

Pynchon 1984 Intro

Thomas Pynchon : The road to 1984 From The Guardian, Saturday May 3, 2003

George Orwell's last book, 1984, has in a way been a victim of the success of Animal Farm, which most people were content to read as a straightforward allegory about the melancholy fate of the Russian revolution. From the minute Big Brother's moustache makes its appearance in the second paragraph of 1984, many readers, thinking right away of Stalin, have tended to carry over the habit of point-for-point analogy from the earlier work. Although Big Brother's face certainly is Stalin's, just as the despised party heretic Emmanuel Goldstein's face is Trotsky's, the two do not quite line up with their models as neatly as Napoleon and Snowball did in Animal Farm. This did not keep the book from being marketed in the US as a sort of anticommunist tract. Published in 1949, it arrived in the McCarthy era, when "Communism" was damned officially as a monolithic, worldwide menace, and there was no point in even distinguishing between Stalin and Trotsky, any more than for shepherds to be instructing sheep in the nuances of wolf recognition.

The Korean conflict (1950-53) would also soon highlight the alleged Communist practice of ideological enforcement through "brainwashing", a set of techniques said to be based on the work of I P Pavlov, who had once trained dogs to salivate on cue. That something very much like brainwashing happens in 1984, in lengthy and terrifying detail, to its hero, Winston Smith, did not surprise those readers determined to take the novel as a simple condemnation of Stalinist atrocity.

This was not exactly Orwell's intention. Though 1984 has brought aid and comfort to generations of anticommunist ideologues with Pavlovian-response issues of their own, Orwell's politics were not only of the left, but to the left of left. He had gone to Spain in 1937 to fight against Franco and his Nazi-supported fascists, and there had quickly learned the difference between real and phony antifascism. "The Spanish war and other events in 1936-7," he wrote 10 years later, "turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I know it."

Orwell thought of himself as a member of the "dissident left," as distinguished from the "official left," meaning basically the British Labour party, most of which he had come, well before the second world war, to regard as potentially, if not already, fascist. More or less consciously, he found an analogy between British Labour and the Communist Party under Stalin - both, he felt, were movements professing to fight for the working classes against capitalism, but in reality concerned only with establishing and perpetuating their own power. The masses were only there to be used for their idealism, their class resentments, their willingness to work cheap and to be sold out, again and again.

Now, those of fascistic disposition - or merely those among us who remain all too ready to justify any government action, whether right or wrong - will immediately point out that this is prewar thinking, and that the moment enemy bombs begin to fall on one's

homeland, altering the landscape and producing casualties among friends and neighbours, all this sort of thing, really, becomes irrelevant, if not indeed subversive. With the homeland in danger, strong leadership and effective measures become of the essence, and if you want to call that fascism, very well, call it whatever you please, no one is likely to be listening, unless it's for the air raids to be over and the all clear to sound. But the unseemliness of an argument - let alone a prophecy - in the heat of some later emergency, does not necessarily make it wrong. One could certainly argue that Churchill's war cabinet had behaved on occasion no differently from a fascist regime, censoring news, controlling wages and prices, restricting travel, subordinating civil liberties to self-defined wartime necessity.

What is clear from his letters and articles at the time he was working on 1984 is Orwell's despair over the postwar state of "socialism." What in Keir Hardie's time had been an honourable struggle against the incontrovertibly criminal behaviour of capitalism toward those whom it used for profit had become, by Orwell's time, shamefully institutional, bought and sold, in too many instances concerned only with maintaining itself in power.

Orwell seems to have been particularly annoyed with the widespread allegiance to Stalinism to be observed among the Left, in the face of overwhelming evidence of the evil nature of the regime. "For somewhat complex reasons," he wrote in March of 1948, early in the revision of the first draft of 1984, "nearly the whole of the English left has been driven to accept the Russian regime as 'Socialist,' while silently recognising that its spirit and practice are quite alien to anything that is meant by 'Socialism' in this country. Hence there has arisen a sort of schizophrenic manner of thinking, in which words like 'democracy' can bear two irreconcilable meanings, and such things as concentration camps and mass deportations can be right and wrong simultaneously."

