



# THE AGE OF ANXIETY: INTO WORLD WAR II

## 36. George Orwell and dystopia

**George Orwell**  
***Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)**

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*At the beginning of the novel Orwell piles up details about the protagonist and his background, without delaying all the necessary information.*

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled<sup>1</sup> into his breast in an effort to escape the vile<sup>2</sup> wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust<sup>3</sup> from entering along with him.

- 5 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<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup>. 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  
10 current was cut off during daylight hours.

- It was part of the economy drive<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>7</sup>, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so  
15 contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.

1. **nuzzled**: it. *sprofondato*

2. **vile**: hostile but also shameful and corrupt

3. **swirl ... dust**: it. *un turbine di polvere mista a ghiaia*

4. **tacked**: it. *fissata con puntine da disegno*

5. **ruggedly handsome features**: it. *tratti marcati ma belli*

6. **economy drive**: it. *manovra economica*

7. **lift-shaft**: it. *pozzo dell'ascensore*



Inside the flat a fruity voice was reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron<sup>8</sup>. The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled<sup>9</sup> mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a  
 20 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. He moved over to the window: a smallish, frail figure, the meagreness of his body merely emphasized by the blue overalls which were the uniform of the party. His hair was very fair, his face naturally sanguine, his skin roughened by coarse  
 25 soap and blunt<sup>10</sup> razor blades and the cold of the winter that had just ended. Outside, even through the shut window-pane, the world looked cold. Down in the street little eddies<sup>11</sup> of wind were whirling<sup>12</sup> dust and torn paper into spirals, and though the sun was shining and the sky a harsh blue, there seemed to be no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere. The black moustachio'd face gazed down from  
 30 every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own. Down at street level another poster, torn at one corner, flapped fitfully<sup>13</sup> in the wind, alternately covering and uncovering the single word INGSOC. In the far distance a helicopter skimmed down between the roofs, hovered<sup>14</sup> for an instant  
 35 like a bluebottle<sup>15</sup>, and darted away again with a curving flight. It was the police patrol, snooping into people's windows. The patrols did not matter, however. Only the Thought Police mattered.

8. **pig-iron**: it. *ghisa*

9. **dulled**: opaque

10. **blunt**: it. *non affilato*

11. **eddies**: it. *mulinelli*

12. **whirling**: it. *facendo girare*

13. **flapped fitfully**: waved from time to time  
(it. *sbatacchiava di tanto in tanto*)

14. **hovered**: stayed in the air without moving forwards or backwards

15. **bluebottle**: it. *moscone*

## The nightmare



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## A.

*Non-conformity and rebellion cost Winston imprisonment and punishment, an inevitable stage to full reintegration in society as a perfect, homologated subject. In O'Brien's words, he is re-educated.*

With that first blow on the elbow, the nightmare had started...  
 How many times he had been beaten, how long the beatings had continued, he could not remember. Always there were five or six men in black uniforms at him simultaneously. Sometimes it was fists, sometimes  
 5 it was truncheons, sometimes it was steel rods<sup>1</sup>, sometimes it was boots. There were times when he rolled about the floor, as shameless as an animal, writhing<sup>2</sup> his body this way and that in an endless, hopeless effort to dodge<sup>3</sup> the kicks, and simply inviting more and yet more kicks, in his ribs, in his belly, on his elbows, on his shins<sup>4</sup>, in his groin<sup>5</sup>, in his  
 10 testicles, on the bone at the base of his spine. There were times when it went on and on until the cruel, wicked, unforgivable thing seemed to him not that the guards continued to beat him but that he could not force himself into losing consciousness. There were times when his nerve so forsook him<sup>6</sup> that he began shouting for mercy even before  
 15 the beating began, when the mere sight of a fist drawn back for a blow was enough to make him pour forth a confession of real and imaginary crimes. There were other times when he started out with the resolve of confessing nothing, when every word had to be forced out of him between gasps of pain<sup>7</sup>, and there were times when he feebly tried to  
 20 compromise, when he said to himself: 'I will confess, but not yet. I must hold out till the pain becomes unbearable. Three more kicks, two more kicks, and then I will tell them what they want.' Sometimes he was beaten till he could hardly stand, then flung<sup>8</sup> like a sack of potatoes onto the stone floor of a cell, left to recuperate for a few hours, and then  
 25 taken out and beaten again. There were also longer periods of recovery.

