

Not Death, but Annihilation: Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Catastrophe of Englishness

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George Orwell's *1984* is the expression of a mood, and it is a warning. The mood it expresses is that of near despair about the future of man, and the warning is that unless the course of history changes, men all over the world will lose their most human qualities, will become soulless automatons, and will not even be aware of it.

(Erich Fromm, Afterword to George Orwell's *1984*, 313)

German philosopher Erich Fromm's Afterword to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was added in 1961, twelve years after the novel's publication but well into its prestigious life as a classic of dystopian fiction. Fromm's interpretation, excerpted above, exemplifies a popular vein of critical thought about both Orwell and his novel that privileges universal categories over national ones. This still-common reading situates Orwell as a seeker of universal truth undisturbed by ideological affiliation or petty political difference. The American literary critic Lionel Trilling, for example, claimed in 1952 that Orwell "made no effort to show that his heart was in the right place, or the left place . . . He was interested only in telling the truth" (79). If the nature of that truth remains contested, we can nonetheless conclude that *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, like its author, is concerned with higher truths about the nature of the modern world.

However, this conclusion problematically depends on implicit understandings of genre. Generally speaking, *genre* names "a type, species, or class of composition" (Baldick 104), but it also describes the conventions and features by which those types are created and understood. Should an author wish to write a detective novel, for instance, she will need to understand the genre's form, common character types, and tonal and stylistic characteristics. The genre of dystopia takes broad issues of social organization and political

ideology as its primary focus. There is no such thing as a pure or final genre. Like languages, genres are fluid, social, and historically situated. Every literary text comprises a hierarchy of generic components, some dominant and some minor (Bakhtin 301-331). Thus, even if *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s dominant generic identity is dystopian, other generic conventions and expectations—other ways of seeing and thinking about the truths it tells—are necessarily in play.

I question the tendency to read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* primarily as a dystopia by reading the novel from a second generic lens, that of the English catastrophe novel. This latter form of narrative fiction depicts the destruction of Britain by a natural disaster, invasion, or social collapse, and then depicts the struggles of an individual or group who is forced to navigate the ruins of British—most often English—society. Unlike dystopias, English catastrophe narratives shift attention from the universal toward provincial cultural concerns. Like the dystopia, the English catastrophe narrative presents opportunities for social critique by contrasting post-catastrophic societies with their predecessors; its emphasis on the narrower domains of bourgeois social values and national culture often leads to conservative reaffirmations of English imperial ideology. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s simultaneous deployment of both narrative modes exposes a crucial tension between its critique of a mechanized, totalitarian modernity on the one hand and its requiem for the immemorial values—and revolutionary potential—of English culture on the other.

Before we dive into Orwell's novel, however, it is important to understand more about each genre. Crafted to depict and interrogate large-scale forms of social organization—industrial modernity, for example, or capitalism—the dystopia foregrounds the ideological identity of the world built within its pages, necessarily emphasizing universal concepts such as 'modern man.' We can see this in Orwell's protagonist, an English everyman named Winston Smith. In one sense Winston represents a classic dystopian protagonist who maps a universal loss of individuality and decency in a mechanized and authoritarian world. Tom Moylan suggests that both utopias

and dystopias generate their universal dimension formally by focusing on the ‘iconic register’—the dystopian society itself—at the expense of the ‘discrete register’ of character and plot (*Demand* 36). A character’s function in this paradigm is thus different than in conventional realist fiction. As Raffaella Baccolini contends, the primary job of the dystopian protagonist is to create two distinct narratives for the reader (qtd. in Moylan, *Scraps* 148). First, he or she shapes a narrative of the dominant ideas that underpin the dystopian society, helping the reader understand what kind of society it is and, more importantly, how it works. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s opening foray into Winston’s life reveals how Oceania’s socio-political structure monitors, polices, and manipulates individual subjects to promote Party power. Through Winston, we see an ideological layout of Oceanic society ‘mapped’ onto our own, and this reveals by critical contrast what the former lacks: individual identity, basic decency, a firm sense of empirical truth, as well as freedom of love, loyalty, and dissent.