We recognise this "sort of schizophrenic manner of thinking" as a source for one of the great achievements of this novel, one which has entered the everyday language of political discourse - the identification and analysis of doublethink. As described in Emmanuel Goldstein's *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, a dangerously subversive text outlawed in Oceania and known only as the book, doublethink is a form of mental discipline whose goal, desirable and necessary to all party members, is to be able to believe two contradictory truths at the same time. This is nothing new, of course. We all do it. In social psychology it has long been known as "cognitive dissonance." Others like to call it "compartmentalisation." Some, famously F. Scott Fitzgerald, have considered it evidence of genius. For Walt Whitman ("Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself") it was being large and containing multitudes, for American aphorist Yogi Berra it was coming to a fork in the road and taking it, for Schrödinger's cat, it was the quantum paradox of being alive and dead at the same time.

The idea seems to have presented Orwell with his own dilemma, a kind of meta-doublethink - repelling him with its limitless potential for harm, while at the same time fascinating him with its promise of a way to transcend opposites - as if some aberrant form of Zen Buddhism, whose fundamental koans are the three party slogans, "War is

Peace", "Freedom is Slavery" and "Ignorance is Strength", were being applied to evil purposes.

The consummate embodiment of doublethink in this novel is the Inner Party official O'Brien, Winston's seducer and betrayer, protector and destroyer. He believes with utter sincerity in the regime he serves, and yet can impersonate perfectly a devout revolutionary committed to its overthrow. He imagines himself a mere cell of the greater organism of the state, but it is his individuality, compelling and self-contradicting, that we remember. Although a calmly eloquent spokesman for the totalitarian future, O'Brien gradually reveals an unbalanced side, a disengagement from reality that will emerge in its full unpleasantness during the re-education of Winston Smith, in the place of pain and despair known as the Ministry of Love.

Doublethink also lies behind the names of the superministries which run things in Oceania - the Ministry of Peace wages war, the Ministry of Truth tells lies, the Ministry of Love tortures and eventually kills anybody whom it deems a threat. If this seems unreasonably perverse, recall that in the present-day United States, few have any problem with a war-making apparatus named "the department of defence," any more than we have saying "department of justice" with a straight face, despite well-documented abuses of human and constitutional rights by its most formidable arm, the FBI. Our nominally free news media are required to present "balanced" coverage, in which every "truth" is immediately neutered by an equal and opposite one. Every day public opinion is the target of rewritten history, official amnesia and outright lying, all of which is benevolently termed "spin," as if it were no more harmful than a ride on a merry-go-round. We know better than what they tell us, yet hope otherwise. We believe and doubt at the same time - it seems a condition of political thought in a modern superstate to be permanently of at least two minds on most issues. Needless to say, this is of inestimable use to those in power who wish to remain there, preferably forever.

Besides the ambivalence within the left as to Soviet realities, other opportunities for doublethink in action arose in the wake of the second world war. In its moment of euphoria, the winning side was making, in Orwell's view, mistakes as fatal as any made by the Treaty of Versailles after the first world war. Despite the most honourable intentions, in practice the division of spoils among the former allies carried the potential for fatal mischief. Orwell's uneasiness over the "peace" in fact is one major subtext of 1984 .

"What it is really meant to do," Orwell wrote to his publisher at the end of 1948 - as nearly as we can tell early in the revision phase of the novel - "is to discuss the implications of dividing the world up into 'Zones of Influence' (I thought of it in 1944 as a result of the Tehran conference) . . ."

Well of course novelists should not be altogether trusted as to the sources of their inspiration. But the imaginative procedure bears looking at. The Tehran conference was the first allied summit meeting of the second world war, taking place late in 1943, with Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin in attendance. Among the topics they discussed was how,

once Nazi Germany was defeated, the allies would divide it up into zones of occupation. Who would get how much of Poland was another issue. In imagining Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, Orwell seems to have made a leap in scale from the Tehran talks, projecting the occupation of a defeated country into that of a defeated world.

