1985

Anthony Burgess

A complete catalogue record for this book can be obtained
from the British Library on request

First published in 1978

First published in this edition in 2013 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 84668 919 2
eISBN 978 1 84765 893 7

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Catechism

When did the twentieth-century nightmare begin?

In 1945, when, for many people, it seemed to have ended.

How did it begin?

With the first use of atomic bombs, developed with urgency to finish speedily a war that had gone on too long. But with the end of the conflict between the fascist States and the free world (which was not all free, because a great part of it was totalitarian), the stage was cleared for the enactment of the basic encounter of the century. The communist powers faced the capitalist powers, and both sides had unlimited nuclear weapons.

So that –?

So that what had been used to end one war was now employed to start another.

What was the outcome of the Great Nuclear War of the 1950s?

Countless atomic bombs were dropped on the industrial centres of western Europe, the Americas and the Soviet Empire. The devastation was so terrible that the ruling elites of the world came to realize that nuclear warfare, in destroying organized society, destroyed their own capacity for maintaining power.

So that –?

By common consent the nuclear age was brought to an end. Wars henceforth would be waged with conventional weapons of the kind developed during the Second World War. That wars should continue to be fought, and on a global scale, was taken for granted.

What was the disposition of the nations at the end of the Great Nuclear War?

The end of that war saw the world divided into three large power-units or superstates. Nations did not exist any more. Oceania was the name given to the empire comprising the United States, Latin America and the former British Commonwealth. The centre of authority was

probably, but not certainly, North America, though the ideology that united the territories of the superstate had been developed by British intellectuals and was known as English Socialism or Ingsoc. The old geographical nomenclatures had ceased to have much meaning: indeed, their association with small national loyalties and traditional cultures was regarded as harmful to the new orthodoxy.

What happened to Great Britain, for instance?

Britain was renamed Airstrip One – a neutral designation not intended to be contemptuous.

The other superstates?

The two other superstates were Eurasia and Eastasia. Eurasia had been formed by the absorption of the whole of continental Europe into the Soviet Union. Eastasia was made up of China, Japan and the south-east Asian mainland, together with portions of Manchuria, Mongolia and Tibet that, bordering on the territories of Eurasia, fluctuated in imposed loyalty according to the progress of the war.

War?

War between the superstates started in 1959, and it has been going on ever since.

War with conventional weapons, then?

True. Limited armament and professional troops. Armies are, by the standards of earlier modern wars, comparatively small. The combatants are unable to destroy each other: if they could, the war would end, and the war must not end.

Why must it not end?

War is peace, meaning war is a way of life to the new age as peace was a way of life to the old. A way of life and an aspect of political philosophy.

But what is the war about?

Let me say first what the war is *not* about. There is no material cause for fighting. There is no ideological incompatibility. Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia all accept the common principle of a single ruling party and a total suppression of individual freedom. The war has nothing to do with opposed world-views or, strictly, with territorial expansion.

But it has *to do with* –?

The ostensible reason for waging war is to gain possession of a rough quadrilateral of territory whose corners are Tangier, Brazzaville, Darwin and Hong Kong. Here there is a bottomless reserve of cheap coolie

labour, with hundreds of millions of men and women inured to hard work and starvation wages. The contest for this prize is conducted in equatorial Africa, the Middle East, southern India, and the Malay archipelago, and it does not move much outside the area of dispute. There is also a measure of fighting around the northern icecap, where valuable mineral deposits are believed to lie.

Ostensible. The real aim?

To use up the products of the industrial machine, to keep the wheels turning but the standard of living low. For the well-fed, physically contented citizen, with a wide range of goods for consumption and the money to buy them, is a bad subject for an oligarchical state. A man filled with meat turns his back on the dry bones of political doctrine. Fanatical devotion to the ruling party comes more readily from the materially deprived. Moreover, loyalty and what used to be called patriotism are best sustained when the enemy seems to be at the gates.

What enemy?

A good question. I said perpetual war, but it is not, to be strictly accurate, always the same war. Oceania is sometimes in alliance with Eurasia against Eastasia, sometimes with Eastasia against Eurasia. Sometimes she faces an alliance of the other two. The shifts in alignment occur with great rapidity and require correspondingly rapid readjustments of policy. But it is essential that the war be officially presented as always the same war, and it follows that the enemy must always be one and the same. The enemy at any given point in time must be the eternal enemy, the enemy past and future.

