

Burgess in the Orwell Game:

1985 as Cacotopian Ars Poetica

KÁROLY PINTÉR

DOI: [10.53720/QLGO8077](https://doi.org/10.53720/QLGO8077)

The book 1985 is the third and last dystopia in the oeuvre of Anthony Burgess. It can be considered unique since it contains a string of non-fictional texts reflecting on Orwell's classic as well as related philosophical, political, social, and theological issues, followed by a dystopian novella entitled "1985." The essay argues that the book, but especially the essays, can be read as Burgess's "cacotopian ars poetica," or his last and most extensive statement on the genre.

If there is anything like a "triptych" of English literary dystopias in the twentieth century, the three most obvious candidates would be Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). While some critics may argue for the imaginative or literary qualities of other novels, I can think of no other works that approach the well-established popularity, wide-ranging impact, and cultural penetration of these classics. Written within a 30-year period, they display some distinctly similar concerns, such as the possibility of individual freedom vis-a-vis the modern oppressive state, the threats presented by scientific advances and various collectivist ideologies, and the futility of rebellion in an unheroic age. All three stories are also distinctly British in their cultural preoccupations, taking place mostly in and around London and satirising aspects of the social class system or invoking English literary classics, especially William Shakespeare.

Each novel, however, represents a strikingly different cultural era. Huxley, profoundly disgusted by both the scientific Wellsian utopia and the industrial-commercial United States of the 1920s, presents an artificial and mechanised far future whose quasi-human society functions smoothly like a well-constructed machine because its human parts are also purpose-built and rigidly standardised and organised, with almost any shade of individuality and human particularity carefully bred and educated out of them. Orwell's nightmarish vision is much closer to its empirical present in fictional time, projecting its ultimate totalitarianism less than 40 years into the future, and the wretched existence under the absolute control of the adjectiveless, therefore, absolute Party and its symbolic leader, Big Brother, offers an oppressive essence distilled from all the gruesome experiences of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union.

Compared to these two audacious and horrifying visions, Burgess's novel looks less ambitious and less shocking too: his fictional world is hardly futuristic at all, its Britain still recognisably contemporary (i.e. 1960s—Burgess himself suggested that he did not project his fiction more than 10 years into the future [*You've Had Your Time* 26]), except for the violent youth subculture and a more authoritarian government ready to experiment on convicted criminals. The boldest invention of *A Clockwork Orange* is arguably its language, the brilliantly realised Nadsat slang in which the story is told by his teenage narrator, Alex, the least sympathetic character of the three main heroes. *A Clockwork Orange* owes a lot of its success to the ingenious 1971 movie adaptation by Stanley Kubrick, which was a worldwide success but scandalised conservative audiences with its (by contemporary standards) explicit depiction of violence and rape, and forced Burgess into the uncomfortable position of defending a story that significantly departed from his own original and preferred British edition.²³

23 Burgess discussed his problems with Kubrick's movie in several subsequent writings, emphasising that Kubrick—accidentally—was unfamiliar with the original British edition, in which Alex finally chooses to give up violent crime to become a more responsible adult. Therefore, the conclusion of the movie version—in line with the truncated American edition—presented an unregenerate criminal finally free from behavioural constraints, whereas Burgess's original ending was meant to emphasise the benefit of free will and moral choice. But Burgess was even more irritated by baseless accusations after the movie came out that he promoted or celebrated mindless violence: "I was also sickened

A Clockwork Orange, however, is not the only dystopia written by Burgess: there are two other books by him whose fame and success never came close. *The Wanting Seed*, also published in 1962, imagined England in an unspecified future time suffering from the consequences of overpopulation, food shortages, and political repression. *1985*, written in 1978, was a peculiar tribute to Orwell's classic: a string of nonfictional writings discussing and dissecting *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well as several issues related to the story, followed by a short dystopian novel entitled "1985," once again taking place in the very near future and presenting a chaotic and authoritarian Britain dominated by the TUC, or the Trades Union Congress. It is this work, *1985*, that I wish to discuss in the following, since its rare combination of essay and fiction, meant to be read in conjunction, reflects on both Orwell and Burgess's own views on the dystopian genre, amounting to an ambiguous statement that can justifiably be considered his cacotopian *ars poetica*. Cacotopia is Burgess's preferred term for dystopia because he believes—incorrectly, actually—that utopia was originally neutral, encompassing both positive and negative versions,²⁴ and partly because "[i]t sounds worse than dystopia" (*1985* 330).

The book displays a rather complex structure. The first part consists of nine texts of (mostly) non-fictional character, although in Burgess's case the line is sometimes blurred: the whole series, for instance, opens with a short Q-and-A session entitled "Catechism," which sets out the underlying assumptions and principles of Orwell's *1984*, from its fictional alternative

by the manner in which a book that, all of ten years before, had made very little impact on the reading public was now becoming a kind of invisible primer of evil" (*You've Had Your Time* 257). He finds an opportunity to vent his grievance in *1985* as well when discussing his earlier book: "The novel was not well understood. Readers, and viewers of the film made from the book, have assumed that I, a most unviolent man, am in love with violence" (*1985* 371).