This grouping of Britain and the United States into a single bloc, as prophecy, has turned out to be dead-on, foreseeing Britain's resistance to integration with the Eurasian landmass as well as her continuing subservience to Yank interests - dollars, for instance, being the monetary unit of Oceania. London is still recognisably the London of the postwar austerity period. From the opening, with its cold plunge directly into the grim April day of Winston Smith's decisive act of disobedience, the textures of dystopian life are unremitting - the uncooperative plumbing, the cigarettes that keep losing their tobacco, the horrible food - though perhaps this was not such an imaginative stretch for anyone who'd had to undergo wartime shortages.

Prophecy and prediction are not quite the same, and it would ill serve writer and reader alike to confuse them in Orwell's case. There is a game some critics like to play in which one makes lists of what Orwell did and didn't "get right". Looking around us at the present moment in the US, for example, we note the popularity of helicopters as a resource of "law enforcement," familiar to us from countless televised "crime dramas," themselves forms of social control - and for that matter at the ubiquity of television itself. The two-way telescreen bears a close enough resemblance to flat plasma screens linked to "interactive" cable systems, circa 2003. News is whatever the government says it is, surveillance of ordinary citizens has entered the mainstream of police activity, reasonable search and seizure is a joke. And so forth. "Wow, the government has turned into Big Brother, just like Orwell predicted! Something, huh?" "Orwellian, dude!"

Well, yes and no. Specific predictions are only details, after all. What is perhaps more important, indeed necessary, to a working prophet, is to be able to see deeper than most of us into the human soul. Orwell in 1948 understood that despite the Axis defeat, the will to fascism had not gone away, that far from having seen its day it had perhaps not yet even come into its own - the corruption of spirit, the irresistible human addiction to power were already long in place, all well-known aspects of the Third Reich and Stalin's USSR, even the British Labour party - like first drafts of a terrible future. What could prevent the same thing from happening to Britain and the United States? Moral superiority? Good intentions? Clean living?

What has steadily, insidiously improved since then, of course, making humanist arguments almost irrelevant, is the technology. We must not be too distracted by the clunkiness of the means of surveillance current in Winston Smith's era. In "our" 1984, after all, the integrated circuit chip was less than a decade old, and almost embarrassingly primitive next to the wonders of computer technology circa 2003, most notably the internet, a development that promises social control on a scale those quaint old 20th-century tyrants with their goofy moustaches could only dream about.

On the other hand, Orwell did not foresee such exotic developments as the religious wars with which we have become all too familiar, involving various sorts of fundamentalism. Religious fanaticism is in fact strangely absent from Oceania, except in the form of devotion to the party. Big Brother's regime exhibits all the elements of fascism - the single charismatic dictator, the total control of behaviour, the absolute subordination of the individual to the collective - except for racial hostility, in particular anti-Semitism, which was such a prominent feature of fascism as Orwell knew it. This is bound to strike the modern reader as puzzling. The only Jewish character in the novel is Emmanuel Goldstein, and maybe only because his original, Leon Trotsky, was Jewish too. And he remains an offstage presence whose real function in 1984 is to provide an expository voice, as the author of *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* .

Much has been made recently of Orwell's own attitude towards Jews, some commentators even going so far as to call it anti-Semitic. If one looks in his writing of the time for overt references to the topic, one finds relatively little - Jewish matters did not seem to command much of his attention. What published evidence there is indicates either a sort of numbness before the enormity of what had happened in the camps or a failure at some level to appreciate its full significance. There is some felt reticence, as if, with so many other deep issues to worry about, Orwell would have preferred that the world not be presented with the added inconvenience of having to think much about the Holocaust. The novel may even have been his way of redefining a world in which the Holocaust did not happen.