Impossible.

Impossible? The ruling party has total control of the collective memory and, by the alteration, or strictly rectification, of records, can easily bring the past into line with the present. What is true now must always have been true. Truth is actuality. Actuality is now. There is another reason for requiring an eternal enemy, but consideration of that had best be deferred.

Until –?

Until you properly understand the true aim of Ingsoc.

Describe Oceanian society.

It is very simply stratified. Eighty-five per cent of the population is proletarian. The proles, as they are officially called, are despicable, being uneducated, apolitical, grumbling but inert. They perform the most

menial tasks and are satisfied with the most brutish diversions. The remaining fifteen per cent consists of the Party – Inner and Outer. The Inner Party is an elective aristocracy, dedicated to the implementation of the Ingsoc metaphysic. The Outer Party is made up of functionaries, a kind of lower civil service whose members are employed in the four main departments of government – the Ministries of Love, Plenty, Truth and Peace.

Peace?

Really war. But war is peace.

Who is the head of the Party?

A personage called Big Brother who, never having been born, can never die. Big Brother is God. He must be obeyed, but he must also be loved.

Is that possible?

It is essential.

But can one be made to love to order?

There are ways and means. The elimination of marital love, of love between parents and children, the destruction of joy in sex and in begetting help to direct what may be regarded as an emotional need towards its proper object. The existence of the traitor Emmanuel Goldstein, always in league with the enemy, who hates Big Brother and wishes to destroy Oceania, ensures a perpetual diffusion of fear and loathing among the population, with a compensatory devotion to him who alone can protect and save.

What is the Ingsoc metaphysic?

Ultimate reality, like the first cause or causes, has no existence outside the mind that observes it. Sense-data and ideas alike are mere subjective phantoms. The mind is not, however, an individual mind but a collective one. Big Brother's mind contains all others. His vision of reality is the true one, and all others are false, heretical, a danger to the State. The individual must learn to accept without question, without even hesitation, the vision of the Party, using a technique known as doublethink to reconcile what appear to be contradictions. Outward conformity of belief is not enough. There must be total and sincere allegiance. If the individual memory of the past conflicts with Party history, the device of instantaneous memory control must be employed. Any contradiction can be resolved, and must be. Doublethink – wholly instinctive, sincere, unqualified – is an essential instrument of orthodoxy.

What, apart from metaphysical idealism and the perfection of its diffusion through the body of the Party, is the true aim of Ingsoc?

If you expect demagogic hypocrisy, you will not get it. Rule is not directed towards the welfare of the ruled. Rule is for power. The Party desires total control of everything outside itself, ingesting all of exterior reality into its organism, but it is deliberately reluctant to absorb its enemies. The war with Eastasia or Eurasia or both will never end, the treacherous Goldstein will never die, because Ingsoc needs enemies as a nutcracker needs nuts. Only over an enemy can power be satisfactorily exercised. The future is a boot perpetually crushing the face of a victim. All other pleasures will in time be subordinated to the pleasure of power – food, art, nature and, above all, sex.

May nobody revolt against this monstrous denial of human freedom?

Nobody. Except, of course, the occasional madman. It is the loving concern of Big Brother to restore such a deviate to sanity. And then to vaporize him as a flaw in the pattern, to convert him into an unperson. Rebellion belongs to the old way. And what is this *human freedom*? Freedom from what? Freedom to do what? A man may be free of illness as a dog may be free of fleas, but freedom as an absolute is freedom in a void. The watchwords of old revolutions were always nonsense. Liberty. Equality. Fraternity. The pursuit of happiness. Virtue. Knowledge. Power is different. Power makes sense. God is power. Power is for ever . . .

Intentions

There are many who, not knowing Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, nevertheless know such terms as doublethink and Newspeak and Big Brother, and, above all, associate the cipher 1984 with a situation in which the individual has lost all his rights of moral choice (this is what *freedom* means) and is subject to the arbitrary power of some ruling body – not necessarily the State. That the year 1984 may come and go without the realization of the nightmare – with, indeed, an augmentation of personal freedom and a decay of corporate power – will not necessarily invalidate the horrible identification. Doublethink, which the art of fiction can abet, enables us to reconcile the most blatant disparities. In the film Stanley Kramer made of Nevil Shute's novel *On The Beach*, the world comes to an end in 1962. Seeing the film in a television old-movie slot, we in the seventies can still shudder at what is going to happen in the sixties. In an idyllic 1984, the 1984 of Orwell's vision will still serve as a symbol of humanity's worst fears.