- 24 Thomas More's original coinage of "utopia" deliberately included a pun: the Greek compounds of "eutopia" (goodplace) and "outopia" (noplac) are both transcribed in Latin as "utopia." The pun is made explicit by one of the prefatory materials of the early Latin editions of More's *Utopia*, a poem on Utopia by an unknown poet called Anemolius entitled *Hexastichon* (see e.g. More [4]). While it cannot be determined whether the poem was actually written by More (it may be an addition by Peter Giles or other Humanist friends who contributed the ancillary writings), it does reveal that the earliest readers of the book were clearly aware of the dual meaning of the term and its implication of an "ideal human community" as opposed to "any imaginary human society."

history to the ideology and organisation of the Party. After a brief statement of intentions, Burgess presents a self-interview with “an old man,” and later on there is another mock-conversation with himself. The remaining five pieces are straightforward essays presenting wide-ranging reflections on Orwell’s classic as well as broader excursions into related philosophical, political, social, and theological issues. Then follows the novella entitled “1985,” Burgess’s attempt to present his “Orwellian” dystopia from the vantage point of the late 1970s. Finally, there are two appendices, one of them clearly a deferential parody of Orwell’s summary of Newspeak at the end of his book, the other is an Epilogue which continues the series of mock-interviews of the first part and contains some musings on possible future developments in the world.

At the time of its publication, the volume generated mostly negative critical responses: Martin Amis in *The New York Times* summed the book up as “the first half is reasonable [sic] good, the second half unconscionably poor,” then described the novella as a “stoked-up 1976,” the year of the deepest economic and political crisis in Britain. Clive James in *The New York Review of Books* commented that “Burgess would probably like *1985* to be thought of as a teeming grab-bag of ideas. In fact it is a scrap heap” because of the lack of coherence in his vision and because his political insight is limited to an antipathy to soulless bureaucratic government. Burgess “is an individualist by instinct—a valuable trait in a personality, but a limited viewpoint from which to criticize a whole society.” In his massive study on utopia and anti-utopia, Krishan Kumar offered a similarly bipolar opinion about the book: while he praised the essayistic first half as “lively and provocative in the best sense,” he had no more to say about the novella than it is “excruciatingly awful” (Kumar 469n3).

The only significant exception to the predominantly dismissive tone of criticism is John Stinson’s essay, in which he made an effort to interpret the novella in the context of Burgess’s Manichaean world view (while completely neglecting the essays): the world is made up of opposites in constant and ceaseless conflict, and above all, the struggle between good and evil is necessary and eternal. Since these two principles presuppose each other, evil is an ineradicable part of both human nature and human society, and those who try to pretend it does not exist and this way avoid moral

choice by staying neutral are mocked, dismissed, and condemned in quite a few novels of Burgess. “Apathy—torpor, moral neutrality—Burgess insists, is a deadly and all-pervasive sin of our times” (Stinson 512). The England of “1985” is presented exactly as a morally “lukewarm” place which casts out people with strong moral convictions.

Stinson’s dedicated defence notwithstanding, I tend to agree with those critics who believe that the novella entitled “1985” does not belong to Burgess’s notable fictional achievements. It suffers from problems characteristic of other mediocre Burgess novels (weak, random plotting, and few convincing characters) without many compensating virtues, since his vision of the near-future Britain lacks true originality and creativity despite occasional hilarious satirical episodes. He did endeavour to model the story on Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, especially in the opening part, but a direct comparison of the two novels is not flattering to Burgess. This may be at least partly accounted for by the fact, revealed by the author in his autobiography, that the entire book was written on the initiative of an American publishing house and not out of his own creative inspiration, and was a product of a period of severe depression. His own wife, Liana, wrote secretly to Little, Brown in Boston and asked them to commission a book from Burgess, “anything to make [him] feel that [he] was still wanted” (Burgess, *You’ve Had Your Time* 351). He commented on this entire period of his career (the late 1970s) the following way: “When a writer writes about other writers it is a sign of a loss of creative vitality or else an evasion of the generation of it” (350). Nonetheless, even if the fictional element is not truly inspired, Burgess’s idiosyncratically creative mind was sufficiently stimulated by the discussion of Orwell’s classic and produced perhaps the most extended set of critical and theoretical reflections about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and related issues of literary dystopias by a fellow first-rate British writer and a younger contemporary.

To my mind, the fact that Burgess was a contemporary of Orwell is a significant factor: although a generation younger (there was a 14-year age gap between them), Burgess claimed to have met Orwell during the war years when he and his first wife fell in with a number of writers and artists during their weekend pub crawls in London. He even suggested that Orwell took the idea of Winston’s phobia of rats from a painter, Gilbert Wood, another regular of these drinking bouts, who was terrified of rats (Burgess,

Little Wilson and Big God 291), and that the Chestnut Tree Café was inspired by a popular contemporary haunt, the Mandrake Club:

Orwell, whom I saw briefly at the Mandrake Club, which specialised in dubious gin flavoured with cloves and a large number of chessboards. It was run by a man named Boris. I had brought back with me from Gibraltar a number of tins of Victory cigarettes, which were a very briefly maintained army ration and were quite unsmokable. ... Orwell's noncommittal eye took in the tin I had on my table at the Mandrake, which became the Chestnut Tree Café, but did not accept a cigarette, preferring to roll his own. But his description of the Victory cigarettes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is accurate, and his Victory gin is Boris's. Odd members of the club sat in dark corners doing chess problems. (*Little Wilson and Big God* 334–335)

These claims are impossible to verify, of course, as they may well be imaginary embellishments of very brief encounters; it is at least suspicious that none of these anecdotes feature in Burgess's essays and remembrances written as part of *1985*, except for a brief hint that the Mandrake Club may have indeed served as a model for the Chestnut Tree Café, "a place where you drank gin of mysterious provenance and played chess" (*1985* 303). In his autobiography, written a decade later, Burgess may not have been able to resist the temptation of expanding his personal mythology and attributing some minor personal influence on one of the best-known English novels of the twentieth century.

