Lies, Damned Lies and Literature: George Orwell and 'The Truth'

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This article sets out to illustrate the value of imaginative literature as a tool of political analysis. It investigates the nature of truth and lies principally through a discussion of Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Hannah Arendt's concerns about new forms of political lying provide a platform for a detailed analysis of Orwell's depiction of the struggle between the individual and the state over the nature of reality and truth. We consider the plausibility of the Party's attempt to recreate the truth in its own image, especially through the control of language. Orwell's novel, we shall conclude, stands as a stark warning against allowing civil society to atrophy and the state to subvert ordinary language, thereby destroying the basis of representative government, trust.

Keywords: Orwell; totalitarianism; literature; truth

Although it would be widely agreed that imaginative literature can offer a rich commentary on and explication of political issues (Hanne 1994; Whitebrook 1995; Ingle 1999), it is not easy to find such explication in academic journals of politics. This article constitutes an attempt at just such an explication. It would not be feasible to explore within these pages the extensive literature demonstrating just what it is that imaginative literature brings to the study of politics,[1] but clearly it has a lot to do with the imaginative insights of writers who, by dint of their expertise, seek to give us an understanding of an issue that could be called experiential as much as intellectual. The issues, that is to say, are played out in the arena of human experience as portrayed by the author. The issue to be explored here is that of lying and truth telling in politics, an issue that has always intrigued political theorists and philosophers but has never had greater salience than in today's era of news spin. I propose to use imaginative literature to illuminate the issues involved in the perceived threat to the 'trust relationship' between the ordinary citizen and the state by a close analysis of one of the best-known modern accounts of that relationship, George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Not only did this book achieve iconic status during the cold war but it is still widely read throughout the world; indeed, which of us does not carry in their minds a strong recollection of the struggle between Winston Smith and the Party? In short the book provides an excellent example of the insight that may be gained into a key political issue through studying its portrayal in imaginative literature.

The Importance of Truth and the Possibilities for Lying

In her Reith Lectures Series of 2002 Onora O'Neill took as her theme the question of trust and began by recalling Confucius's advice that of the three essentials of

good government—weapons, food and trust—the last was first. She spoke of a crisis of trust throughout modern government and argued for 'genuine efforts to reduce deception' and for 'genuine communication', and she deplored the 'culture of suspicion', which she linked to what modern politicians and bureaucrats ironically refer to as transparency but which is, in fact, a modern version of smoke and mirrors deception. It is especially poignant that O'Neill's reflections were aired before the Coalition of the Willing invaded Iraq in 2003 and all the problems of trust to which that gave rise.

In his Nobel lecture in 2005, entitled *Art, Truth and Politics*, the playwright Harold Pinter concluded: 'I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory'. In a way he could be seen as identifying with both of the attitudes Bernard Williams ascribes to modern society: a suspicion of being deceived and a worry that there is actually no such thing as objective truth (Williams 2002, 206–209). Pinter's emphasis on the importance of truth to democratic governance, as a foundation for the sense of trust that makes the notion of consent a reality, is well placed and consistent with Williams' own championing of the crucial importance to the polity of accuracy and sincerity. Pinter's misgivings arose primarily from what he took to be the lies told about Iraq and its offensive weaponry prior to the invasion of 2003 and subsequent events, and is reminiscent of an earlier attack on the alleged duplicity of US foreign policy.

In her influential article about this duplicity, 'Lying in politics', Hannah Arendt sought to distinguish between what she saw as the kind of lying that is intrinsic to politics, and about which she had already written at length, and new forms of lying (Arendt 1971, 2). She was not concerned with Plato's so-called 'golden lie' that underpins hierarchy and stability but concentrated instead on contingent lying in the processes of governance and diplomacy. Facts, she tells us, have time and again shown themselves to be inherently fragile and capable of being punctured by a single well-constructed lie. Both truth and lies deal with contingent 'facts', and true facts carry no imprimatur; both lie and truth could be other than what they are presented as. The liar can customise a lie to suit a particular audience whereas truth, that is, a reasonably accurate account of reality, cannot be massaged. Indeed the truth may seem implausible or unwelcome to some audiences, who may prefer the lie. But lying has traditionally been viewed as at best a necessary evil, to be resorted to only *in extremis*, and of its nature abhorrent. After all it denotes deception, a betrayal of trust. Those who trick through lies or half-lies—casuists—are generally despised.[2]

All the same *some* lying has traditionally been part of the warp and woof of politics though Arendt (ibid.) claims that it has ultimately been of limited political use. After all, she reminds us, it could always be defeated by reality: the truth *will* out, if only at the eleventh hour. But in the modern world, she continues, there are two new, potentially interconnected forms of lying that by their nature may not be so readily unseated by the truth: image making and policy 'science' (Arendt 1971, 3). In the world of public relations an image can be a form of reality. We may be convinced, for example, that a beauty product makes us look younger and more attractive and

we may then act with such assurance that others notice; our faces can grow to fit our mask.[3] The important distinction that Hamlet was convinced he could draw between what 'is' and what merely 'seems' becomes blurred here. In short the image maker creates a kind of reality or truth, and the power of advertising gives it enormous political force.