1984 is used as a somewhat vague metaphor of social tyranny, and one has to regret the vagueness. American college students have said, 'Like 1984, man,' when asked not to smoke pot in the classroom or advised gently to do a little reading. By extension, the term Orwellian is made to apply to anything from a computer print-out to the functional coldness of a new airport. There are no computers on Airstrip One, and most of the buildings we hear of are decaying Victorian. Present-day Leningrad, with its façades in need of a lick of paint, its carious warehouses, is closer to the look of Big Brother's London than is, say, Dallas International. For Orwellian read Wellsian – specifically the decor of the 1936 film *Things to Come*. The whole point of the urban scene in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that it doesn't matter what it looks like, since reality is all in the mind. And there is nothing 'Orwellian' about particular deprivations – like a ban on copulation in trams: it is the total and absolute, planned, philosophically consistent subordination of the individual

to the collective that Orwell is projecting into a future that, though it is set in 1984, could be any time between now and 1962, when Nevil Shute brings the world to an end.

We have the following tasks. To understand the waking origins of Orwell's bad dream – in himself and in the phase of history that helped to make him. To see where he went wrong and where he seems likely to have been right. To contrive an alternative picture – using his own fictional technique – of the condition to which the seventies seem to be moving and which may well subsist in a real 1984 – or, to avoid plagiarism, 1985. Orwell's story was set in England, and so will be mine. Americans may reflect, before deploring this author's inverted chauvinism, that Britain has usually, with the absent-mindedness that acquired her an empire, blazed the major trails of social change. Change for the worse, as well as the better.

The French are cleverer than the British! They are skilful at the intellectual work of getting new constitutions on to paper, but the forms of new order have to emerge in Britain first. Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, which had such an influence on the American Constitution, could not have been written if there had not been an existing social contract in Britain – one that Montesquieu did not thoroughly understand. The British do not well understand their political systems either, but they make no claim to be clever. It was Walter Bagehot who described the British as stupid. They lack the collective intelligence on which the French pride themselves, but they do not noticeably suffer for this deficiency. French intellectuality may have had something to do with the French surrender of 1940; British stupidity counselled resistance to Nazi Germany. Out of stupidity, which may be glossed as intuition, came the seventeenth-century revolution and the settlement of 1688, complete with limitation of the power of the executive and Bill of Rights. Out of the muddle and mess of contemporary Britain the pattern of the future of the West may well be emerging. It is a pattern which many of us must deplore, but only Ingsoc and Big Brother will prove capable of breaking it.

1948: an old man interviewed

Orwell's book is essentially a comic book.

A WHAT?

Consider. My bookshelves are disorganized. Wishing to reread *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I could find at first only the Italian edition. This, for the moment, would have to do. But there was something wrong with that first sentence. '*Era una bella e fredda mattina d'aprile e gli orologi batterono l'una*.' It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks struck one. It ought to be '*battevano tredici colpi*': they were striking thirteen. Latin logic, you see. The translator couldn't believe that clocks would strike thirteen, even in 1984, since no reasonable ear could ever take in more than twelve. So Italian readers were forced to miss a signal of the comic. Here's the original: 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.' You laugh, or smile.

Or shudder?

Or shudder pleasurably. As at the beginning of the best kind of ogre story – one in which strange and terrible and unbelievable things are imposed on a familiar world. The world of English April weather, to begin with. A liverish wind mocking the sun. Swirls of dust at street corners. Grit in your eye. A run-down weary city at the end of a long war. Apartment blocks collapsing, a smell of boiled cabbage and old rag mats in the hallway.

COMIC, *for God's sake*?

Comic in the way of the old music halls. The comedy of the all-too-recognizable. You have to remember what it was like in 1948 to appreciate *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Somebody in 1949 told me – that was the year the book came out – that Orwell had wanted to call *it Nineteen Forty-Eight*. But they wouldn't let him.

You remember the first reviews?