However, being a younger contemporary offers Burgess a unique perspective to reveal how closely Orwell's dystopian vision is rooted in the experience of a bombed-out, dilapidated, decaying London of the late 1940s whose inhabitants were suffering from all sorts of post-war hardships and deprivations. In the playful mock-dialogue entitled "1948: an old man interviewed," Burgess astonishes his readers with a perplexing declaration: "Orwell's book is essentially a comic book" (*1985* 298). At first sight, it sounds like a *non sequitur*: how could the darkest, most horrible nightmare vision of twentieth-century literature be comic? Yet Burgess succeeds in pointing

out that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does not lack comedy, especially black comedy and satirical or absurdist parody, which he has a particularly sharp eye for. He goes on to argue, utilising plenty of specific examples and parallels, that Orwell's Airstrip One is an only slightly distorted view of London in 1948, the "comedy of the all-too-recognizable" (298) from war-torn, shabby Victorian houses through didactic, in-your-face propaganda posters to such everyday discomforts as power cuts, shortages of goods, and bad food. He supplies some revelations that may even be shocking to some Orwell fans, for instance that the infamous name Big Brother is rooted in the pre-war advertisements of the Bennett Correspondence College of Sheffield: "You had a picture of Bennett *père*, a nice old man, shrewd but benevolent, saying, 'Let me be your father.' Then Bennett *fils* came along, taking over the business, a very brutal-looking individual, saying: 'let me be your big brother'" (299–300). And Burgess's memory is correct, as this 1936 newspaper ad illustrates (see image of the advertisement).²⁵ Telescreens are merely extrapolations of the pre-war Baird television sets with the twist that the screen is also an eye observing the viewers (300–301); the four towering ministries are an imaginative extension of the headquarters of the BBC (the Ministry of Truth), where Orwell broadcast propaganda aimed at colonial India from a basement room numbered 101 (303).

Of course, the claim that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is essentially comic is itself an obvious exaggeration for comic effect, and Burgess is fully aware of it. Yet, his strikingly unusual perspective is a helpful corrective against the majority view of the novel as a universally and unflinchingly bleak vision of the future. Newspeak can also be seen as a grim joke, for instance, the name of the four government ministries that are called Minitrue, Miniluv, Minipax, and Miniplenty, with their punning suggestion that merely a minimal amount of these virtues is represented by these institutions (an obvious example that Burgess failed to cite). Burgess's powerful sense of black humour gets full rein in the next essay devoted to Ingsoc, when he joins Orwell's language game by translating the most famous part of the Declaration of Independence into Newspeak, which turns out like this:

25 Source: <<https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/File:Im19360130MEE-Bennett.jpg>>

We say that truth writed is truth unwrited, that all mans are the same as each other, that their fathers and mothers maked them so that they are alive, free from all diseases and following not food but the feeling of having eated food. They are maked like this by their parents but Big Brother makes them like this. Big Brother cannot be killed but he is to be killed, and in his place there will be himself... (323)

Translating a foundational document of the United States of America is not an accidental choice; in Burgess's own admission, the book was intended to correct widespread American misconceptions about Orwell's novel: "American readers ... had thought that Orwell was an arch-conservative warning against Soviet communism, and the vapid use of the term 'Orwellian' for any vision of the future ... had to be rectified" (352). Burgess, as a fellow Englishman and a contemporary, recalls in detail how the majority of the country, and the ordinary soldiers in the British Army in particular, were fed up with the conservatism of Churchill and hoped for a left-wing turn by voting for Labour at the 1945 parliamentary elections. They experienced the British class system in a particularly perverted way in the armed forces, with all the officers being "gentlemen," speaking in a recognisable educated, upper-class accent, and treating their lower-class subordinates accordingly. "If a man entered the army as a mild radical, he approached the 1945 election as a raging one. A Welsh sergeant summed it up for me: 'When I joined up I was red. Now I'm bloody purple'" (307).²⁶ The fact that the main character of Orwell's novel is named Winston Smith is not an expression of admiration for Britain's war-time leader and the glorious past of the Empire but another comic gesture, juxtaposing a rare and aristocratic first name with a most ordinary surname to create a hilariously improbable combination: "The name Winston Smith is comic: it gets a laugh from British readers" (305).

26 The same sentiments are recalled by another contemporary of Burgess and a fellow World War II veteran, science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, in a letter written almost exactly at the time *1985* was published: "Another memory: with what glee did I rush into the C.O.'s office, in May '45, to break the good news that we had just thrown out Winston! I find it hard to believe that I was such a typical parlour pink in those days."