For their part, the policy scientist has a version of reality that is located in theory. The policy scientists that Arendt had in mind were, specifically, the games theorists and systems analysts who advised on US policy on Indochina. It was they who devised the domino theory which held that if South Vietnam were to be lost to communism then each of the nations of South-East Asia would fall one by one as a direct consequence. It was they who advised that bombing North Vietnam would persuade Ho Chi Minh not to aid the Vietcong in the South, where, left to its own devices, communist opposition to the regime would soon collapse. But the subsequent publication of *The Pentagon Papers* (Department of Defense 1971) showed clearly that these theories were not taken seriously by systems analysts themselves; rather they made use of them in order to bolster the US image of itself as an omnipotent friend who stood by its allies. However, what was required to propagate these theories effectively through the world was what Arendt referred to as defactualisation (Arendt 1971, 7) and Arthur Schlesinger Jnr described as nothing less than 'the wilful, deliberate disregard of all facts historical, political, geographical, for more than 25 years' (Ellsberg 1971, 219). These policy scientists could only manage such a thing because of what Daniel Ellsberg called internal self-deception (Ellsberg 1971, 235). The private world of close-knit government bureaucracies, with their arrogance of power, encouraged both image makers and policy scientists to confuse avoiding defeat with avoiding *admitting* defeat. The imperative, after all, was to save face, a goal that was all about image and not necessarily about historical and political reality.

This alliance of image makers and policy scientists could practise such deception successfully only because it was so utterly committed to the end of securing America's self-image that it became equally committed to whatever means appeared necessary to achieve that end. In support of the larger 'truth' (US self-image) smaller lies could be commandeered and rebranded as truths. They became 'true' vicariously, so to speak, or by association. They could be defended as 'the truth' because they were part and parcel of that larger 'truth' of American omniscience. For Arendt this was a new and infinitely more dangerous form of lying because those in power could realistically expect to control the flow of information on which citizens would assess the veracity of what their leaders told them, rendering the media only nominally free (Arendt 1971, 11). To all intents and purposes policy scientists and image makers could create a truth from an untruth and sustain it in the public domain. For these modern liars not truth so much as *the concept of truth* was their victim.

The Fabrication of 'Reality'

That governments might lie as a matter of course and that their citizens might never know what constituted 'the truth' was a possibility that had come to fixate George

Orwell a quarter of a century earlier. At the end of 1936 Orwell had taken himself off to the Spanish Civil War to fight, as he said, against fascism and for common decency (Ingle 1992, 72). He could claim no real grasp of the political complexities of the republican alliance of communists, trade unionists, anarchists and Trotskyites and had by chance joined the (revolutionary socialist/Trotskyite) POUM militia (Bowker 2004, 203–204). His subsequent attempts to transfer to the communist-dominated International Brigade were thwarted by the internecine warfare that broke out among these forces in Barcelona when he returned there (Newsinger 1999, 49–50) and so it was as a POUM militiaman that Orwell fought, on the Aragon front, until being seriously wounded. He and his wife were subsequently pursued by the communist security forces and were lucky to escape with their lives (Taylor 2003, 241–249).

On his return to Britain Orwell sought to put the revolutionary case of POUM and its allies to the British public via the left-wing press, not because he believed it himself, he said, but because it *deserved to be aired* (Ingle 2006, 77). He found it almost impossible to get a hearing and concluded that the left-wing intelligentsia were entirely in thrall to Stalin and the USSR. What especially concerned him, and here he anticipated Arendt, was what he took to be a new kind of lying. In Spain Orwell had seen newspaper reports that were completely unrelated to the facts as he had experienced them, not forming 'even the relationship which is implied in any ordinary lie' (Orwell 1966 [1937], 223). In London, he said, eager intellectuals 'built [and sold!] emotional superstructures over events that had never happened' (Ingle 1992, 72). He found this development profoundly sinister. It portended the disappearance from the world of what he called the 'very concept of objective truth'. Now in Arendt's USA a true account of the events of the Vietnam War eventually became publicly available through the various media, but Orwell set out to create a fictional world in which no such independent account of events was possible. In Oceania, Arendt's worst fear was realised, for the very nature of truth as a concept had disappeared: not merely had it become hidden, but it had disappeared forever. So shaken had Orwell been by his experiences in Spain that he devoted the rest of his creative life to painting pictures of a state that had torn the concept of truth from the fabric of social discourse.