As close as 1984 gets to an anti-Semitic moment is in the ritual practice of Two Minutes Hate, presented quite early, almost as a plot device for introducing the characters Julia and O'Brien. But the exhibition of anti-Goldsteinism described here with such toxic immediacy is never generalised into anything racial. "Nor is there any racial discrimination," as Emmanuel Goldstein himself confirms, in the book - "Jews, Negroes, South Americans of pure Indian blood are to be found in the highest ranks of the Party . . ." As nearly as one can tell, Orwell considered anti-Semitism "one variant of the great modern disease of nationalism", and British anti-Semitism in particular as another form of British stupidity. He may have believed that by the time of the tripartite coalescence of the world he imagined for 1984, the European nationalisms he was used to would somehow no longer exist, perhaps because nations, and hence nationalities, would have been abolished and absorbed into more collective identities. Amid the novel's general pessimism, this might strike us, knowing what we know today, as an unwarrantedly chirpy analysis. The hatreds Orwell never found much worse than ridiculous have determined too much history since 1945 to be dismissed quite so easily.

In a *New Statesman* review from 1938 of a John Galsworthy novel, Orwell commented, almost in passing, "Galsworthy was a bad writer, and some inner trouble, sharpening his sensitiveness, nearly made him into a good one; his discontent healed itself, and he reverted to type. It is worth pausing to wonder in just what form the thing is happening to oneself."

Orwell was amused at those of his colleagues on the left who lived in terror of being termed bourgeois. But somewhere among his own terrors may have lurked the possibility that, like Galsworthy, he might one day lose his political anger, and end up as one more apologist for Things As They Are. His anger, let us go so far as to say, was precious to him. He had lived his way into it - in Burma and Paris and London and on the road to Wigan pier, and in Spain, being shot at, and eventually wounded, by fascists - he had invested blood, pain and hard labour to earn his anger, and was as attached to it as any capitalist to his capital. It may be an affliction peculiar to writers more than others, this fear of getting too comfortable, of being bought off. When one writes for a living, it is certainly one of the risks, though not one every writer objects to. The ability of the ruling element to co-opt dissent was ever present as a danger - actually not unlike the process by which the Party in 1984 is able perpetually to renew itself from below.

Orwell, having lived among the working and unemployed poor of the 1930s depression, and learned in the course of it their true imperishable worth, bestowed on Winston Smith a similar faith in their 1984 counterparts the proles, as the only hope for deliverance from the dystopian hell of Oceania. In the most beautiful moment of the novel - beauty as Rilke defined it, the onset of terror just able to be borne - Winston and Julia, thinking they are safe, regard from their window the woman in the courtyard singing, and Winston gazing into the sky experiences an almost mystical vision of the millions living beneath it, "people who had never learned to think but were storing up in their hearts and bellies and muscles the power that would one day overturn the world. If there was hope, it lay in the proles!" It is the moment just before he and Julia are arrested, and the cold, terrible climax of the book commences.

Before the war, Orwell had his moments of contempt for graphic scenes of violence in fiction, particularly the American hard-boiled crime fiction available in pulp magazines. In 1936, in a review of a detective novel, he quotes a passage describing a brutal and methodical beating, which uncannily foreshadows Winston Smith's experiences inside the Ministry of Love. What has happened? Spain and the second world war, it would seem. What was "disgusting rubbish" back in a more insulated time has become, by the postwar era, part of the vernacular of political education, and by 1984 in Oceania it will be institutionalised. Yet Orwell cannot, like the average pulp writer, enjoy the luxury of unreflectively insulting the flesh and spirit of any character. The writing is at places difficult to stay with, as if Orwell himself is feeling every moment of Winston's ordeal.

