

## 29 Imagining the Future

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats. At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide: the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features. Winston made for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times it was seldom working, and at present the electric current was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for Hate Week. The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.

Inside the flat a fruity voice was reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron. The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely.

GEORGE ORWELL *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

IT IS ONLY SUPERFICIALLY paradoxical that most novels about the future are narrated in the past tense. Michael Frayn's *A Very Private Life* (1968) starts in the future tense ("Once upon a time there will be a little girl called Uncumber") but he can't keep it up for long, and soon shifts into the present tense. To enter into the imagined world of a novel we have to orientate ourselves in space and time with the characters, and the future tense makes that impossible. The past tense is "natural" for narrative; even the use of the present tense is somewhat paradoxical, since anything that has been written down has by inference already happened.

Of course, for us, today, 1984 *has* already happened. But when Orwell wrote the novel he was imagining the future, and to make sense of it we have to read it as a prophetic, not a historical novel. He used the narrative past tense to give his picture of the future a novelistic illusion of reality. By setting his story only thirty-odd years ahead he was perhaps aiming to impress his readers with the imminence of the political tyranny he envisaged. But there is also a grim humour in the anagrammatic mirroring of the date of the novel's completion (1948) in its title. Orwell drew on many recognizable features of life in "austerity" post-war Britain, as well as on reports of life in Eastern Europe, to create the depressing atmosphere of London in 1984: drabness, shortages, dilapidation. Science fiction usually tells us how different the material conditions of life will be in the future. Orwell suggested that they would be much the same, only worse.

The first sentence of the book is justly admired. "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." The sting is in the last word, though it is probably more powerful for readers who remember a time when there were no digital clocks or twenty-four-hour timetables. Until you reach it, the discourse sounds reassuringly familiar. It could be the beginning of an "ordinary" novel about an ordinary day in the contemporary world. It's the anomalous word "thirteen" that tells us with wonderful economy that a very different experience is in store. Clocks, time, and the calculations that go with them, are part of the rule of reason by which we order our lives in the ordinary, familiar world. So "thirteen" is like the moment in a nightmare when something tells

you are dreaming and you wake up. But in this case the nightmare is only beginning, and the hero, at least, never wakes up – from a world in which power can decree that two and two make five.

In the next sentence only the proper names seem to stand out from the style of low-key realism. Winston Smith was obviously named for Winston Churchill, leader of the nation in World War II, and the mansion block he lives in would have been built shortly after the end of that war. The irony of these details becomes evident when we learn later in the text that the globe is embroiled in continuous intercontinental warfare thirty-six years on. The gritty dust that blows into the lobby suggests that the roads and pavements outside are not well cleaned, and this note of physical squalor and deprivation deepens in the following paragraph, with the references to boiled cabbage, the old rag mats on the floor, the power-cuts, and Winston's varicose ulcer.

The reference to "Hate Week", and the huge coloured poster with the caption, "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU," are the only unfamiliar details in what could otherwise be a description of a run-down block of council flats in 1948. They are equivalent in effect to the clock striking thirteen. They are enigmas, arousing our curiosity – and apprehension, since what they imply about the social context is not reassuring, and already we are beginning to identify with Winston Smith as a victim of this society. Hate Week and Big Brother are associated, by contiguity, with the physical squalor and deprivation of the environment – even with the vile wind in the first paragraph. The features of Big Brother resemble Stalin's, but they also recall a famous recruiting poster of World War I, depicting a heavily moustached military man (Lord Kitchener) pointing a finger, with the caption, "Your Country Needs You." Only in the two-way television screen (which keeps the viewer under permanent observation) does Orwell use the licence of science-fiction to imagine a gadget that did not exist in his own time. Its technological sophistication seems all the more sinister in the drab and poverty-stricken setting of Victory Mansions.

Orwell, in short, imagined the future by invoking, modifying and

recombining images of what his readers, consciously or unconsciously, already knew. To some extent, this is always the case. Popular science fiction, for instance, is a curious mixture of invented gadgetry and archetypal narrative motifs very obviously derived from folk tale, fairy tale and Scripture, recycling the myths of Creation, Fall, Flood and a Divine Saviour, for a secular but still superstitious age. Orwell himself echoes the story of Adam and Eve in his treatment of the love affair between Winston and Julia, secretly monitored and finally punished by Big Brother, but with an effect that is the reverse of reassuring, and so subtly that the reader may not be conscious of the allusion. In that respect as in others his technique is indistinguishable from that of the traditional realist novel, though his purpose was different: not to reflect contemporary social reality, but to paint a daunting picture of a possible future.