While London was to prove the cauldron in which the future of modern Britain would unfold, the early post-war anxieties about London and the social, political, and cultural future of the country initiated a series of near-future dystopian visions of the city. Although this was never an extensive tradition, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), and J.G. Ballard’s *High Rise* (1975) represent three clear waypoints in its development. It has, nonetheless, marked a continuing sense of a loss of national prestige and an acute anxiety over the future of both the city and modern British society. Strikingly, given the known liberal credentials of these authors, such anxieties have provoked in these novels a conservative fear of change, whether represented by a socialist government, a burgeoning youth culture, or technological development. Some sense of the political miasma of what should have been a triumphant Left following the General Election victory of 1945 can be detected in Kingsley Amis’s attack on Orwell in his 1957 pamphlet ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals’: ‘the “present political apathy of the intelligentsia” was largely the fault of Orwell who had become “a right-wing propagandist by negation, or at any rate a supremely powerful – though unconscious – advocate of political quietism”’.¹ And yet following the darkest days of the later 1940s, London and Britain began to turn around – rationing was finally to disappear, London gradually began to rebuild and a national festival crowned the years of Labour government. Moreover, a consensus was formed among the planners and architects, if not the inhabitants of the city: ‘London needed modernising’.² This essay will concentrate on the instigating text of the tradition, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is without question the immediate post-war instigator of the dystopian-city genre in the UK, and while critical attention has focused on the novel’s political
warning against Stalinist totalitarian government and the implications of ‘doublethink’ and ‘Newspeak’, much less attention has been paid to how the narrative is inextricably grounded in London. At best one might find an acknowledgement that the fabric and living conditions of London in Nineteen Eighty-Four are a direct response to London during and immediately after the war. George Woodcock, for example, draws upon his own personal memory of Orwell to observe:

But in Nineteen Eighty-Four, with true polemic genius, Orwell made a virtue of his weakness of invention by setting the dread world of the future in an even more decayed version of the wartime London in which he and I walked in the last decade of his life. There are the rundown, unrepaired 1930s blocks of flats, the tumbling shored-up buildings, the vacant lots red with fireweed, the rockets unpredictably crashing down, and even, served in the canteen of the Ministry of Truth, a stew with ‘amongst its general sloppiness, cubes of a spongy pinkish stuff that might have been a preparation of meat,’ which astonishingly resembled a wartime dish that Orwell and I and some of our friends would eat when we went for lunch to the Bodega in Fleet Street.³

Woodcock’s reminiscences are interesting insofar as they alert us to several aspects of the novel that demand critical attention. Firstly, and unusually in a futurist novel, is the manipulation of a nostalgia in relation to wartime London. Even in the late 1940s the ‘myth’ of London’s and England’s resistance to Germany – a ‘people’s war’ – was well established thanks to the propaganda of the war years themselves, to which Orwell contributed at the BBC. In this respect, locating the Ministry of Truth in the same building as the temporary home of the Ministry of Information during the war where Orwell (and, indeed, Elizabeth Bowen) had worked emphasises the association, notwithstanding the further irony that the building is better known as Senate House, the usual home of the governing body of the University of London and its central library. Naming the principal character ‘Winston’ further evokes the wartime atmosphere, as Giles and Middleton observe: ‘the versions of Englishness occasioned by the Second World War have remained potent tools … of the “English Character” in extremis’.⁴ Shorn of such propaganda and nationalist sentiment, the mismatch between a nostalgic image of a heroic city and a heroic country versus the crushing tawdriness and fear of life in the London of the novel is stark and deliberately drawn.

Secondly, while nostalgia is a particularly politicised deployment of the past, the issue of history has a wider resonance within the
novel. It is the obliteration of any sort of reliable historical record by the Party that is a key plank in the ideological apparatus by which it retains power. While the idea of an objective history is a concept open to debate – histories are interpretations of factual material, not facts in themselves – it is the stifling of historical debate, of contestation over the meanings of the past, which makes this form of thought control ostensibly so effective and provocative. Orwell provides what appears to be an all-powerful exemplar of this power in the Ministry of Truth. Despite Winston’s memory of discovering an uncensored document that disproved the Party’s version of the past, such evidence is on the whole unimportant in a system where ‘All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly and as often as was necessary’.5 Moreover, the collective memory of the Proles, in which Winston invests his hopes, seems equally ineffectual, although this is more to do with a failure of communication:

Within twenty years at the most, he reflected, the huge and simple question, “Was life better before the Revolution than it is now?” would have ceased once and for all to be answerable. But in effect it was unanswerable even now, since the few scattered survivors from the ancient world were incapable of comparing one age with another. (83)

Time, rather ironically, would seem to be on the Party’s side.