This ideological mapping gives rise to the dystopian protagonist’s second function, which is to produce a ‘counter-narrative’ through which resistance to the dominant narrative can be expressed. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s counter-narrative manifests itself in Winston’s small but seemingly significant acts of rebellion against the Party, from writing independent thoughts in his journal, to his clandestine affair with Julia, to his ultimately fruitless attempt to overthrow the Party by joining O’Brien’s mysterious ‘Brotherhood.’ Each small revolt contributes to a larger counter-story, which the novel presents as Winston’s attempt to “[carry] on the human heritage” in an inhuman world designed to deform and suppress it (Orwell, *1984* 33). Here we see the dystopian emphasis on the universal once again. Winston revolts not only for the citizens of Oceania, but in defense of humanity. Interrogating Winston in the Ministry of Truth, O’Brien explains that, “If you are a man, Winston, you are the last man. Your kind is extinct; we are the inheritors. Do you understand that you are *alone*?” (270, Orwell’s italics). While this statement is directed at Winston, the individual man, its implications are more fundamental. The Party confronts humanity at the level of species-being. It aims

not to retrain one to be a different or ‘correct’ kind of man, to think about society or politics in this or that conscious way, but to eliminate the very concept of a thinking ‘man’ altogether. Winston’s counter-narrative foregrounds resistance to this threat of universal annihilation, and it is through his resistance—futile though it is—that we learn to critique the ideological conditions which might one day allow an Oceania to arise in our own world.

The English catastrophe novel, on the other hand, often works to reaffirm prevailing ideological conditions, particularly those related to the role of Britain as an imperial power and to the centrality of English culture. Like the dystopia, it emerged in the late nineteenth century, during an extended economic recession that weakened national confidence and hinted that the country’s global dominance might be waning. The imperial context is especially important for understanding the cultural work performed by the catastrophe narrative. British imperial expansion after 1875 brought Britons into contact with an increasing number of so-called primitive peoples, whose very existence, when read in light of recently popularized Darwinian theories of adaptation and evolution, led to a pervasive ambivalence about the role of English civilization relative to the larger world. On the one hand, the colonial encounter justified the imperial civilizing mission; from their perch atop the pecking order, the English tasked themselves with bringing light to the supposedly uncivilized. On the other, Darwin’s theories suggested that social evolution did not necessarily equate to historical ‘progress’; a society, like a species, could also decline. If the English were among the most powerful of nations at the close of the nineteenth century, from that point, they could only fall.

The catastrophe novel provided a cultural vehicle for expressing the latent fear of a people threatened by the prospect of historical change and cultural obsolescence. Because we use ‘catastrophe’ primarily to signify disaster in the contemporary age, we forget that its original meaning in ancient Greek tragedy also connoted the *subversion* of the existing order such a calamity produces. Catastrophe thus foregrounds transformation, particularly the fall of one power and the rise of another. From a British perspective,

‘change’ would most likely mean the collapse of the British Empire and the displacement of the English from the forefront of world history.

The English catastrophe novel mimics this anxiety in its form, which privileges strategies of ‘world-reduction.’ This term has three relevant meanings for us. First, it describes the plot of a catastrophe novel: a disaster occurs, reduces the possible scope of narrative action—what we would normally think of as ‘the world’—and confines it to a very specific location, in this case England. Second, this narrative-spatial contraction generates a process of sociocultural reduction, which Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. describes as “apocalyptic winnowing”:

a small fraction of humanity survives the near-annihilation of the species. The survivors are deprived of the conditions of civilization. . . . Typically, they degenerate into tribes. The genre often treats this reduction of human civilization as a form of historical purification, or at least an opportunity to begin the civilizing process again from scratch. (226)

In this scenario, the distinction between a universally conceived ‘humanity’ and the more specific sociocultural identities of specific human survivors collapses. Think of the possible issues in interpretation that might arise if we assume that ‘humanity’ is the same thing as ‘the English.’ The latter is actually only a sliver of the former, yet in the catastrophe, they are made synonymous.