Burgess is careful to emphasise that the Ingsoc of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has precious little to do with the existing English Socialists, that is, the Labour Party that came into power in 1945. Orwell, a committed Socialist, did not write a pamphlet against the Labour government at the time, but he observed the fanatic tendencies of his fellow left-wing intellectual compatriots with a good deal of suspicion and distrust. He was distinguished by a strongly idiosyncratic, liberal, and individualist Socialist conviction tinged with a strong sense of English patriotism and a powerful nostalgic love for the traditions and popular culture of his homeland:

Orwell prized his English inheritance—the language, the wild flowers, church architecture, Cooper’s Oxford marmalade, the innocent obscenity of seaside picture postcards, Anglican hymns, bitter beer, a good strong cup of tea. His tastes were bourgeois, and they veered towards the working class. (310)

Burgess astutely points out that such patriotic nostalgia for the past—and partly for a working-class life he could not have due to his middle-class family and upbringing—is irreconcilable with doctrinaire Socialist convictions. Orwell yearns for an imaginary Dickensian England “of farmhouse kitchen with hams hanging from the rafters, a smell of old dog ... kindly policemen, clean air, noisy free speech in pubs, families sticking together, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, the fug of the old music hall” (311), while he has a distinct fear of the future. That is why the past functions as a subversive element in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a source of pragmatic values to be set against ideological ones: the beautiful blank notebook and the old-fashioned pen, the nursery rhyme Winston is trying to recall throughout the first half of the novel, the words of Shakespeare, the glass paperweight with the coral in it.

In my opinion, Burgess discerns Orwell’s nostalgia-tinged conservative bent so well partly because of the similarly paradoxical nature of their intellectual outlook in relation to their social background. As an Eton-educated former imperial policeman, Orwell is committed to egalitarian Socialism out of empathy for the plight of the poor, yet he is still unable to love the workers as his equals: they remain an essentially different group of people to him,

“noble animals” like Boxer in *Animal Farm* (1985 311) or the singing prole woman in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 180–181). His patriotic and nostalgic cultural conservatism prevents him from becoming a conventional Socialist faithful with a firm belief in the bright future of English Socialism. Burgess, a recusant Lancashire Catholic of modest lower-middle-class background (see *Little Wilson and Big God* 7–88),²⁷ would have made a much more typical Labour supporter, yet he never shared Orwell’s faith in Socialism but displays a similar nostalgia for the distinctive curiosities of English culture,²⁸ as well as a distrust of growing state power and repressive bureaucracies. Burgess, who clearly disliked the entrenched British class system and never missed an opportunity to lampoon the aristocrats and the wealthy of his country, nonetheless stuck to a certain individualist or even libertarian political attitude throughout most of his life, which may be described as “conservative” only in the sense that he consistently disliked the inexorable trend of twentieth-century democracies (not to mention dictatorial regimes) towards more regulations and restrictions in every area of life, fewer individual liberties, and higher taxation. He was obviously a cultural conservative, however, excoriating modern mass cultures, the decline of education, and the debasing impact of mindless entertainment provided by television.²⁹ As a self-conscious intellectual who struggled to make a living as an independent writer, he had a sobering view of intellectuals in modern society:

27 Jim Clarke in his essay identified Burgess’s family origin as “poor working-class background” (28), but this designation is contradicted by Burgess’s own autobiography, who described his father as a bookkeeper who played the piano in music halls at nights, while his stepmother owned a pub and later a tobacco and a liquor store. It is certainly true that his paternal uncles were manual labourers and his stepmother was practically illiterate, but apparently Burgess’s family lived a notch above the working class: he wrote that he was often mocked by other kids due to his family being “rich” (Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* 80–83).

28 See his long diatribe against the metric system, those “Cartesian abstractions of France” (1985 311) and his somewhat unconvincing argument that the old British coinage represented “empirical common sense, not abstract rationality” (312).

29 See, for instance, his remarks in the essay entitled “Bakunin’s children,” a rumination on anarchic youth movements and revolutions: “Education consists in taking swift and economical meals out of the larder called the past. ... The young very logically reject the past because it seems of no use to people living in an eternal present. ... The young do not necessarily reject educational establishments, however, since being taught involved

[I]n a free society, intellectuals are among the under-privileged. What they offer—as schoolteachers, university lecturers, writers—is not greatly wanted. If they threaten to withdraw their labour, nobody is going to be much disturbed. ... They lack the power of the capitalist boss on the one hand and the power of the syndicalist boss on the other. They get frustrated. They find pure intellectual pleasures inadequate. They become revolutionaries. Revolutions are usually the work of disgruntled intellectuals with the gift of the gab. (1985 315)

In Burgess's reading, Ingsoc was not an imaginary extrapolation of Labour government in Britain but a radically different fantasy: the ultimate totalitarian dictatorship of fanatic intellectuals. Burgess points out the blatant impossibility of such an occurrence as a historical development, emphasising the absurdity of such a scenario and coming to another radical conclusion: "Orwell gave us nothing new. ... He was playing the intellectual game of constructing a working model of a utopia, or cacotopia. How far, he seems to say, can I push things without seeing the careful structure collapse?" (1985 317).

