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## *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Tradition of Satire

### *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Satire

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is routinely described as a satire. But why? Satire is usually thought of as a mode of literature or art that uses comic techniques to ridicule and diminish its targets. Yet does any reader find Orwell's chilling vision of the future – a boot stamping on a human face forever (*NEF*, p. 280) – a rollicking good time? The novel's prevailing tone is not even darkly funny in the manner of a writer like Evelyn Waugh, whose bleak judgements are registered with amusement or even delight. If laughter is necessary for satire, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* hardly seems to qualify.

*Animal Farm* (1945), the novel Orwell completed just before *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is a different story. It fits comfortably in the category of the beast fable or allegory, an ancient satiric form, and its comic reduction of human actors or social groups to talking barnyard animals has clear precedents in works like Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Nun's Priest's Tale'. In treating a weighty subject like the Russian Revolution through the simple form of a children's 'fairy story', Orwell's fable makes plain its didactic intent, while employing the fantasy, whimsy, and humour normally seen as components of satire. But while *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is pervaded with – even built upon – irony, it contains very little of the wry, playful spirit of *Animal Farm*. True, a reader like Anthony Burgess keenly perceives moments of black comedy in the book. He cites the weary Winston labouring through his morning calisthenics under the dour watch of the telescreen – a surveillance technique, he proposes, that Orwell adapted from Charlie Chaplin's silent comedy *Modern Times* (1936). But it's hard to consent to Burgess's broader judgement that 'Orwell's book is *essentially* a comic book' (Burgess, 1985, p. 10).<sup>1</sup> It seems far more probable that the word *satire*, having fittingly been applied to *Animal Farm*, was then uncritically transferred to Orwell's follow-up, which shared its anti-communist theme.

Indeed, Orwell's publisher, Fredric Warburg, described *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as 'Animal Farm writ large' (CW, 19, p. 479), and the dust jacket of the first American edition marketed Orwell as 'the author of *Animal Farm*', seeking to capitalize on the earlier book's success.

Yet it is not mere proximity to *Animal Farm* that makes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a satire. After all, Orwell himself used the term, writing in his statement on the novel: 'I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it could arrive' (CW, 20, p. 136). An early reviewer, V. S. Pritchett, agreed, describing the novel as 'a satirical pamphlet'. Yet Pritchett also pointed out that the book lacks the 'irony and unnatural laughter' of satirists like Jonathan Swift and Voltaire. For Orwell, he said, 'hypocrisy is too dreadful for laughter: it feeds his despair'. But if the novel is not funny, then what makes it a satire? Pritchett's answer is a kind of grotesque exaggeration. 'The duty of the satirist', he writes, 'is to go one worse than reality.'<sup>2</sup> Orwell's statement on the novel similarly suggests that his satire consists in his deliberate departure from norms of realism.

If the primary feature of satire in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not laughter, then its primary motivation is not amusement. Instead, it is what Pritchett calls 'withering indignation'.<sup>3</sup> With this phrase, Pritchett locates Orwell in the tradition of satire called 'Juvenalian', after the poet-satirist who denounced the decadence of ancient Rome in a series of verses written around the beginning of the second century CE. 'Indignation will drive me to verse', Juvenal declares as he runs through a litany of complaints about a corrupt, unjust, dangerous, filthy metropolis; confronted with such evils, it is, he says, 'difficult *not* to write satire'.<sup>4</sup> A similar outrage often animates Orwell's writing, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and elsewhere. As Orwell himself testifies: 'My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. [...] I write [my books] because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention' (CW, 18, p. 319).

Beyond its general tone of indignation, however, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* participates in a more specific satiric tradition, the genre of the literary dystopia.<sup>5</sup> *Dystopia*, from the Greek, means a bad or evil place, the opposite of a *utopia* (which means both 'no place' and a 'good place').<sup>6</sup> Most readers today are familiar with many of its common features: a near-future world of straitened economic or environmental conditions, a repressive government that relies on surveillance and violence, a population cowed into obedience and conformity, and, often, a small resistance whose actions drive the plot. These dystopian conditions, by their very existence in the world of the novel, offer an implicit satiric commentary on present-day circumstances. The dystopia says, in effect, that the conditions it envisions are already discernible

in nascent form in reality. For this reason, critical quibbling about whether Orwell's book is best described as a 'warning', a 'prophecy', or a 'satire' is fruitless. It's all of the above.

