandering. Across the road, wild roses,
phlox and cinquefoil are in their June abundance.
My dog sits beside me, tranquil and regardant
on the cool stone, as we listen to the colloquy
of birds, considering this small piece of Eden.*

—Jack Flavin

The New Verbal Order

J. Daryl Charles

THE NOVELS *1984*, *FAHRENHEIT 451*, and *Brave New World* depict societies that represent in the mind of the author the radicalization of particular trends in Western culture. In George Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith is employed by the Records Department of the "Ministry of Truth," where his job is to "rectify" the record of the past in order to make it conform to what the Party says in the present. In Ray Bradbury's *451*, Guy Montag's role is not unlike that of Smith: he burns books—books, that is, other than comics and pornography—for the purpose of revising the past. And Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* portrays a society in which great literature of the past is obliterated because it is superior in quality to the mass-produced entertainment of the state; the goal is to ensure the happiness of the people and thus cement the state's power-base.

In the anti-literate dystopia of these three novels, it is the literature generally considered to be "classics"—literature which has formed the curricular basis of educated Western culture—that is obsolete or held in contempt.¹ In order to facilitate a purging of the past, however, a transformation of the vehicle for understanding the past is requisite.² A transmuting of language and the meaning of words must first occur; hence, the peculiar significance of George Orwell's *1984*

as a cautionary tale.³

Of the three novels,⁴ it is *1984* that has perhaps most captured the imagination of twentieth-century readers. Even those who have never read the novel are familiar with ideas that are regarded as "Orwellian," while words associated with *1984* have achieved remarkably widespread currency—as illustrated, for example, by the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*. Orwell's genius lay in his perception of the role of language in preserving, and disturbing, social cohesion. Orwell's nightmare, it should be remembered, though incorporating totalitarian elements from the Stalin era, was intended to apply to liberal democracies.

A fundamental question that undergirds the literary dystopia and *1984* in particular begs revisiting. It is a profoundly philosophical, anthropological, and, as Erich Fromm⁵ has noted, religious question. Can human nature be affected or altered in such a way that it loses all understanding of freedom, human dignity and integrity? From a distinctly Judaeo-Christian standpoint, given the pressing moral-cultural and bioethical issues facing Western societies at the end of the second millennium, is it possible that the *imago Dei* can be effaced by current and emerging cultural devices?