By declaring Orwell's book an "intellectual game," Burgess has also revealed his own attitude to the construction of cacotopias. The element of game playing has been an inherent part of all major literary utopias from Thomas More onward: satirising and parodying real-life phenomena and characters, creating an aura of credible storytelling while carefully placing alienating markers in the text to signal the fictionality and the impossibility of the narrative, presenting absurd imaginary social or political institutions with a straight face—all these are among the methods employed by utopias and dystopias alike, methods of a complex intellectual game.³⁰ Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* served as a widely popular model for such sarcastic literary playfulness at the expense of contemporary politics and society for generations of English writers, and Orwell was also a great admirer of Swift (see his essay "Politics vs. Literature" written in 1946

being in communities of their own kind, with teaching as an irrelevance or as a purveying of things to be rejected, such focuses of protest being welcome to the idealism of youth" (1985 353).

30 For a more detailed explication of the parallels between utopias and games, see Pintér (41–43).

[Orwell, *Collected Essays* 241–261]). Burgess identifies several key elements of game-playing in Orwell's fiction: the grim parody of contemporary London with the defamiliarising effect of the characters using Newspeak phrases, paying with dollars, terrified by telescreens, and confronted with the face of Big Brother wherever they go. In the essay "Ingsoc Considered," he focuses on the philosophy of the Party, which he describes as a form of collective solipsism, aiming at the political community to think like a single mind and utilising the mental technique of doublethink to achieve that. Since the Party denies the existence of objective reality and arrogates to itself unlimited power to control all aspects of not just the present but also the past, doublethink is necessary for Party members to constantly adapt to the alterations issued by Party leaders whenever the past is "rectified." Newspeak, another initiative to guarantee absolute orthodoxy, stems from the ambition of removing all shades of ambiguity and all opportunities for heretical thought from language. Burgess, however, also points out that all these are also stimulating intellectual games: "Newspeak is, God help us, fun. Doublethink is, God help us again, absorbing mental acrobatics. There may be dangers in living in 1984, but there is no need for dullness" (324).

He also spots the contradictions in the totalitarian game that Orwell has constructed. The simple and static pleasure derived from unlimited power, cruelty, and violence is not enough to maintain a regime; human nature is more complicated than that. He offers an insight that echoes the German political philosopher Carl Schmitt's famous thesis about the sovereign (Schmitt 5–15): "We recognize power when we see a capacity for choice unqualified by exterior factors. When authority is expressed solely through doing evil, then we doubt the existence of choice and hence the existence of power" (327). This claim is an interesting complement to Burgess's definition of individual freedom, i.e. the capability for moral choice, which is denied to Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* due to his psychological conditioning: a person or a body exercising absolute power also loses its freedom of action if all they do is evil. "O'Brien is talking about not of power but of a disease not clearly understood. Disease, of its nature, either kills or is cured" (328).

Burgess underlines the outer limits of controlling reality by the collective solipsistic mind of the Party as well: doublethink fails as a method of collective adjustment when faced with such irrefutable natural phenomena

as emergencies, disasters, earthquakes, epidemics, or the destruction of the environment. Even the language of Newspeak would not remain eternally unchanging under extreme restrictions, and would probably develop its own slang; Burgess, never missing a comic opportunity, offers a characteristically entertaining example: “If *doubleplusungood* ... is applied to an ill-cooked egg, we shall need something stronger to describe a sick headache. *Unbigbrotherwise uningsocful doubledoubledoubleplusungood*, for instance” (329).

But true to his Manichean worldview of thinking in terms of opposites, he switches his perspective once again at the end of the essay by pointing out that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not just a “Swiftian toy but ... an extended metaphor of apprehension ... an apocalyptic codex of our worst fears” (329). The Orwellian game may be entertaining, but it is far from light-hearted: the threat of totalitarian nightmare, the total loss of individual freedom has been haunting humanity at least since the early twentieth century.

In the next essay entitled “Cacotopia,” Burgess offers a brief but insightful survey of Orwell’s antecedents, beginning with a quote from Thomas More’s *Utopia* (which could easily be interpreted as a frightful dystopia by a modern reader) but focusing primarily on Zamyatin’s *We* and Huxley’s *Brave New World*,³¹ books Orwell had read and publicly commented on: he was impressed and inspired by the former while disagreeing and arguing with the latter. Burgess cannot resist the temptation to bring into the discussion his own cyclical theory of history, which revolves around two conflicting views of human nature, both rooted in early Christian theology. The Augustinian view, classically formulated by St. Augustine of Hippo in the early fifth century, is a sceptical and austere understanding of human nature, which is tainted by the original sin of Adam and Eve and, therefore, always tempted by evil, making salvation impossible without divine grace. The opposite view is termed Pelagian by Burgess after Pelagius, a monk and theologian of British Celtic origin, who was Augustine’s contemporary: he denied the doctrine of original sin and insisted that humans can achieve salvation guided by their own free will. Augustine considered

31 Somewhat surprisingly, Burgess ignores what is arguably the earliest modern dystopia in English, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) by H. G. Wells. He must have been unaware of the strong impact Wells made on Zamyatin and *We*, which has since been uncovered by criticism (see e.g. Parrinder 115–126).