But although many of the signal features of dystopia exist in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell didn't use that term to describe his book. On the contrary, in February 1949 he described it to Julian Symons as 'a Utopia in the form of a novel' (CW, 20, p. 35). Of course, the word *dystopia* had not attained the currency in 1949 that it has today. It appears as early as 1747, but isn't used as a literary term until 1952, and doesn't enter the lexicon until the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Yet even if Orwell had access to the term, his choice of *utopia* remains apt. For as an attentive reading of his novel makes clear, utopia and dystopia are closer in nature than common sense might suppose. A dystopia is often (if not always) a utopia as viewed by those who reject its values, or a utopia gone wrong.

The dystopia, at least in its canonical form, arises from intellectual, social, and technological developments initially thought to be progressive or utopian. As Irving Howe wrote: 'Not progress denied but progress realized is the nightmare haunting the anti-utopian novel.'<sup>8</sup> The dystopia, then, isn't exactly a utopia gone wrong; it's a utopia executed as planned, 'a future [the author] had been trained to desire'.<sup>9</sup> Yet it is simultaneously a future in which the costs of 'progress realized' prove impossible to bear. This reversal, the shift from hope to fear, is precisely the irony that constitutes the dystopia, and the reason that dystopias, though rarely comic, are fundamentally ironic in nature. Dystopia is an irony – it is a world that 'means' two opposing things at once. Orwell articulates this insight when he enunciates Oceania's slogans: 'WAR IS PEACE', 'FREEDOM IS SLAVERY', 'IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH' (NEF, p. 6).<sup>10</sup> These paradoxes are more than mere political lies; they are doublethink, and as Goldstein's *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* explains, each contains a truth, albeit a perverse one.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* makes explicit the link between dystopia and utopia that Howe observes. Goldstein's book notes that nineteenth-century socialism 'was still deeply infected by the Utopianism of past ages' but that 'from about 1900 onwards the aim of establishing liberty and equality was more and more openly abandoned' (NEF, p. 211). O'Brien goes further, boasting that Oceania is 'the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the old reformers imagined' (NEF, p. 279). And in the appendix ('The Principles of Newspeak'), the narrator tells us that with the shift from 'Communist International' to 'Comintern', the Soviets 'narrowed and subtly altered' the meaning of the phrase, jettisoning the high ideals of 'universal human brotherhood' in favour of 'a tightly knit organisation and a well-defined body of doctrine' (NEF, p. 321). Whether because of the hypocrisy of its proponents or its own internal contradictions, utopian socialism has become its opposite.

### Dystopian Satire: A Brief History

A comprehensive history of utopia and dystopia would begin with ancient myths of societies of peace and abundance such as the Garden of Eden in the Hebrew Bible, or the Golden Age of Saturn described by Hesiod and Ovid; it would surely include Socrates's description of a healthy *polis* in Plato's *Republic*. But the genre of utopia (as well as the word itself) can properly be said to begin in 1516 with Thomas More's *Utopia*, a fictional account of an Atlantic island whose society is free from the evils – greed, inequality, deceit, war – that riddle sixteenth-century Europe. More's book draws upon the ancient genres of the imaginary voyage and the philosophical dialogue – genres often described as *Menippean satire* since they target 'mental attitudes' rather than 'people as such'<sup>11</sup> – but it transforms these influences into a new literary type, combining political philosophy, satire, and prose fiction. Four centuries later, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers a similar amalgam, integrating long excerpts from Goldstein's book (which is so boring that Julia falls asleep as Winston reads it to her) and the appendix. These passages read like essays in political history and philosophy of language, yet they are (nominally) written about fictional entities.