Orwell had contemplated entitling his final novel *The Last Man in Europe*, for this was the role and status with which Orwell endowed Winston Smith. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is Orwell's longest, most complex and in many ways most ambitious book. Its basic premise appears at first glance to be that the only possible constraint upon a totalitarian regime is provided by the individual acting as an autonomous moral agent capable of passing judgements upon the nature of external reality—what Orwell called 'objective truth'—and by extension upon the actions of the state. (I use the word autonomous here to denote a sense of moral and intellectual independence from monolithic institutions, especially the church and, more recently, the state, but will have cause to return to this point later.) This places Orwell firmly in the natural rights camp, along with the American Founding Fathers (as well, of course, as Hobbes and Locke). For its part, the state will seek to crush individuals by controlling every aspect of their lives, thereby rendering them incapable of making an independent judgement upon the nature of reality and hence upon the actions of the state, or indeed upon anything. Reduced to this

condition, if they are to make sense of the world, they need the state to tell them what is and is not true. When we come, like Winston, to love Big Brother it is because we have lost the capacity to recognise what is objectively true. Big Brother, like the Grand Inquisitor, caringly saves us from our uncertainties, offering as he did 'happiness to all ... so long as they forsake their freedom. They will have no secrets from us, knowing that every sin can be expiated' (Dostoevsky 1972, 305).

Reality and Common Sense

While he was no epistemologist Orwell thought he had a firm idea of the nature of knowledge and man's proper relationship to knowledge. He held knowledge and hence truth to be the result of our comprehension of the world based on our capacity for experience, observation and reflection. For Orwell, reality, the external world, could be discerned by the undeceived intelligence of the ordinary individual—of whom Winston Smith is the personification—by means of Lockean sense experience interpreted and codified by reason. That this 'ordinary individual', ready to do battle with the state over the issue of truth, might itself be a socially constructed concept and not a child of nature was not a possibility that Orwell entertained. Nor did he bother to confront Nietzsche's argument (indeed he was unaware of it) that truth itself was nothing more than 'the invention of fixed conventions for merely practical purposes'; nothing more, in fact, than a property of language (Nietzsche 1979, 83). No, for Orwell man's very humanity and identity were rooted in this capacity to apply reason to sensory experience, and man's capacity for reason led him to grasp the nature of objective truth. In some respects Winston's claim on behalf of the individual reflected Martin Luther's claim on behalf of all people that they could achieve salvation, through God's grace, only by their own agency as individuals and not by the intercession of any collective identity such as the church[4] (or for Winston, the Party). It is our knowledge of the world gained through a range of experiences mediated by reason, Winston maintained, that guarantees our freedom and allows us to act in an autonomous and meaningful way.

Where did Orwell's faith in reason come from? There is no evidence that he ever read Descartes, who elevated reason to establish God's existence, and not vice versa, or Kant on the relationship between sense and reason. He was unfamiliar with Mill's work, though naturally sympathetic to his emphasis—or what Berlin called his overemphasis (Berlin 1969, 174)—on rationality. Although towards the end of his life Orwell included among his acquaintances both A. J. Ayer and Bertrand Russell, he was simply not interested in schools of philosophy and had no great capacity for philosophical thought. Indeed, in a letter to Richard Rees in which he referred to a philosophical argument of Russell's, Orwell wrote: 'But I never can follow that kind of thing. It is the sort of thing that makes me feel that philosophy should be forbidden by law'.[5] We could be sure that, if he had understood them, Orwell would have been offended by the relativistic tendencies of existentialism, the philosophy that had influenced so many of his contemporaries. If not grounded in philosophy, then in what?

Orwell conceptualised his faith in reason as follows: if we can be confident as individuals that two plus two makes four, then 'all else follows' (Orwell 1960, 68).

Orwell was fishing in deep waters here: some have contended that this equation constitutes nothing more than a truism; others even dismissed it as a tautology.[6] Arendt showed the limitations of Orwell's argument when she wrote that although $2 + 2 = 4$ was the only absolutely reliable truth human beings could fall back on, this 'truth' was ' empty or rather no truth at all because it does not reveal anything' (Arendt 1958, 477). Outside of mathematics, what follows from the statement that $2 + 2 = 4$ is—nothing. Far from being the foundation of common sense, Arendt continued, $2 + 2 = 4$ is the last line of defence for those 'once they have lost common sense' (ibid.). Orwell would have been unaware of the basic distinction, essential to our understanding of empiricism, that Leibniz first drew between analytical and synthetic knowledge, a distinction that had persuaded Hume[7] to counsel diffidence and humility about what we *think* we know from experience about the world.