Pelagius a dangerous heretic and managed to get him condemned in 418 at the Synod of Carthage. Burgess insists that the entire history of humanity can be captured in the struggle of these two interpretations of human nature, one pessimistic and one optimistic, which continue to influence modern thinking in secularised form as well.³² The Pelagian impulse is dominated by the optimistic view that humans are perfectible and general human progress is inevitable since most humans wish to be good; Pelagian phases of history are characterised by liberal laws and a minimum of coercion. The Augustinian view is suspicious of human frailty and sinfulness; therefore, Augustinian governments introduce strict laws, enforce conservative morals, and bring about a more authoritarian exercise of power. Utopians are typically secularised Pelagians, and the textbook example of Pelagianism for twentieth-century educated British readers was the Wellsian utopia with its optimistic promise of both malleable human nature and the unlimited potential of scientific progress.³³ As Burgess remarks, “[t]he Wellsian brand of Pelagianism blamed criminal impulses on environment. What priests called ‘original sin’ was a reaction to poverty, slum tenements, enforced ignorance and squalor. A scientific socialism would extirpate what was called crime” (1985 334). Dystopians tend to subscribe to an Augustinian view of humanity, seeing the potential of humans to commit evil greater than their potential to do good. But Burgess does not picture these two views as polar

32 The most extensive treatment of the Augustinian-Pelagian dichotomy can be found in *The Wanting Seed*, in which Tristram, a history teacher, explains the cycle as three phases constantly following one another: “We have a Pelagian phase. Then we have an Intermediate phase. ... This leads into an Augustinian phase. ... Pelphase, Interphase, Gusphase, and so on, for ever and ever. A sort of perpetual waltz” (Burgess, *The Wanting Seed* 17). The entire novel is an illustration of how these cycles work out in an overpopulated Britain of the future. Jim Clarke argues, however, that Burgess’s theological labels are ill-fitting to what are essentially political attitudes and suggests that “the vying forces are ought to be more accurately called Hobbesian and Rousseauvian than Augustinian and Pelagian” (Clarke 31).

33 This is not to say that H. G. Wells was actually a simple-minded optimist, and his early SF novels from *The Time Machine* (1895) to *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899) offer ample testimony to his pessimistic anthropology. The utopian visions of his mature career represent conscious efforts to show a way to humanity to prevent a global catastrophe; in this sense, he was an eminent representative of Augustinian and Pelagian views mixed in the same person.

opposites because they are present in all of us: “Orwell was Pelagian in that he was a Socialist, Augustinian in that he created Ingsoc” (335).

This theological diversion leads Burgess to the discussion of good and evil, in which he offers some crucial observations. First of all, he separates these concepts from the terms “right” and “wrong,” which are impermanent values determined by State laws and changing circumstances. Burgess distinguishes between moral and aesthetic goodness: the pleasure offered by a delicious meal or a beautiful piece of music is morally neutral, and—in a startling twist of argument—Burgess suggests that God’s goodness is easier to be imagined as analogous to this kind of aesthetic pleasure, “eternally gratifying and of an infinite intensity; self-sufficient, moreover, with the symphony hearing itself and the eaten also the eater. The goodness of art, not of holy men, is the better figure of divine goodness” (336). Moral goodness consists of selfless, altruistic acts intended to promote or restore the capacity of humans to act freely. These acts are characterised by disinterestedness, just as pure evil is disinterested, but evil acts aim at removing or restricting human freedom. Whoever exercises power at the helm of the State has a vested interest in expanding their scope of action, which requires restricting the scope of freedom of the ruled. In Orwell’s cacotopia, the state commits evil for its own sake, without a specific purpose, chiefly for the delight of cruelty. But Orwell, due to his entirely secular world view, could see evil only in the State and not in individuals, a conviction shared by modern Western culture as a whole:

The view that evil is somehow outside the individual still persists in a West that has discarded all but the rags of its traditional beliefs. ... [I]t is comforting to believe that this evil is not built into the human entity, as Augustine taught, but comes from without, like a disease. The devil and its attendant demons own the monopoly of evil ... but evil does not grow in man himself. The superstitious feel happier about their own backslidings if they can attribute them to the Father of Lies. The Orwellians blame it all on Big Brother. (338)

The problem of individual free will remains in the centre of the next two essays as well. In “Bakunin’s children,” focusing primarily on the anarchic youth movements whose memories were still strong in the late 1970s, Burgess argues, faithful to his cyclical view of history, that the conflict between the young and the old is yet another eternal and recurring phenomenon. The young of all ages react to demands of conformity from mature society with resistance and their own counterculture. The main slogan of youth movements is the demand for more freedom, but they tend not be interested in the lessons of the past transmitted by tradition and education; therefore, they lack the knowledge necessary to understand the full meaning and implications of free will, which potentially renders them unwitting allies or tools of adult manipulators:

Youth groups are very useful engines: young people have energy and sincerity and ignorance. They have all the qualities that would make them valuable for the professional agitators who want to bring in Ingsoc. The young could easily be made to love Big Brother as the enemy of the past and the old. He is, after all, careful not to call himself Our Father. (354)

For Burgess, the primary condition of free will is the ability to exercise judgement in three crucial areas: truth, beauty, and goodness. No matter how much humans are determined by their genetic heritage, their social environment, their history, and their unconscious, they should still be able to make individual judgements aided by their education, which “is the first condition of freedom” (357). Then they should be free to act or not to act on those judgements or to act contrary to them: Burgess’s own example is his decision not to quit smoking even though he is fully aware that smoking is bad for his health (he ultimately died of lung cancer). He insists that people should have the right to commit even illegal acts as long as they have full knowledge of the consequences of their acts.

In the following essay, entitled “Clockwork Oranges,” with a characteristic Burgessian reversal he subverts his own previous manifesto for individual free will by examining the various possibilities offered by modern science and technology to influence and manipulate individual minds.