More's utopia establishes a standard of perfection by which the reader can measure the fundamental madness of various European institutions, most centrally private property. Yet even More's foundational text hints at dystopian threats embedded in utopian ideals. The communist basis of the imagined society relies on a suppression of the individual self, and while there are no telescreens, we discern the beginnings of a surveillance state. 'Because they live in the full view of all', More writes, the Utopians 'are bound to be working at their usual trades or enjoying their leisure in a respectable way.'<sup>12</sup> Peace and prosperity are achieved through restrictive mechanisms of social control, and the utopian commonwealth only exists because of a founding act of violent conquest. More's imagined world indeed contains the basic paradoxes of Orwell's: violence is peace; freedom is conformity; docility is strength.

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) similarly presents itself as a true account of the author's journeys to distant lands, sometimes showing social practices that seem far preferable to those of Europe, at other times offering a comic rendition of the absurdities Gulliver has left behind. The talking horses ('Houyhnhnms') whom he encounters on his final voyage are utopian citizens 'wholly governed' by reason, embodying virtues such as strength, modesty, benevolence, cleanliness, and justice.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the savage primates ('Yahoos') who share the island are dystopian monsters, embodying every imaginable vice: lust, greed, squalor, and selfishness. The perfection

of the Houyhnhnms rebukes a debauched European society; the viciousness of the Yahoos reveals grotesque human flaws. Yet the Houyhnhnms themselves come to appear monstrous when they contemplate the extermination of the Yahoo race. Although they ultimately reject mass slaughter, deciding instead on mass castration, Utopia is maintained only through large-scale violence inflicted on the bodies of living beings to regulate their reproduction – an exercise of biopolitical power that foreshadows the importance of the state's control over sexuality in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. On his return to England, Gulliver finds his wife and children as disgusting as the Yahoos left behind and favours the company of inarticulate horses. Where does this leave us? The rationality of the Houyhnhnms has proven cold and genocidal; the barbaric Yahoos are driven solely by lusts and appetites. Gulliver himself appears mad, yet his indictment of human society retains its satiric power.

*Gulliver's Travels* still stands at some distance from the literary dystopias of the twentieth century. In between lie not only influential literary and philosophical works, but also real-world historical efforts to put Enlightenment ideals into practice, including the ongoing collective struggles for emancipation on the part of the enslaved, the colonized, workers, women, Jews, and others. During these years, various strains of socialism (including but not limited to Marxism) emerge, and utopia starts to be seen as a socialist concept. The late nineteenth century sees a boom in utopian writing, the most influential texts being Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890). Compared to the works of More and Swift, however, these utopias offer little in the way of satire – neither the slippery ironies that undercut proffered ideals nor the withering indignation that animates the call for change.

Alongside this boom, however, a more satiric counter-tradition of anti-utopia arises. Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) includes a long passage, 'The Book of the Machines', which questions industrial and technological progress, suggesting that men are becoming slaves to the machines they invented. Jerome K. Jerome's sketch 'The New Utopia' (1891) – known to both H. G. Wells and Yevgeny Zamyatin – offers a gentle comic satire of the socialism of Bellamy and Morris in which the narrator journeys to a twenty-ninth-century society that has eradicated all potential sources of discord, including love, marriage, family, nature, art, and individual difference. In Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), an inventor, himself a symbol of scientific progress, visits a future that seems to resemble an Edenic socialist utopia but turns out to be a dystopian state of nature in which evolution has split the human race into two species. One has descended from 'the favoured

aristocracy', while the other, descended from 'their mechanical servants', now maintain their former masters as 'fatted cattle' to be consumed.<sup>14</sup>

But while these works, which we might call proto-dystopias, are responses, in some measure, to utopian socialism, the rise of dystopian fiction is also driven by the very socio-economic disruptions that motivate the utopian critique in the first place. Its satiric targets include mechanization and industrialization; the standardization and rationalization of production; technocracy, bureaucracy, utilitarianism, and other aspects of modern management; and eugenic thinking and biopolitics. Thus, as the canonical dystopia takes shape in the twentieth century, it must be seen as a reaction to both the modernizing forces of capitalism in the West and to the persistent expectation of a utopian socialist future, for which Wells (sometime dystopian science-fiction author) becomes the leading prophet.<sup>15</sup>