The interests of the regime in Oceania lie in the exercise of power for its own sake, in its unrelenting war on memory, desire, and language as a vehicle of thought. Memory is relatively easy to deal with, from the totalitarian point of view. There is always some agency like the Ministry of Truth to deny the memories of others, to rewrite the past. It has become a commonplace, circa 2003, for government employees to be paid more than most of the rest of us to debase history, trivialise truth and annihilate the past on a daily basis. Those who don't learn from history used to have to relive it, but only until those in power could find a way to convince everybody, including themselves, that history never happened, or happened in a way best serving their own purposes - or best of all that it

doesn't matter anyway, except as some dumbed-down TV documentary cobbled together for an hour's entertainment.

By the time they have left the Ministry of Love, Winston and Julia have entered permanently the condition of doublethink, the anterooms of annihilation, no longer in love but able to hate and love Big Brother at the same time. It is as dark an ending as can be imagined. But strangely, it is not quite the end. We turn the page to find appended what seems to be some kind of critical essay, "The Principles of Newspeak". We remember that at the beginning, we were given the option, by way of a footnote, to turn to the back of the book and read it. Some readers do this, and some don't - we might see it nowadays as an early example of hypertext. Back in 1948, this final section apparently bothered the American Book-of-the-Month Club enough for them to demand that it be cut, along with the chapters quoted from Emmanuel Goldstein's book, as a condition of acceptance by the club. Though he stood to lose at least £40,000 in American sales, Orwell refused to make the changes, telling his agent, "A book is built up as a balanced structure and one cannot simply remove large chunks here and there unless one is ready to recast the whole thing . . . I really cannot allow my work to be mucked about beyond a certain point, and I doubt whether it even pays in the long run." Three weeks later the BOMC relented, but the question remains, why end a novel as passionate, violent and dark as this one with what appears to be a scholarly appendix?

The answer may lie in simple grammar. From its first sentence, "The Principles of Newspeak" is written consistently in the past tense, as if to suggest some later piece of history, post- 1984 , in which Newspeak has become literally a thing of the past - as if in some way the anonymous author of this piece is by now free to discuss, critically and objectively, the political system of which Newspeak was, in its time, the essence. Moreover, it is our own pre-Newspeak English language that is being used to write the essay. Newspeak was supposed to have become general by 2050, and yet it appears that it did not last that long, let alone triumph, that the ancient humanistic ways of thinking inherent in standard English have persisted, survived, and ultimately prevailed, and that perhaps the social and moral order it speaks for has even, somehow, been restored.

In a 1946 article on *The Managerial Revolution* , an analysis of the world crisis by the American ex-Trotskyist James Burnham, Orwell wrote, "The huge, invincible, everlasting slave empire of which Burnham appears to dream will not be established, or if established, will not endure, because slavery is no longer a stable basis for human society." In its hints of restoration and redemption, perhaps "The Principles of Newspeak" serves as a way to brighten an otherwise bleakly pessimistic ending - sending us back out into the streets of our own dystopia whistling a slightly happier tune than the end of the story by itself would have warranted.

There is a photograph, taken around 1946 in Islington, of Orwell with his adopted son, Richard Horatio Blair. The little boy, who would have been around two at the time, is beaming, with unguarded delight. Orwell is holding him gently with both hands, smiling too, pleased, but not smugly so - it is more complex than that, as if he has discovered something that might be worth even more than anger - his head tilted a bit, his eyes with

a careful look that might remind filmgoers of a Robert Duvall character with a backstory in which he has seen more than one perhaps would have preferred to. Winston Smith "believed that he had been born in 1944 or 1945 . . ." Richard Blair was born May 14, 1944. It is not difficult to guess that Orwell, in 1984 , was imagining a future for his son's generation, a world he was not so much wishing upon them as warning against. He was impatient with predictions of the inevitable, he remained confident in the ability of ordinary people to change anything, if they would. It is the boy's smile, in any case, that we return to, direct and radiant, proceeding out of an unhesitating faith that the world, at the end of the day, is good and that human decency, like parental love, can always be taken for granted - a faith so honourable that we can almost imagine Orwell, and perhaps even ourselves, for a moment anyway, swearing to do whatever must be done to keep it from ever being betrayed.

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