Third, this sociocultural reduction has significant political consequences. Fredric Jameson describes the strategy of world-reduction as “the experimental production of an imaginary situation by excision of the real” (274). This strategy is linked to the utopian desire to explore a world “released from the multiple determinisms (economic, political, social) of history itself” (Jameson 274-5). In other words, the catastrophe novel frames what Csicsery-Ronay Jr. describes above as “an opportunity to begin the civilizing process again from scratch” as an experiment in speculative politics. In this, it is very similar to the dystopia. However, while the dystopia examines what might happen if this or that ideology were to take

hold and transform the world, the catastrophe interrogates what might happen if this or that people were freed from the world and left to their own devices. This experiment questions how humans might organize themselves if freed from the broad forces—global capitalism, for instance, or industrial social organization—which drive historical change and limit political solutions to pressing human problems.

Unlike the dystopia's pretensions to the universal, the catastrophe narrative is more parochial and inwardly-focused. It foregrounds a cast of common characters marked specifically as products of English society and culture, complete with ingrained habits and values representative of the national character. The disaster that narrows narrative vision focuses attention on what these people do when the routine civilized conditions they take for granted suddenly vanish. This puts such characters—and the English cultural values they represent—under a microscope. Subjected to sustained physical and psychological pressure, survivors often shed the trappings of civilized English culture to reveal baser motives and 'savage' desires. This commonplace development represents the genre's critical edge, as cultural regression of this kind illuminates the hypocrisy of English imperial ideology to reveal that the English are not special or privileged, but are, in fact, of the same human cloth as those colonized peoples against whom their superiority has traditionally been defined. This frequently produces an existential crisis, as survivors are forced to examine critically the relationship between their identities and the social and material conditions which legitimize them. As Roger Luckhurst asserts, "The extremities of the English disaster narrative . . . work as a laboratory reconceiving English selfhood in response to traumatic depredations" (132). Most often, this self-reflexive energy gives way to the question of how survivors will rebuild their new (and often better) world.

The reader takes at face value the universal human dimension of this new world without understanding how it remains conditioned by its implicit association with the social consciousness and cultural habits of the English. What begins as an articulation of national identity crisis ends with the ideological reaffirmation that English

cultural and political values are, as the basis of the new society to come, central to world-historical experience. This process takes many forms across a variety of texts, but in many cases when the English catastrophe novel critiques British imperial arrogance, it also implicitly reestablishes imperial authority. Therefore, if the dystopian genre generates a critical perspective by foregrounding a universal defense of humanity, the catastrophe works against this by reinforcing hierarchical distinctions *within* humanity, privileging the English above everyone else. Reading dystopia as catastrophe narrative exposes the parochial dimensions of the former's pretensions to universality, while reading catastrophe as dystopia illuminates how the latter goes about universalizing those dimensions. This approach reveals the too-often-ignored centrality of imperial English ideology to Orwell's novel.

It is not a stretch to describe *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a catastrophe novel. First, from exposure to both Winston's dim memories and the historical narrative contained in Emmanuel Goldstein's book, we learn that the current global order emerged following a protracted period of nuclear warfare (Orwell, 1984 32-3, 194), making the society described quite literally post-catastrophic. While Oceania is in part the result of dystopian world-building, it is also the product of catastrophic world-reduction. The political fracture of the earth into three equally powerful superstates ensures that, as the Goldstein book announces and O'Brien later confirms, "Oceania is the world" (265).