1. **steel rods:** it. *barre d'acciaio*
2. **writhing:** it. *contorcendo*
3. **dodge:** avoid
4. **shins:** it. *stinchi*

5. **groin:** it. *inguine*
6. **forsook him:** left him
7. **gasps of pain:** it. *rantoli di dolore*
8. **flung:** thrown

**B.**

*The torture continues, but this time it is carried out by O'Brien.*

O'Brien was looking down at him gravely and rather sadly. His face, seen from below, looked coarse and worn, with pouches<sup>1</sup> under the eyes and tired lines from nose to chin. He was older than Winston had thought him; he was perhaps forty-eight or fifty. Under his hand there was a dial with a lever on top and figures running round the face.

5 'I told you,' said O'Brien, 'that if we met again it would be here.'  
'Yes,' said Winston.

Without any warning except a slight movement of O'Brien's hand, a wave of pain flooded his body. It was a frightening pain, because he could not see what was happening, and he had the feeling that some mortal injury was being done to him. He did not know whether the thing was really happening, or whether the effect was electrically produced; but his body was being wrenched<sup>2</sup> out of shape, the joints were being slowly torn apart. Although the pain had brought the sweat out on his forehead, the worst of all was the fear that his backbone was about to snap<sup>3</sup>. He set his teeth and breathed hard through his nose, trying to keep silent as long as possible.

15 'You are afraid,' said O'Brien, watching his face, 'that in another moment something is going to break. Your especial fear is that it will be your backbone. You have a vivid mental picture of the vertebrae snapping apart and the spinal fluid dripping out of them. That is what you are thinking, is it not, Winston?'

1. **pouches:** it. *borse*

2. **wrenched:** twisted violently

3. **snap:** break

## C.

*Winston is taken to Room 101, the worst thing in the world. For each person it is his own personal hell. For some it is death by fire or being buried alive. For Winston it is...*

Winston could hear the blood singing in his ears. He had the feeling of sitting in utter loneliness. He was in the middle of a great empty plain, a flat desert drenched<sup>1</sup> with sunlight, across which all sounds came to him out of immense distances. Yet the cage with the rats were not two metres away from him. They were enormous rats. They were at the age when a rat's muzzle grows blunt<sup>2</sup> and  
 5 fierce and his fur brown instead of grey.

...

There was an outburst of squeals from the cage. It seemed to reach Winston from far away. The rats were fighting; they were trying to get at each other through the partition. He heard also a deep groan<sup>3</sup> of despair. That, too, seemed to come from outside himself.

O'Brien picked up the cage, and, as he did so, pressed something in it. There was a sharp click.  
 10 Winston made a frantic effort to tear himself loose from the chair. It was hopeless, every part of him, even his head, was held immovably. O'Brien moved the cage nearer. It was less than a metre from Winston's face.

'I have pressed the first lever,' said O'Brien. 'You understand the construction of this cage. The mask will fit over your head, leaving no exit. When I press this other lever, the door of the cage will  
 15 slide up. These starving brutes will shoot out of it like bullets. Have you ever seen a rat leap through the air? They will leap onto your face and bore straight into it. Sometimes they attack the eyes first. Sometimes they burrow through the cheeks and devour the tongue.'

The cage was nearer; it was closing in. Winston heard a succession of shrill<sup>4</sup> cries which appeared to be occurring in the air above his head. But he fought furiously against his panic. To think, to think,  
 20 even with a split second left – to think was the only hope. Suddenly the foul musty<sup>5</sup> odour of the brutes struck his nostrils. There was a violent convulsion of nausea inside him, and he almost lost consciousness. Everything had gone black. For an instant he was insane, a screaming animal. Yet, he came out of the blackness clutching an idea. There was one and only one way to save himself. He must interpose another human being, the body of another human being, between himself and the rats.

1. **drenched:** it. *inondato*

2. **blunt:** it. *ottuso*

3. **groan:** it. *lamento, gemito*

4. **shrill:** high-pitched and unpleasant

5. **foul musty:** it. *nauseante e stantio*