The writer and thinker Michael Frayn[8] pointed out that the truth value of mathematics and logic is entirely formal (Frayn 2006, 165) and A. J. Ayer had earlier argued that it was an error to suppose that we can deduce any information about matters of fact from analytical propositions (Ayer 1971, ch. 2). Unfortunately he does not appear to have told his friend Orwell. To suggest, as Orwell did, that it was logical that the Party would one day announce that $2 + 2 = 5$, and that it would be necessary for everybody to believe it (to accept it would not be enough), is simply misguided (Orwell 1960, 67–68). The laws of mathematics are independent even of Big Brother and would stand despite the fact that the last man in Europe had lost faith in them. This is not a semantic matter: the relationship between fact and value is crucial to our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Winston's position.

Misguided as his symbolic use of $2 + 2 = 4$ might have been, it nevertheless stands as an emblem of Orwell's faith in man's common sense, his undeceived intelligence, 'his ability to understand reality and thereby confidently to reach out to objective truth' (Orwell 1960, 198–202).[9] For Orwell, to deny that $2 + 2 = 4$ was to deny not merely the validity of experience but the very existence of a knowable external reality and hence of objective truth. After all, as Goldstein (Trotsky) wrote, the state was the enemy of empiricism; it denounced common sense as the 'heresy of heresies' (Orwell 1960, 78). Common sense allowed Winston a vantage point from which to perceive reality, objective truth, and to hold the state accountable, as Harold Pinter would have wished.

But is reason really the individual's best hope for autonomy? In Oceania the state embodied unreason,[10] and so reason, affirmed by common sense and championed by Winston Smith, the ordinary man, was its natural enemy. But in Zamyatin's *We* (1993 [1927]), for example, which some commentators have injudiciously claimed to be the model for *Nineteen-Eighty Four*,[11] as in Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done* (1989 [1863]), or indeed in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1973 [1932]), reason, not unreason, was embodied in the state: what then was the guarantee of autonomy? To answer this question we must defer to the foremost opponent of reason's enthronement, Dostoevsky. For him reason was no more than one of man's critical faculties, whereas individual volition—'one's own free and unfettered volition, one's own caprice, however wild' was a 'manifestation of the whole of life'

(Dostoevsky 1972, 30–31). True enough, reason tells us that $2 + 2 = 4$, but Dostoevsky's Underground Man set little store by this as a safeguard of anything at all, and certainly not of individual moral autonomy. 'I agree', he said, 'that two and two make four is an excellent thing: but to give everything its dues, two plus two make five is also a very fine thing' (Dostoevsky 1972, 36). For Dostoevsky it was in *rejecting* rationality and the quest for objective truth and thus sending 'all systems and theories to the devil' that man safeguarded his autonomy (Dostoevsky 1972, 33–34).

It was only by pursuing one's own 'free and unfettered volition, one's own caprice'—one's own subjective truth—that one could truly become oneself. Winston's claim to autonomy is based upon reason, the Underground Man's on unfettered volition. In some respects the latter represented an Orwellian prototype; not for Winston though, but for Julia (dismissed by Winston—though with a sneaking admiration—as a rebel only from the waist down), who actually represented Oceania's only truly free individual. We may reasonably conclude, then, that there are problems with Orwell's championing of the individual and his powers of reason and common sense. But there is a prior problem, surely: what constituted that objective truth, grasped through reason and experience, which so haunted Winston and exercised Bernard Williams (Williams 2002, 63–83)?