The catastrophic isolation of the English setting—clearly marked in the novel's focus on a near-future London and English countryside—is literal. But the text also depicts world-reduction figuratively in its representation of Oceania's abolition of empirical truth: "Everything faded into mist. The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth" (75). If the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not actually an island of humanity in a sea of desolation, it exists as though it were. This is relevant because it establishes the grounding for narrative action and meaning in two overlapping registers. One is the product of dystopian world-building and the other of catastrophic world-reduction; one indicates

a universalized 'human' context and the other a national 'English' context.

In this double frame, Winston can easily be read as a quintessential English catastrophe survivor looking nostalgically back at a vanished past from the vantage point of its ruined future. Early in the novel, for instance, the narrator notes that Winston "felt as though he were wandering in the forests of a sea bottom, lost in a monstrous world where he himself was the monster. He was alone. That past was dead, the future was unimaginable" (Orwell, 1984 26). The last part is crucial, as one of the characteristics separating the dystopia from the catastrophe novel is the latter's shift in orientation—noticeable here—toward the 'dead' past. Born or raised in entirely different worlds, dystopian protagonists often live in either partial or total ignorance of the past; it is because they are so totally integrated into their worlds that they can inhabit them naturally. Catastrophe survivors, however, are often haunted by the old world precisely because it comprises the material and ideological conditions on which their sense of self is based. With little memory of the world as it was before the Revolution, Winston exists most consciously in the dystopian realm. Yet, while he cannot consciously understand the nature of the connection, he is, like a catastrophe survivor, also drawn inexorably to the past in ways which complicate his primary role as a dystopian protagonist fighting in defense of universal human values.

Consider Winston's compulsion to write. The narrator tells us that Winston's journal is a record of "a truth that nobody would ever hear. But so long as he uttered it, in some obscure way the continuity was not broken. It was not by making yourself heard but by staying sane that you carried on the human heritage" (Orwell, 1984 27). From the perspective of the text's dystopian register, this comment indexes Winston's struggle both to claim a generically construed individual identity through the act of writing and, in doing so, to forge a connection with 'the human heritage,' carrying on the feeble light of human resistance. However, his motivation is also that of the catastrophe survivor to connect that vague future, previously described as "unimaginable" (26), to an English past of which he

is the sole remaining embodiment and which he understands as the sole repository of knowledge and truth on which any viable future can be based. Performing a toast with Julia and O'Brien in the latter's apartment, Winston refuses to acknowledge the dystopian critique generated in and by his character, choosing instead to look backward: "'What shall it be this time?' [O'Brien] said, still with the same faint suggestion of irony. 'To the confusion of the Thought Police? To the death of Big Brother? To humanity? To the future?' 'To the past,' said Winston. 'The past is more important,' agreed O'Brien gravely" (176). This exchange marks a moment of noticeable confusion between the novel's dystopian and catastrophic registers. As a dystopian protagonist intent on destroying the inhuman world he is in part responsible for illuminating, Winston should choose to toast any of the options offered by O'Brien because they signify a universal level of humanity and an imagined future better than his conscious resistance might help create. Nonetheless, he balks at this opportunity and instead retreats into the safety of an English tradition he can barely remember.

However, if we turn to Orwell's WWII-era writings on Englishness, we can see that Winston needn't consciously remember his English heritage to feel a connection to it. In "England Your England," Orwell constructs the English as an inherently free people bound together by a transcendental sense of unified identity. While the ardent socialist in Orwell can admit that the modern English nation is "the most class-ridden country under the sun," Orwell the popular patriot can simultaneously affirm that it is nonetheless still "a family . . . bound together by an invisible chain" of "emotional unity" (*Collection* 266-7). What Englishness means cannot be tied to the nation's modern dispensation because "in all societies the common people must live to some extent *against* the existing order. The genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface" (256, Orwell's italics). It is something that one feels rather than something one does consciously. Furthermore, it is always accessible because "[England] is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature" (254). What we *can* know about the English,

however, derives from the things they do and feel naturally. Thus, we can look for “the gentleness of English civilization,” “the *privateness* of English life,” or, most importantly, the fact that “the liberty of the individual is still believed in” (255-257, Orwell’s italics).