In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, such technologies are not employed by O'Brien and the Thought Police (except in one single episode, almost as an illustration of the unlimited potential of the Thought Police to break down the resistance of the mind), primarily because the Party's whole theory of power requires individuals with a recalcitrant mind to be broken and "cured." As Burgess puts it, "Ingsoc depends ... on a kind of exercise of free will, for acceptance of its authority is nothing unless it is free acceptance" (364). It is all part of a strategic game symbolised by chess in the novel, and Winston's final meditation on the eternal victory of white over black in chess problems is a gut-wrenching summary of how much he has capitulated to the superior power of Big Brother.

Other dystopias before and after Orwell have, on the other hand, utilised contemporary scientific breakthroughs; Huxley, for instance, relied on Pavlovian conditioning in *Brave New World* (Burgess discusses Pavlov's career in some detail as an example of the ultimate Pelagian who wished to perfect the human brain) or B. F. Skinner on behavioural psychology in *Walden Two*. Burgess also cites a late book by Arthur Koestler entitled *Janus*, in which Koestler expresses his hope that the evolutionary "error" that made the human brain susceptible to aggressive instincts and blind submission to authority could be "cured" by drugs in the future. Burgess remarks with characteristic sarcasm that it is "[s]trange that the expert beings who are to administer the cure are themselves men. Can we really trust the diagnostics and remedies of these demented creatures? But the assumption is that, though all men are ill, some are less ill than others" (369).

Burgess himself takes a firm stand against any such approaches that treat the imperfections of human nature as some sort of a disease to be cured, and he cites his own *A Clockwork Orange* as proof of his dissent. His statement is perhaps his most essential utterance of the entire essay cycle and deserves to be quoted in full:

I recognise that the desire to cherish man's unregenerate nature, to deny the possibility of progress and reject the engines of enforced improvement, is very reactionary, but, in the absence of a new philosophy of man, I must cling to whatever I already have. What I have in general is a view

of man which I may call Hebreo-Helleno-Christian-humanist. It is the view which the Savage in *Brave New World* ... brings to the stable utopia of AF 632: "I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin." The World Controller, Mustapha Mond, sums it up for him: "In fact, you're claiming the right to be unhappy." Or the right, perhaps, not to find life dull. (372)

This apparently utterly serious proclamation of his creed is, however, immediately subverted in the conclusion of the essay. Burgess, who describes his faith as a "residual Christianity that oscillates between Augustine and Pelagius" (372), proposes that the teachings of Jesus Christ could be applied in a secular context. Readers follow his proposal with genuine interest until they realise that they have been taken for a ride, that is, they are offered an elaborate parody of a renewed emergence of Christianity:

The serious practitioners of the game, or *ludus amoris*, will find it useful to form themselves into small groups, or "churches," and meet at set intervals for mutual encouragement and inspiration. They may find it valuable to invoke the spirit of the founder of the game. Indeed, they may gain strength from conjuring his, in a sense, real presence in the form of a chunk of bread and a bottle of wine. ... Men and women must practise the technique of love in the real world and not seal themselves off into communes of convents. ... The practice of love has nothing to do with politics. Laughter is permitted, indeed encouraged. Man was put together by God, though it took him a long time. What God has joined together ... let no man put asunder. Pray for Dr Skinner. May Pavlov rest in peace. Amen. (373–374)

This ironic, secular recreation of the cult of Jesus Christ is repeatedly referred to by Burgess as a "game," and it is the various and surprising manifestations of this whimsical ludic spirit that is left behind as the predominant impression of his essay series. Burgess clearly loves playing mental games

and enjoys involving his audience in them. In an interview, he suggested that God created the world as a form of entertainment and “set the principle of evil free in terms of a game” (Coale 440). Games are a source of fun, relieving the dullness of ordinary life in a harmless way.³⁴ Games are also a sort of ritual, giving an opportunity to bridge the gap of antagonism between inescapable dialectic opposites. To quote Burgess again, “[y]ou can make rituals out of language. And it is in the ritual that opposites are reconciled, of course” (qtd. in Coale 441). Literature is obviously a game for Burgess, and dystopias—or cacotopias, to remain faithful to his preferred terminology—are a very special kind of literary game, somewhat analogous to horror stories. Dystopian authors toy with ideas and potential scenarios that look terrifying or ominous, and by giving a sort of free rein to their nightmares they manage to diminish them and distance them, this way exorcising fear, worries, and anxieties. Burgess dabbled in this game three times in his eventful literary career, finally opting for a centaur genre of essay-cum-fiction to pay his tribute to Orwell.

In his final essay, “The Death of Love,” Burgess offers his ultimate assessment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: he claims that Winston fails because of his inability to love Julia. Their clandestine affair is an act of rebellion, but there is little that connects them beyond their physical attraction. They are aware that their relationship would not last, that they would be exposed and caught, that their love is condemned to death from the start. Big Brother’s ultimate victory is that love as a deep bond that cannot be broken by Thought Police no longer exists in the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And Winston’s failure mirrors Orwell the author’s failure: his inability to love the workers made him imagine them as a generalised grey mass, the “proles”: they are either romanticised as the ultimate but vague hope of humanity or despised as little more than animals. “*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not a prophecy so much as a testimony of despair. Not despair of the future of humanity; a personal despair of being able to love” (1985 380).