Yet the one aspect of Winston’s world that challenges both the stifling of historical debate, the erasure of the written record of the past, and the inability to communicate across class and generational boundaries, is the material fabric of the city. As Burton Pike observes: ‘The overall impression of the physical city to one who observes it … is of buildings and streets deposited in sedimentary fashion over a long period, and implying a future’.6 Peter Ackroyd goes further by noting that:

Contemporary theorists have suggested that linear time itself is a figment of the human imagination, but London has already anticipated their conclusions. There are many different forms of time in the city, and it would be foolish of me to change its character for the sake of creating a conventional narrative.7

An elaboration of Pike’s metaphor demonstrates Ackroyd’s point. The laying down of sedimentary layers fits in well with our notions of a comprehensible chronology (an archaeology even) that forms the essence of historical interpretation. However, the erosion and
physical interference of subsequent ages produces the situation Ackroyd describes: an apparent chronological inconsistency of the buildings with the evidence of the development and planning of previous eras existing side by side in the contemporary material experience of the city.

The emergence of the nursery rhyme ‘Oranges and Lemons’ as a significant motif in the novel attests to Orwell’s complex engagement with the materiality of the past. The significance of the rhyme is that it points to physical locales in the fabric of London and hints at a pre-Revolutionary usage and history. This is crucial since the Party, in line with its policy of rewriting the historical record and the complementary control of memory to suit its purposes, has also attempted to appropriate the material artefacts of the city’s history to their version of the past:

Winston wondered vaguely to what century the church belonged. It was always difficult to determine the age of a London building. Anything large and impressive, if it was reasonably new in appearance, was automatically claimed as having been built since the Revolution, while anything that was obviously of an earlier date was ascribed to some dim period called the Middle Ages. The centuries of capitalism were held to have produced nothing of any value. One could not learn history from architecture any more than one could learn it from books. Statues, inscriptions, memorial stones, the names of streets – anything that might throw light upon the past had been systematically altered. (88)

It is memory rather than history that presents this challenge and gains its power by its association with the material city. Even while only remembered in fragments and by different people, none of whom seem to know the whole, the power of the rhyme points to the difficulty of controlling and restricting this nexus of memory, language and physical place. While the Party may seek to control language through Newspeak and appropriate physical space by giving it a new history, that control only extends very imperfectly to the Proles where, presumably, memory and tradition still exist. In many respects this is Winston’s tragedy. He is trained by the Party to think only in historical terms that he rewrites daily at work. When he questions the Prole in the pub he fails to recognise the value and power of memory: ‘A sense of helplessness took hold of Winston. The old man’s memory was nothing but a rubbish-heap of details’ (82). The old man’s reminiscences based in a physical experience of the city do in fact provide Winston with an answer to the question he
poses; clearly the ‘capitalists’ did not dominate the city in the way the Party histories would have it, exposing a chink in their ideological armour that Winston fails to grasp. He is right to identify hope in this respect with the Proles, but he is constitutionally unable to decode the form that hope might take.

In many respects the old man represents an aspect of the spatiality of memory that Michel de Certeau elaborates in the following terms: ‘Stories traverse and organise places; they select and link places together making sentences and itineraries out of them’. In this respect, the experiential fabric of London is a vast network of individual itineraries and stories that create, circulate and preserve a past that the Party attempts to rename, appropriate, or rewrite but clearly fails to repress entirely. That Party members can sally out into London (even if at the risk of being picked up by a patrol) points to the potential development of individual consciousness of the past beyond Party control. Indeed, the very scarcity of day-to-day consumables forces the outer-party member to undertake such expeditions: ‘Party members were supposed not to go into ordinary shops … but the rule was not strictly kept, because there were various things, such as shoelaces and razor blades, which it was impossible to get hold of in any other way’ (11). The failure by the Party to supply personal necessities draws Winston and presumably others before and, one must presume, after him into the streets of London and among the Proles.