E. M. Forster, for example, described his story 'The Machine Stops' (1909) – another work that features the word *machine* in its title – as 'a reaction to one of the earlier heavens of H. G. Wells',<sup>16</sup> but it equally takes aim at what Tom Moylan calls 'a totalizing administration' of an 'emergent modernity'.<sup>17</sup> Forster's eponymous Machine is a great impersonal network that, while superficially tending to human needs, completely regulates and restrains all aspects of human experience, including love, sex, reproduction, and death. The humans of this future reside in underground hexagonal cells, interacting with other people only through video screens, and with nature not at all; 'it is we that are dying', says the dissident-protagonist, Kuno; 'the only thing that really lives is the Machine'.<sup>18</sup> The Machine has become identical with a Wellsian world state, indeed with modernity itself. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the role of the Machine will go to the Party, a collective entity that similarly survives at the expense of autonomous human beings.

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), written in Lenin's USSR, similarly responds to socialist utopianism. But its attacks on standardization target not only Wells's socialism and Lenin's communism but also the industrial production strategies promulgated by the American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor, who is described in the novel as 'the most brilliant of the Ancients'. *We* imagines a thoroughly collectivized, urbanized society in which human beings no longer have names but only numbers. Their lives are strictly governed by the state, under the leadership of a great 'Benefactor', supported by Wellsian 'Guardians'. People, or 'ciphers', live in apartments made of glass, subject to constant surveillance. A strict biopolitical regime prevails; the ciphers are permitted only brief periods of privacy for sex, which is regulated by a 'lex sexualis' according to which '[e]ach cipher has the right to any other cipher as sexual product'. Children are raised in factories; to

conceive a child without a permit is a crime. A utilitarian ideology subordinates individual happiness to the collective good ('forget that you are a gram, and feel as though you are a millionth part of the ton'), reduces personal differences to a minimum ('being original is to violate equality'), and exalts mathematics as the highest ideal ('the multiplication table is wiser, more absolute than the ancient God').<sup>19</sup>

Zamyatin called his book 'a warning against the two-fold danger which threatens humanity: the hypertrophic power of the Machine and the hypertrophic power of the State'.<sup>20</sup> To articulate this warning, he draws on the writings of Dostoevsky, whose *Notes from the Underground* (1864) lodges a protest against scientism and utilitarianism, which leave no space for human freedom. Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), meanwhile, includes a famous parable in which Spain's Grand Inquisitor visits an imprisoned Jesus Christ and propounds the idea that freedom must be abolished for happiness to be achieved. This passage provides a template, both narrative and philosophical, for the climactic confrontation between D-503 and the Benefactor, as well as similar dialogues in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940), and of course *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In many other ways, too, *We* directly influences *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Like Winston, D-503 keeps a secret diary, and rebels sexually as well as intellectually and politically. He joins a resistance but is brought to heel by the state through violent measures. *We* even anticipates Orwell's image of the boot as a symbol of repression; a character tells D-503 that although Adam and Eve, at the behest of the Devil, erroneously chose freedom over happiness, this satanic freedom can be crushed: 'Our boot: on his head – crrunch! And there: paradise is restored.'<sup>21</sup>

Huxley called *Brave New World* a book about 'Wells's Utopia realized, and the absolute horror of it', and it follows *We* in rendering a future where a single technocratic world state promotes uniformity among its citizens.<sup>22</sup> The economy is centrally planned; marriage and family do not exist; the natural world and high culture are scorned. Henry Ford rather than Taylor is the revered figure of efficiency, but the same principles of standardization and mass production have infiltrated society, including the reproduction of the species: babies are produced on assembly lines. It has generally been read as an attack on American-style consumer capitalism rather than Soviet-style totalitarianism; Theodor Adorno called *Brave New World* 'a nightmare of endless doubles like that which the most recent phase of capitalism has spawned into everyday life', finding in it a satire of 'the standardized consciousness of millions'.<sup>23</sup> As in *We*, 'everyone belongs to everyone else' sexually, but Huxley envisions a system of excess, not repression, in which sanctioned promiscuity and orgies have the effect of mollifying the populace.