It may sound like a harsh judgement on a book Burgess obviously holds in high regard, but if we consider his concluding remarks in conjunction

34 Cf. Burgess’s remark from 1985: “Life ought to be adequately fed and fairly dull. That’s civilization. And if we don’t really like the dullness, then we’d best do something about expanding our own inner vision. We can go to a George Orwell class.” (346)

with the previous essay in which he presented his playful project for a recreation of Christianity as a kind of game whose main slogan as well as driving force is “love,” we may be able to discern Burgess’s proposed antidote against dystopian despair: as long as love survives in the world, there is some hope left for humanity.

How are we to assess *1985* then as a “cacotopian ars poetica,” to recall my earlier proposition? I believe that in his string of non-fictional texts Burgess offered a splendid demonstration of why he considers utopias and dystopias “complex intellectual games” and how he himself is playing that game. Critics, like Jim Clarke who seek in *1985* a reductive critical assessment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and blame Burgess for getting it wrong,³⁵ miss the larger point entirely. Burgess deliberately concocts his cocktail from self-interviews, essays, and disparate topics, in which he does not pursue a single line of argument or critical viewpoint but offers several different, occasionally even contradictory insights about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, while also musing on a number of related political, social, philosophical, and theological issues. Occasionally he adopts multiple personae (e.g. when interviewing himself) to present a dialectical debate, like Thomas More did in Book One of *Utopia*; he seems to maintain a predominantly serious essayistic tone, but then switches to parody and satire; he offers the provocative idea that “Orwell gave us nothing new” only to investigate the creativity of his invention of Ingsoc and Newspeak; in sum, he is playing the game of cacotopia, and invites readers to join the fun.

35 Cf. his opinion of *1985*: “Burgess’s attempt to parse *1984* as a darkly comic novel borne out of the deprivations of mid-century Britain would have been unconvincing had it emerged in the immediate aftermath of Orwell’s novel; coming as it did some decades on, his misreading of one of the most influential novels of the 20th century through the perspective of his own conservative expatriate perspective on Seventies Britain seems perverse” (Clarke 32). I hope my analysis provides ample evidence to prove that Burgess offers a lot more complex, more ambiguous, and also more tongue-in-cheek assessment of Orwell’s classic than this simplifying account suggests, which raises the doubt that Clarke never got further with the essays than the first self-interview.

WORKS CITED

- Amis, Martin. "A Stoked-Up 1976." *The New York Times*. 19 November 1978. Web. 26 September 2021. <<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/11/30/home/burgess-1985.html>>
- Burgess, Anthony. *A Clockwork Orange*. Penguin Books, 1972.
- . *Little Wilson and Big God*. London: Penguin Books, 1988.
- . 1985. In *Future Imperfect*. London: Vintage, 1994. 283–518.
- . *The Wanting Seed*. In *Future Imperfect*. London: Vintage, 1994. 1–282.
- . *You've Had Your Time*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Clarke, Arthur C. "On Moylan on *The City and the Stars*." *Science Fiction Studies* 5.1 (March 1978). Web. <<https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/14/notes.html#clarke>>
- Clarke, Jim. "Anthony Burgess and Science Fiction." *SFRA Review* 313 (Summer 2015): 28–35.
- Coale, Samuel. "An Interview with Anthony Burgess." *Modern Fiction Studies* 27.3 (1981): 429–452.
- Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. London: Grafton, 1977.
- James, Clive. "Looking Backward." *The New York Review of Books*. 23 November 1978. Web. 26 September 2021. <<https://nybooks.com/articles/1978/11/23/looking-backward/>>
- Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. London: Blackwell, 1991.
- More, Thomas. *Utopia [1516]: A Scholar Press Facsimile*. Menston: The Scholar Press, 1971.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. New York: Signet Classic, 1984.
- . *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters. Vol. 4: In Front of Your Nose, 1945–1950*. Eds. Sonia Orwell, Ian Angus. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.
- Parrinder, Patrick. *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
- Pintér, Károly. *The Anatomy of Utopia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226738901.001.0001>>

BURGESS IN THE ORWELL GAME

Stinson, John J. "Better to Be Hot or Cold: 1985 and the Dynamic of the Manichaeic Duoverse." *Modern Fiction Studies* 27.3 (1981): 505–516.

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. London: Penguin Books, 1985.

Wells, H. G. *The Time Machine*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

—. *When the Sleeper Wakes*. London: Everyman, 1994.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. Transl. by Clarence Brown. London: Penguin Books, 1993.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Károly Pintér is associate professor and currently chair of the Institute of English and American Studies, Pázmány Péter Catholic University (PPKE), Budapest. He received his PhD in English Literature in 2005 from Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest. His study entitled *Anatomy of Utopia: Narration, Estrangement and Ambiguity in More, Wells, Huxley and Clarke* was published in 2010 in McFarland's Critical Explorations of Science Fiction and Fantasy series and won the HUSSE Junior Book Award in Hungary in the same year. Within literary studies, he specialises on utopian studies as well as H. G. Wells and classic English-language SF. His other research interest is American history and culture, particularly church-state relations in the US and the phenomenon of American civil religion. He also wrote introductory textbooks on British and American culture. Between February and June 2017, he was Visiting Fellow of Nanovic Institute at Notre Dame University.