Orwell’s acute sensitivity to this aspect of the city as lived space and the practices, memories and narratives that accrete around specific places can usefully be codified in De Certeau’s terms as a ‘practiced place’ – ‘Stories thus carry out a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places’ – a place that is created not from the simple materiality of the physical street, building, or monument, but by usage, by practice. In contradiction to the Party’s palimpsest of an endlessly redefinable discursive history, this is the past and memory codified around material spaces. Practice, by its very dependence on the engagement of the individual, is a challenge to the monolithic official, corporate, recorded history of the Party. This analogy of the city as text recalls Roland Barthes’s scriptable (readerly) text ‘that calls for active involvement on the part of the reader in the production of the text’. In the novel, this works on two levels. On the one hand, Winston increasingly becomes a reader of the city through the association between his thoughts, memories, and the
narrative he forms from them for his diary, and the material spaces of the city in which he lives and moves. The first two parts of the novel chart an increasing awareness of his essential humanity before the brutal repression of Part Three. The exploration of Winston’s memories form a personal narrative of the past enacted through his traverse across, and experience of, a recognisable image of the everyday city. For example, alongside his record of his marriage and the visit to the prostitute, Winston begins to recall memories of his mother and sister again, anchored to a recognisable (if generic) element of the city, the underground railway:

His mother, in her slow, dreamy way, was following a long way behind them. She was carrying his baby sister – or perhaps it was a bundle of blankets that she was carrying: he was not certain whether his sister had been born then. Finally they emerged into a noisy, crowded place which he had realized to be a Tube station. (33)

This passage engages the contemporary reader by drawing upon memories of the war and the use as air-raid shelters of the deep central Tube stations, but it also takes this general sympathetic reminiscence and generic London space, and solidifies a personal memory. As Winston moves through his life, and particularly when he is formulating a forbidden personal itinerary through London, he is increasingly characterised and humanised with a past and feelings that are morally comprehensible to the reader rather than conditioned by the grim ideology of the Party.

The London of Nineteen Eighty-Four is a spatialised narrative which we perceive far more structurally than, say, a typical romance. This is, of course an aspect of the broader literary tradition of utopian/dystopian fictions by which the plot is often spatialised to provide a checklist of comparisons to the contemporary society it is challenging. Yet Orwell goes further than these generic conventions which tend not to involve extensive narrative characterisation. The city of the Party aspires to be a vast mechanism of social control in a Foucauldian sense through the various panoptic technologies of observation and regulation, from the telescreens to other Party members and children. But it has only been superficially transformed to demonstrate that power exemplified by the enormous disconcerting posters and statues of Big Brother pasted on every other wall and atop existing monuments (Big Brother has replaced Nelson in Trafalgar Square). More potent symbols are the four towers of the ministries:
He tried to squeeze out some childhood memory that should tell him whether London had always been quite like this. Were there always these vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses, their sides shored up with baulks of timber, their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron, their crazy garden walls sagging in all directions? And the bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air and the willow-herb straggled over the heaps of rubble; and the places where the bombs had cleared a larger patch and there had sprung up sordid colonies of wooden dwellings like chicken-houses? But it was no use, he could not remember: nothing remained of his childhood except a series of bright-lit tableaux occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible.

... The Ministry of Truth contained it was said, three thousand rooms above ground level, and corresponding ramifications below. Scattered about London there were just three other buildings of similar appearance and size. So completely did they dwarf the surrounding architecture that from the roof of Victory Mansions you could see all four of them simultaneously. They were the homes of the four Ministries between which the entire apparatus of government was divided. (8–9)