Yes. For the most part, tepidly laudatory. Only Bertrand Russell saw that this was that rare thing, a philosophical novel. The others said that

Mr Orwell was more convincing with his boiled cabbage and rag mats than with his totalitarianism. Some truth there. Orwell was known as a kind of comic poet of the run-down and seedy. *Down and Out in Paris and London. The Road to Wigan Pier.* Wigan Pier – that was always a great music-hall joke. Orwell was good at things like working-class kitchens, nice cups of tea so strong as to be mahogany coloured, the latest murder in the *News of the World*, fish and chips, stopped-up drains. He got the feel of 1948 all right. Physical grittiness. Weariness and privation. Those weren't tragic. All the tragedy then was reserved for the Nazi death-camps. And the Russian ones too, but you weren't supposed to think of those. Ergo, our own troubles were comic.

You mean: if a thing isn't tragic it has to be comic?

In art, if not in real life. Let me tell you more about 1949, when I was reading Orwell's book about 1948. The war had been over four years, and we missed the dangers – buzz-bombs, for instance. You can put up with privations when you have the luxury of danger. But now we had worse privations than during the war, and they seemed to get worse every week. The meat ration was down to a couple of slices of fatty corned beef. One egg a month, and the egg was usually bad. I seem to remember you could get cabbages easily enough. Boiled cabbage was a redolent staple of the British diet. You couldn't get cigarettes. Razor blades had disappeared from the market. I remember a short story that began, 'It was the fifty-fourth day of the new razor blade' – there's comedy for you. You saw the effects of German bombing everywhere, with London pride and loosestrife growing brilliantly in the craters. It's all in Orwell.

What you seem to be saying is that Nineteen Eighty-Four *is no more than a comic transcription of the London of the end of the Second World War.*

Well, yes. Big Brother, for instance. We all knew about Big Brother. The advertisements of the Bennett Correspondence College were a feature of the pre-war press. You had a picture of Bennett *père*, a nice old man, shrewd but benevolent, saying, 'Let me be your father.' Then Bennett *fils* came along, taking over the business, a very brutal-looking individual, saying: 'LET ME BE YOUR BIG BROTHER.' Then you get this business of the Hate Week. The hero of the book, Winston Smith, can't take the lift to his flat because the electricity's been cut off – we were all used to that. But the 1984 juice has been cut as part of an economy drive in preparation for Hate Week – typical government *non sequitur*.

Now we knew all about organized hate. When I was in the army I was sent on a course at a Hate School. It was run by a suspiciously young lieutenant-colonel – boy friend of which influential sadist, eh? We were taught Hatred of the Enemy. 'Come on, you chaps, hate, for God's sake. Look at those pictures of Hun atrocities. Surely you want to slit the throats of the bastards. Spit on the swine, put the boot in.' A lot of damned nonsense.

And I suppose the contradiction of that section of the book is meant to be comic too?

Contradiction?

The electricity has been cut off, but the telescreen is braying statistics to an empty apartment. It's hard to accept the notion of two distinct power supplies.

I hadn't thought of that. I don't think anybody thinks of it. But there you are – a necessary suspension of disbelief, appropriate to a kind of comic fairy tale. And the television screen that looks at you – Orwell had lifted that from Chaplin's *Modern Times*. But it's prophetic, too. We're in the supermarket age already, with a notice saying, 'Smile – you're on TV!'

Did England have television in those days?

Are you mad? We'd had television back in the 1930s. The Baird system, what James Joyce called the 'bairdbombardmentboard' or something. Logie Baird, his name dimly echoing in Yogi Bear. I saw the very first BBC television play – Pirandello, *The Man with a Flower in His Mouth*. You got vision from your Baird screen and sound from your radio. Aldous Huxley transferred that system to his *Brave New World* – 1932, as I remember. Mind you, it's never been necessary actually to have television in order to appreciate its potentialities. The Queen in *Snow White* has a TV screen that puts out just one commercial. In England, Robert Greene has a TV screen or magic mirror for spying in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. That was about 1592. The word existed before the thing. In 1948 the thing was back, I think. It was evident then it was going to be a part of everybody's life. Among the ingenuous there was a feeling that the faces that spoke at you were really looking. The TV was intrusive. The first post-war programmes were more didactic than diverting. The screen was for big faces, not for the tiny figures of old movies. The adjustment of vision we take for granted now wasn't easy at first – I mean the ability to take in a Napoleonic battle on a pocket set. The TV set in the corner of the living-room was an eye, and it might really be looking at you. It was a member of the household, but it was also the