Thus the society lacks the emphasis on surveillance and torture that characterizes Oceania. The government instead controls the population through a combination of genetic engineering, behavioural conditioning, and a hedonist ethos that includes (in addition to the orgies) drugs, sports, and mass entertainment. ‘The whole world has turned into a Riviera hotel’ (CW, 12, p. 211), Orwell commented wryly.

Conventional wisdom holds that *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* make up a ‘canonical dystopian trilogy’,<sup>24</sup> but the years leading up to the writing of Orwell’s book saw publication of many more now-forgotten titles available to readers. Not all were anti-socialist. An important influence on Orwell was Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1907), sometimes claimed as the first dystopian novel.<sup>25</sup> It imagines the crushing of the socialist movement in the United States by a reactionary capitalist oligarchy. It is not a portrait of an established dystopian state in the manner of *Brave New World*, but a story about the struggle between socialism and fascism, reminiscent of Wells’s futuristic adventure *The Sleeper Awakes*. As a specifically anti-fascist fantasy, it anticipates works from the 1930s such as Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) and Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937). It is in its formal methods, however, that London’s book was most useful to Orwell. Set in the near-future United States, it uses footnotes ostensibly written centuries later to comment on the narrative, and, as in Orwell’s book, this framing voice provides a hopeful perspective because it attests to a world in which the totalitarian system has been overcome. Orwell praised the novel, though his compliments are somewhat backhanded: comparing London to H. G. Wells, he said that London, though artless, had the advantage of an unconscious ‘Fascist strain’ (CW, 12, p. 212), a love of power and violence that gave him an intuitive understanding of the ruling class which Wells lacked.

A final influence on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. The book is not set in the future and is not, properly speaking, a dystopia or even a satire but rather a political novel about the Moscow show trials of 1936 to 1938, during which Stalin’s political enemies confessed under torture to trumped-up charges. It acquires an allegorical feel because it doesn’t identify Stalin specifically, though the Russian names are something of a giveaway. Orwell dubbed this genre ‘concentration camp literature’: ‘the special class of literature that has arisen out of the European political struggle since the rise of Fascism’ (CW, 16, p. 392) and that analyses ‘the special world created by secret police forces, censorship of opinion, torture and frame-up trials’ (CW, 16, p. 393). Orwell found in Koestler, a Hungarian Jew and disillusioned member of the German Communist Party, a voice of moral integrity who took political writing beyond shallow polemic to approach tragedy. He also admired the keenness with which



Koestler understood the psychic effects of totalitarianism on the individual. In writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell fused elements of *Darkness at Noon* and *The Iron Heel* on to the dystopian template that Zamyatin and Huxley had established.

### Orwell's Satiric Technique

As I noted at the start of this chapter, the satire of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not generally comic. At certain moments, however, a dark humour surfaces as Orwell's horror and despair give way to a bitter contempt. Such moments occur most frequently when Orwell directs his ire not at the totalitarian state but at less forbidding targets, notably British leftists. Indeed, *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* mockery of the habits of the socialist intelligentsia is more characteristic of the comedy of manners than the dystopia.<sup>26</sup> Early in the novel, we get a satirical glimpse of the dreary social activities expected of Party members: 'Tonight was one of [Winston's] nights at the Community Centre. He wolfed another tasteless meal in the canteen, hurried off to the Centre, took part in the solemn foolery of a "discussion group", played two games of table tennis, swallowed several glasses of gin and sat for half an hour through a lecture entitled "Ingsoc in relation to chess"' (*NEF*, p. 115). The satire here is more social than political; a phrase like 'solemn foolery' indicates a vantage point outside the ruling ideology from which Orwell can target the posturing of the bourgeois Left. This is the same culture he mocks in 'Inside the Whale' (1940) when he describes the literary climate of England in the 1930s as 'a sort of Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing' (*CW*, 12, p. 99).