This is a recognisable post-war London vista, even down to the fireweed (‘willow-herb’ or *Epilobium angustifolium*) that grew profusely among the burnt-out remains of blitzed buildings, and the temporary shacks that sprang up later in the war and after in response to the housing crisis. Towering over this prospect is the ‘enormous pyramidal structure of glistening white concrete’ (9) of the Ministry of Truth and the similar buildings of the three other ministries. In appearance, the description fits well with the white concrete and tiers as well as the authoritarian severity suggested by the early 1930s neo-classicism of Senate House on Russell Square. However, the scale of the fictional building in the novel dwarfs the real building. Moreover, where did the three other ministry buildings come from? They are of course symbolic additions to the central London skyline of the novel and are the only post-war buildings to be identified in the novel. They are the tallest buildings in this low-rise London, still, for the most part, a nineteenth-century fabric. Phallic and panoptic they both induce fear and awe as well as suggesting a ‘panorama city’ that is, to evoke de Certeau, ‘a “theoretical” (that is, visual) simulacrum’ suggesting a “geometrical” or “geographical” space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions’. The height and visual domination of these buildings expresses a desire to define, control, and ‘idealise’ the city and the social interaction of its inhabitants.
The view of the ministry buildings at near ground level is where one would expect their affect to be most potent. Yet their vision of unassailable and complete power is rather diminished despite the presence of the technological adjunct of scopic domination, the telescreen. As Winston demonstrates, one can, with care, simply turn one’s back, belying the claim to total visibility and thence total power claimed by the gleaming white towers of the Party. This power is further countered by the areas of privacy sectioned out by forms of residential architecture that pre-date the Revolution. What this suggests is that an inner life can never be entirely eradicated so long as the physical fabric exists to facilitate it. This leads to the conclusion that while the Party desires to dominate the city and its inhabitants, its ability to realise this aim must remain psychological rather than material because the structure of the city has not developed from their ideology, but from earlier ages when power was far more contingent and far more reliant on voluntary complicity. The Party’s claim that capitalism produced no buildings of distinction is, of course, instead an accurate statement of the period of Party rule rather than the past; the society created and maintained by the Party exists in a physical environment that is alien if not inimical to its strictures. When Winston looks out at London it is not the towering ministry buildings that determine his thoughts, but the evidence of an earlier society represented by ‘rotting nineteenth-century houses’ and his own Victory Mansions ‘built in the 1930s or thereabouts’ and ‘falling apart’, as well as the evidence of the Party’s inability to provide even basic housing for some of its citizens evident from the wooden shacks that have grown up in the larger bomb sites. This leads Winston to dwell upon the past. With this clear evidence of decay – these buildings must have been new and maintained at one time – the obvious question that emerges is ‘has it always been like this?’ Winston’s inability to recall the past from his memory at this point is really neither here nor there; the material city has provoked the desire to know and understand.

The Party tacitly acknowledges the limitation of its control of the material and by implication the circulation of stories and memories by the implementation of both Doublethink and Newspeak. Doublethink can only be thought of as an imperfect system of thought control most at risk by the conjunction of materially anchored memory. The very need for the existence of the concept acknowledges that failure, since from the trajectories traced through
the material city there emerge spatial codes that challenges both forms of discursive control as well as a reformulated history. As de Certeau observes:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognised poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility.14

While Winston’s rebellion, manifest from the memories and questions provoked by the city, leads to ever more frequent sallies onto the streets and spaces of the city, he is ultimately caught when that movement ceases and he becomes a static target for the Thought Police. At the point when he and Julia settle into a permanent place of liaison above Charrington’s shop, the tie between his physical trajectory through the city and his memories cease, just as discursively his own thoughts and the practical independence of his memory are subsumed by the reassertion of historical discourse through the conventional explanation and chronology of Goldstein’s book. The Party controls and dominates this form while memory is the real threat. Winston ceases to present to the absolutism of the Party a tantalising, incomprehensible, and amorphous series of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces when he reenters the visible controllable realm of the Party.

Viewed in a broader context, the deft representation of history rooted in discourse as a form of oppression versus memory anchored in the material as an expression of liberation (even if of severely limited scope) has, ironically, created considerable problems for critics dissatisfied with the imperfect alignment of the novel with ‘the historical and political circumstances to which it alludes’.15 In a very strong sense, it is the danger of the constructedness of history that forms the foundation of Orwell’s warning and it is interesting to note the consternation among those who wish, in turn, to simply incorporate the novel as a social artefact of post-war history. The narrative itself resists this. Alan Sinfield has sought to explain this characteristic of the novel by invoking Barthes’s elaboration of myth:
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It abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.  

This certainly helps to explain what the Party is striving for; no less than mythic status, but the counter-discourse established by the novel is to advance the specificity of individual experience and memory in engagement with the material space and place of the city. In its particulars, in walking the street, contemplating its sedimented history, or evoking memories, the city goes, as Jonathan Raban observes, ‘soft’: ‘it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in’. Nineteen Eighty-Four explores the significance of the micro-politics of the individual in conflict with the broad, totalising sweep of the macro-politics of history and the ‘system’; the former shapes the lived spaces of the city, while the latter seeks to impose meaning and order discursively, producing a mapped space without the complicity of its inhabitants.

Notes

5. George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 39. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited in parenthesis in the text.
9. Ibid., 117.
10. Ibid., 118.
14. Ibid., 93.