Deprived of the past, Winston cannot know his Englishness consciously. Therefore, he must depend on a more fundamental structure of unarticulated feeling, which in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is described as ‘ancestral memory’:

Always in your stomach and in your skin there was a sort of protest, a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had a right to. It was true that he had no memories of anything greatly different... And though, of course, it grew worse as one’s body aged, was it not a sign that this was *not* the natural order of things... Why should one feel it to be intolerable unless one had some kind of ancestral memory that things had once been different? (60, Orwell’s italics)

These moments of ancestral memory occur regularly throughout the text and provide Winston with vague references to a past and a set of values he cannot remember, but which he nonetheless feels to be his. The room above Mr. Charrington’s shop fills him with an emotional nostalgia for English privacy: “it seemed to him that he knew exactly what it felt like to sit in a room like this, in an armchair beside an open fire with your feet in the fender...utterly alone, utterly secure” (Orwell, 1984 97). Even more acute is his reaction to ‘the Golden Country,’ an idyllic country landscape that awakens in him the perennial connection between English land and national identity (122-3).

Most importantly, though he has never known true freedom, Winston—our English protagonist who is otherwise a proxy for humanity—nonetheless feels it to be his ‘right.’ Cairns Craig writes that Orwell’s articulation of popular Englishness dovetails with a commonly held, Second-World-War myth that “[the English] were uniquely the representatives of the traditions of liberty . . . the inherent liberty of those who are ‘free-born’ because they are born English” (142). Taking this into account, we might say that Winston does not know he is free because he is a human faced with systematic

inhumanity in a dystopian society, but rather because ‘being free’ is something an Englishman does naturally.

Reading the catastrophe elements in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* against its primary dystopian framework helps us see that within the novel’s universal defense of humanity is the far less human assumption that the basis of that humanity lies in English cultural antecedents. In other words, it exposes the parochial in the global. English cultural and political values masquerade as the spirit of humanity *tout court*. Conor Cruise O’Brien writes of Orwell that, “He never thought it worth while [*sic*] to imagine seriously what it would be like to belong to a people with quite a different historical experience from that of the English” (159-60). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents all historical experience as a version of imperial English experience and suggests that all ideas about humanity or freedom or individualism extend outward from an English center.

If *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be read as a form of narrative catastrophe, we can also turn this around and read catastrophe as dystopia. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes assumptions about the primacy of Englishness and universalizes them through a process of dystopian world-building. On the other hand, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not a novel in which English cultural values remain central to the world created. As we learn from Winston’s journey, it is precisely his *inability* to access the Englishness at the heart of historical experience that leads to his ultimate downfall. The horror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* lies not only in the absence of individuality and human values. Jonathan Rose suggests that “the ultimate horror of *Nineteen Eighty-four*” is that “there won’t always be an England” (41). This is true, but it does not go far enough. Rather, the novel’s final despair lies in the utter annihilation of the English cultural foundations from which the very possibility of individual life proceeds.

The novel famously culminates with Winston’s final ‘conversion’ in Room 101. Here, faced with his worst fear—vicious rats—his individual resistance is overcome, and he saves himself only by denouncing Julia, the last remaining exterior object to which he retains any private attachment. The crucial idea hanging over this scene is foreshadowed in Winston and Julia’s initially confident