A darker comic moment occurs in Section Three, when Parsons is brought in for the crime of muttering 'Down with Big Brother!' in his sleep. Winston asks Parsons whether he's guilty:

'Of course I'm guilty!' cried Parsons with a servile glance at the telescreen. 'You don't think the Party would arrest an innocent man, do you?' His froglike face grew calmer, and even took on a slightly sanctimonious expression. 'Thoughtcrime is a dreadful thing, old man', he said sententiously.

(*NEF*, p. 245)

But even worse than Parsons's acceptance of his own guilt is his response when Winston asks who turned him in:

'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?' (*NEF*, p. 245)

Breaking up the bleakest section of the novel, this moment reads as a bit of comic relief. We can laugh at the ‘servile’ party member who takes pride in the daughter who has betrayed him in a way that we cannot laugh at Winston’s own misery.

For the most part, however, the novel’s satire focuses not on the social or moral failings of individual Party members but on the ideology and practices of the Party itself, which is the object not of scorn but of fear. Consequently, Orwell’s prevailing method is not to poke fun, but to outline the conditions of Oceania in 1984 and imply their relevance to England in 1949. The satire registers not in bursts of laughter but in the slow narrative work of world building. Orwell uses various narrative techniques to do this work: Winston’s thoughts, perceptions, and memories, conveyed through free indirect discourse; his conversations with Julia; his long interrogation by O’Brien; and the interpolated texts of Goldstein’s book and the Newspeak appendix. Sometimes the conditions of the world are explained directly in expository prose, sometimes more indirectly and subtly.

Consider the famous first sentence: ‘It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen’ (*NEF*, p. 3). The disorienting surprise of ‘thirteen’ subtly signals that we are in an alternative reality, in the way that a science-fiction film might place a second sun in the sky to let us know we’re not on Earth. Thirteen is an unlucky number, an odd number, a prime. Perhaps it indicates a shift to military time. More subtly still, a new way of measuring time might also allude to the calendar implemented during the French Revolution, which, in its efforts to reshape human society, dispensed with traditional systems of months, weeks, and hours in favour of a decimal system. From the first sentence, then, Orwell hints at a world in which utopian aspirations have distorted everyday experience.

Over the course of the novel, Orwell fills in the outline of the dystopia, allowing us to see how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* both continues and departs from its precursors. Orwell follows Forster, Zamyatin, and Huxley in satirizing the loss of the individual at the hands of the collective. As O’Brien says to Winston: ‘Alone – free – the human being is always defeated. [. . .] But if he can make complete, utter submission, if he can escape from his identity, if he can merge himself in the Party so that he *is* the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal’ (*NEF*, p. 277). As in the earlier works, prohibitions on political dissent and even on great art and literature produce not only ‘complete obedience to the will of the State’ but also ‘complete uniformity of opinion on all subjects’ (*NEF*, p. 214). This control extends into reproduction and sexual life; human beings have become resources serving the collective. The nuclear family is intact, but it has become an instrument of the surveillance state, and O’Brien envisions a future more dire yet, when the

final links between parents and children will be cut: 'Children will be taken from their mothers at birth, as one takes eggs from a hen' (*NEF*, p. 280). Sex, already a joyless duty between Winston and Katharine, will become, with the aid of state-sponsored neurology, devoid of physical pleasure.

