

# 5

JONATHAN GREENBERG

## *N* *E* *-F* and the Tradition of Satire

*N*; *e ee*; *E* *!-F* *†* *•* as Satire

*N* *E* *-F* (1949) is routinely described as a satire. But why? Satire is usually thought of as a mode of literature or art that uses comic

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

Yet it is not mere proximity to *A* *F* that makes *N* *E* - *F* 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' (C , 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,

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' (C, 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 dystopia 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

## 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 *Mimesis* 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

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

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 ~~606~~ ai- as

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,

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' (C, 12, p. 211), Orwell commented wryly.

Conventional wisdom holds that *Brave New World*, *1984*, 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 War of the Worlds*. 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 *Solitaire* (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



Koestler understood the psychic effects of totalitarianism on the individual.

In writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell fused elements of *D*

*N* and *I* *H*

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

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'



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

- 10 A F'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, *A C : F E* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 309.
- 12 Thomas More, (1516), trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), p. 53.
- 13 Jonathan Swift, *G ' M* (1726), ed. Christopher Fox (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995), p. 242.
- 14 H. G. Wells, *M* (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, *A - M* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 205).
- 16 E. M. Forster, *C S S* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p. 6.
- 17 Tom Moylan, *S : S F , , D* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001), p. 111.
- 18 Forster, 'The Machine Stops' (1909), in *C S S*, pp. 109-46, at p. 131.
- 19 Yevgeny Zamyatin, (1924), trans. Natasha Randall (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), pp. 102, 27, 59.
- 20 Kumar, *A - M*, p. 229.
- 21 Zamyatin, , p. 55.
- 22 Aldous Huxley to Sydney Schiff (7 May 1931), in *S L A H*, ed. James Sexton (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), p. 255.
- 23 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Aldous Huxley and Utopia' (1942), in *P*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (1955; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 95-118, at p. 98.
- 24 Fredric Jameson, *A F : M D C O S F* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 202.
- 25 Claeys, *D*, p. 332.
- 26 On this distinction, see Jonathan Greenberg, *M C I S* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- 27 Adrian Wanner, 'The Underground Man as Big Brother: Dostoevsky's and Orwell's Anti-Utopia', *S*, 8.1 (1997), pp. 77-88, at p. 81.
- 28 Swift, *G ' M*, p. 227.
- 29 Juvenal, *M S S*, p. 15; Jane Austen, *N A , L S , M , S*, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie, introd. Claudia L. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 198.