assumption that “they can’t get inside you” (Orwell, 1984 166). As Winston explains: “Facts . . . could not be kept hidden. They could be tracked down by inquiry, they could be squeezed out of you by torture. But if the object was not to stay alive but to stay human . . . what difference did it ultimately make? . . . the inner heart, whose working were mysterious even to yourself, remained impregnable” (167). Winston assumes that there remains in humanity something sacred and inviolable, “some spirit, some principle . . . that [the Party] will never overcome . . . The spirit of Man” (270). Armed with this belief, he can, as he does throughout the novel, live as though he were already dead because it is not the biological condition of being alive that matters, but rather ‘staying human.’ This idea is similar in form to the assumption Orwell makes in “England Your England” that, while an Englishman may die, the humane popular spirit of the common people lives on ‘beneath the surface’ (*Collection* 256), where it remains forever accessible. Musing on the tenacity of private loyalties, Winston thinks that “It was natural for his mother to protect him and his sister; it was natural for the woman in the boat, even though it was futile. *Things persist, even though we die*” (Orwell, 1984 164, Orwell’s italics). In turn we might say that it was natural for the English-born Winston to assume his own individual freedom and to thus assume that he could ‘carry on the human heritage’ (27): as long as ‘they can’t get inside of you,’ this seems entirely reasonable.

Of course, as both Winston and Julia learn, in Oceania, they *can* get inside of you, and what they can do once there is compel “not death, but annihilation.” As readers of a dystopia, we are free to interpret this phrase literally. Not only do citizens of Oceania die in the reductively physical sense, but the very idea of their being is obliterated: “You must stop imagining that posterity will vindicate you, Winston. Posterity will never hear of you. You will be lifted clean out from the stream of history . . . nothing will remain of you” (Orwell, 1984 254). However, the metaphorical possibilities inherent in this statement are also hugely significant in terms of its larger cultural resonance. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell argues that the bourgeois individual’s sense of self is so conditioned

by social and material class privilege that any real attempt at “[abolishing] class distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself” (161). While this is directed specifically at the English Leftists with whom Orwell frequently quarreled, it has wider implications for the current discussion. The ‘part’ that Orwell believes must be abolished is that deeply entrenched English sense of social distinction, the ability to conceive of the value of one’s humanity as above another. Because he conceived of England as, “A family with the wrong members in control” (Orwell, *Collection* 267), however, Orwell naturally assumed that rejecting this ideology and reclaiming power for the common people involved something like that ‘partial self-abolition’: excise the rotten bits and trust in the organism to heal itself and grow. As he notes: “England . . . is changing. And . . . it can change only in certain directions. . . . That is not to say that the future is fixed, merely that certain alternatives are possible and others not. A seed may grow or not grow, but . . . a turnip seed never grows into a parsnip” (254). The political possibility of a new and more just world is here made metaphorically reliant on a pre-existing framework Orwell links to English culture. Englishness itself represents the possibility of that future, and as long as an Englishman can never be separated from that which is natural to him, the utopian possibility of a better world remains.

This separation is what transpires in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. While never confirmed, the text suggests that Winston’s conscious opposition to the Party has been carefully managed by O’Brien: “There was no idea that he had ever had, or could have, that O’Brien had not long ago known, examined, and rejected. His mind *contained* Winston’s mind” (Orwell, *1984* 256). This can be seen in Winston’s constant reference to ideas and feelings that float vaguely at the periphery of his consciousness. For example, Winston describes a recurring dream, first experienced seven years prior, in which he hears a voice floating out of the darkness saying, “We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness” (25). Though he does not know why, he feels that this is O’Brien’s voice, a conclusion eventually confirmed by narrative events. As the plot progresses it grows increasingly clear that the trajectory of Winston’s ‘counter-

narrative' to his dystopian society has been engineered. Winston is drawn to the prole quarters because "he had a feeling that he had been in this neighborhood before" (86), and this leads to his belief that the proles represent a possible connection to a lost human future. Similarly, the piece of paper Winston finds that exculpates three men earlier convicted of treason "had evidently been slipped in among the others and then forgotten" (78). The use of passive voice here implies that an absent subject may have purposefully performed this subversive act, leading him to believe in the existence of empirical truth. The Party is depicted as having coopted Winston's natural ability to connect with that everlasting organic Englishness on which human freedom depends; its ability to do so is perhaps the ultimate catastrophe of Orwell's dystopian nightmare.

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