As Julia explains to Winston, state control over sex is part of a greater ambition to control the entire interior affective life. Julia understands that 'the sex instinct created a world of its own which was outside the Party's control', and which, by creating an interior space of freedom, poses a threat to collectivism. Moreover, unsatisfied sexual feelings can then 'be transformed into war-fever and leader-worship' (*NEF*, p. 139). In this regard, too, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* aligns with previous dystopias in recognizing the role of the state in creating collective rituals that stoke public emotion (e.g. Hate Week) and buttress the cult of personality. But Orwell, more keenly than any of his major precursors, recognizes what he called (in a 1946 review of *We*) 'the irrational side of totalitarianism' (*CW*, 18, p. 15), its harnessing of atavistic, unconscious sexual and aggressive drives. For Orwell, who has absorbed the lessons of Freud, the rational Houyhnhnm always has a violent Yahoo within.

But Orwell departs from his predecessors in important ways. His dystopia envisions not a single Wellsian world state but a fractured Cold War world with three superpowers engaged in a perpetual standoff. Unlike his precursors, he's largely unconcerned with technology as a dystopian force; far more threatening than the telescreens are the low-tech methods of the Thought Police and the use of citizens to monitor each other. Nor is the efficient, utilitarian state, deploying the management techniques of Taylor and Ford, a primary target. After all, '[n]othing is efficient in Oceania except the Thought Police' (*NEF*, p. 206); the shortages of basic goods and the terrible quality of gin affirm that the state has relinquished the aspirations of Forster's or Huxley's dystopias to meet people's material needs. (A version of Huxley's hedonistic dystopia does survive in the world of the Proles, who are not indoctrinated but instead placated with alcohol, pornography, and popular music.) The outdated socialist ideal of equality has been abandoned, revealing the Party's true aim as the consolidation of power. Brutality, which earlier regimes justified as a regrettable means to an end, is now an end in itself. Thus, although Orwell borrows from Dostoevsky (via Zamyatin) when he has Winston assert, '*Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four*' (*NEF*, p. 84), he is actually reversing the terms of Dostoevsky's critique. For Dostoevsky, freedom means the freedom to be eccentrically wrong, freedom from the ruthless rule of mathematics. For Orwell it means the freedom to be mathematically correct, to hold to an objective truth that is beyond the power of the Party to rewrite.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, two developments seem to be special concerns of Orwell. The first is the (mis)use of language for political purposes, a topic also examined in one of Orwell's most-read essays, 'Politics and the English Language' (1946). To be sure, utopia and dystopia have long been concerned with language, its use and misuse, how it shapes and reflects human thought and society. Swift's Houyhnhnms lack a word for lying or falsehood, and when Gulliver describes various outrageous features of English society, his dubious Houyhnhnm master assumes that Gulliver has said 'the thing which is not'. The lack of a word for lying reflects the utter honesty of the equine species. In Gulliver's England, however, lying is a common practice, and when he describes lawyers – a professional class unthinkable in the Houyhnhnms' utopia – he is thrown back upon the most basic language: 'there was a society of men among us, bred up from their youth in the art of proving, by words multiplied for the purpose, that white is black, and black is white, according as they are paid'.<sup>28</sup>

Readers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will recall the importance of the Newspeak word *blackwhite*:

Like so many Newspeak words, this word has two mutually contradictory meanings. Applied to an opponent, it means the habit of impudently claiming that black is white, in contradiction of the plain facts. Applied to a Party member, it means a loyal willingness to say that black is white when Party discipline demands this. (NEF, p. 221)

This fear – that language can be manipulated to turn reality upside down, to convince people that black is white – is an ancient one, going back to Plato's attacks on Protagoras and the Sophists. Satirists deploy it across the centuries: Juvenal lashes out at builders who secure contracts 'by swearing black is white', while Jane Austen's villain Lady Susan uses her 'command of Language [...] to make Black appear White'.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, Orwell was sensitive to a new kind of mid-century bureaucratic speech, parodied as Newspeak, designed to cover over violence. He feared that the proliferation and acceptance of such language would enfeeble human thought, curtailing dissent and resistance. It is more than historical accident that in 1949, the year of the book's publication, the United States replaced its Department of War with a Department of Defense.<sup>30</sup> And it was almost 1984 when the Reagan administration first tested an inter-continental ballistic missile paradoxically named the 'Peacekeeper'. It is appropriate, then, that Orwell, the diagnostician of political language, himself created words and phrases – *doublethink*, *Thought Police*, *Big Brother* – that have become as essential to our political discourse as Thomas More's coinage *utopia*. That

we rely on Orwell's neologisms attests to the relevance of his analysis to our current moment.

Yet the debasement of language is ultimately just a symptom of a greater threat, the power of governments to obliterate history and indeed reality itself. This threat is obvious enough to any reader of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; because human beings are mortal and memory is fragile – as Winston's conversation with the old man in the pub illustrates – only written history can counter the flood of false information put out by a totalitarian state that fully controls the mass media. Forster hints at distortion of reality by emphasizing the degradation of experience and the stigmatization of new ideas; Zamyatin's hero is forced to undergo a 'fantasiectomy' to remove his imaginative faculties; Huxley's brave new worlders follow Henry Ford in believing that history is bunk. But in Orwell's imagined future, the manipulation of past and present reality reaches extremes his precursors do not imagine. Writing after Hitler and Stalin, he confronts the malleability of the past with a new urgency and indignation. This indignation, directed at ideologues and sadists who obliterate history so that the Party can keep its grip on power, makes it impossible for Orwell not to write satire.

### Notes

- 1 Chaplin is mentioned at p. 12.
- 2 V. S. Pritchett, 'The Most Honest Writer Alive', *The New Statesman*, 18 June 1949 [reprinted at [www.newstatesman.com/books/2009/06/orwell-eighty-thought-party](http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2009/06/orwell-eighty-thought-party)] (accessed 15 October 2019).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, trans. Peter Green (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 5, 4.
- 5 I will use *anti-utopia* broadly, to describe a work that critiques a utopian project or utopian thinking, reserving *dystopia* for those fictional works that comprehensively imagine an arrangement of society that leads to human misery. More narrowly still, *canonical dystopia* will refer to novels such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which the dystopian society is established and its dystopian nature is the novel's main theme.
- 6 From Thomas More's first usage, the word has played on both meanings: the Greek *outopia* means 'no place', while *eutopia* means a good or happy place. A utopia is thus an ideal society but also a non-existent one.
- 7 Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 274.
- 8 Irving Howe, 'The Fiction of Anti-Utopia', *The New Republic* (23 April 1962), pp. 13–16, at p. 14.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

- 10 *Animal Farm*'s signature slogan relies on the same literary device of paradox: 'ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS' (*AF*, p. 97).
- 11 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 309.
- 12 Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516), trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 53.
- 13 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), ed. Christopher Fox (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995), p. 242.
- 14 H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895), ed. Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 55, 59.
- 15 'British intellectuals largely ignored the earlier Wells, to concentrate their fire on the later propagandist of the world-state' (Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 205).
- 16 E. M. Forster, *Collected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 6.
- 17 Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001), p. 111.
- 18 Forster, 'The Machine Stops' (1909), in *Collected Short Stories*, pp. 109–46, at p. 131.
- 19 Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (1924), trans. Natasha Randall (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), pp. 102, 27, 59.
- 20 Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, p. 229.
- 21 Zamyatin, *We*, p. 55.
- 22 Aldous Huxley to Sydney Schiff (7 May 1931), in *Selected Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. James Sexton (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), p. 255.
- 23 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Aldous Huxley and Utopia' (1942), in *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (1955; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 95–118, at p. 98.
- 24 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 202.
- 25 Claeys, *Dystopia*, p. 332.
- 26 On this distinction, see Jonathan Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- 27 Adrian Wanner, 'The Underground Man as Big Brother: Dostoevsky's and Orwell's Anti-Utopia', *Utopian Studies*, 8.1 (1997), pp. 77–88, at p. 81.
- 28 Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 227.
- 29 Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, p. 15; Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, and Sanditon*, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie, introd. Claudia L. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 198.
- 30 Thomas Pynchon notes the Orwellian nature of the phrase 'Department of Defense' in his 'Introduction' to the 2003 Penguin edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (see George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949; London: Penguin, 2003), p. xi).