The Individual, Reality and Objective Truth

Orwell told the apocryphal story of Sir Walter Raleigh's attempt to write a history of the world while imprisoned in the Tower of London (Orwell 1944, 87–89). One day, after having begun work on volume two, Raleigh's attention was taken by a scuffle in the yard outside and he witnessed first-hand a murder. When he came to write an account of this event for the authorities, he realised that he simply could not manage to do so with any real accuracy, despite the immediacy of the event. He abandoned his world history, burning the completed first volume in despair. Orwell was critical of this decision. Winston's interrogator O'Brien argued, like Raleigh, that no individual could hope to have a firm grasp of reality, of the external world (Orwell 1960, 199–209). Like Orwell himself, Winston believed in reality, truth, as 'something objective' whereas, for O'Brien, it was an invention of the human mind. Not the individual human mind, for individuals were only minorities of one— lunatics said O'Brien—but the 'collective and immortal' mind of the Party. When Winston advanced a Cartesian proposition to establish the truth of his own existence and, by extension, the existence of a knowable, wider external reality—he thinks he exists therefore he exists—and adds to it a version of G. E. Moore's evidence for an external reality—his own hands when he waved them about (Moore 1959, 272) (for Winston it was the observable reality of his own arms and legs)—O'Brien did not attempt to counter his argument. When he pointed out the conclusive illogicality of O'Brien's claim: 'You do not exist' (Orwell 1960, 208), it was not Winston's argument that was demolished but his person. Nevertheless we must conclude that if Winston could be said to have won an intellectual victory here, it was only a minor one: individuals may indeed possess autonomous knowledge but only, on this evidence, of the world of which they have immediate and direct experience.

From the perspective of a broader reality, however, Winston had already defeated his own argument. One of the key passages in *Nineteen-Eighty Four* tells of Winston gaining 'concrete, unmistakable evidence' of reality and of the Party's falsification of it (Orwell 1960, 63–67). Among the few survivors of the original revolutionary leadership were three men who had been arrested in 1965 and finally executed. Some time later, as part of his job in the Ministry of Truth, Winston found himself required to destroy a copy of *The Times* from about 10 years earlier. His eyes had inadvertently taken in the details of a photograph of a Party function in New York. In the middle of a group of prominent Party members were, unmistakably, these same three men. Yet at their trial each had confessed to having been in Eurasia, passing on important military information to the enemy, on that very day. This was a fragment of truth, a fossil bone from the abolished past and he, Winston Smith, was the sole guardian of authentic history, of a knowable objective truth.

But was he? Suppose that photograph had itself been a manipulation of some earlier and long-forgotten truth, and that the three had never been to New York at all. Why pick on one bone at random and declare it to be a genuine fossil? Nobody knew better than Winston about the falsification of evidence. Had he himself not created Comrade Ogilvy, a completely fictitious character whose bogus life history Winston had invented to fill a vacant page in a newspaper caused by the elimination of the original subject of the piece, Comrade Smithers? Thereafter Ogilvy, who had never existed in any present, came to exist in the past, 'just as authentically, and upon the same evidence, as Charlemagne or Julius Caesar' (Orwell 1960, 39–42). All history had become a palimpsest, Winston concluded, 'scraped clean and reinscribed as often as was necessary' (ibid.). How then could he be the sole guardian of *any* truth? Moreover, as Milan Kundera pointed out, the individual's memory is just as defective, selective and creative as the collective memory of the Party,[12] and while Winston might not have been engaged in creating Comrade Ogilvies all the hours of his day, he was certainly involved in creating and recreating Winston Smith; just as each of us will airbrush the Smithers out of our past and replace them with our own glorious Comrade Ogilvies, creating our own 'truths'. Finally, if truth is not generally acknowledged and formally recorded—anywhere— what is the consolation of arguing, as Winston does, that it must, all the same, exist—somewhere?

The Party, Reality and Objective Truth

Just as he failed to disprove Winston's argument for autonomy in regard to the individual's immediate experience, so O'Brien failed to establish a convincing philosophical case for the Party's monopoly in understanding and commenting on broader external reality. He claimed, for example, that the stars were near or distant according to the needs of the Party; if it found it necessary or useful the Party would invent a dual system of astronomy—'Do you suppose our mathematicians are unequal to that? Have you forgotten doublethink?' (Orwell 1960, 214). O'Brien's oxymoronic characterisation of the relationship between the Party and external reality as 'collective solipsism' is arresting but not, surely, persuasive. After all, though Galileo might have been obliged by the church formally to acknowledge his errors and to give way to Ptolemy, it was his vision and not the church's collective

solipsism that came to govern modern man's subsequent understanding of the universe.[13] O'Brien established only the reality and decisiveness of power, where power consisted in winning arguments by inflicting pain. J. S. Mill once noted that the dictum that truth will overcome falsehood was refuted by experience. Persecution, he said, had always succeeded. 'It is a piece of idle sentimentality that truth, merely as truth, has any inherent power ... of prevailing against the dungeon and the stake' (Mill 1957, 89–90). In the long run, Mill thought, truth might prevail, though as J. M. Keynes dryly observed, in the long run we are all dead (Keynes 1923).[14]

As science developed following Galileo's discoveries it became apparent that truth and reality no longer surrendered to commonsensible contemplation. To follow Orwell and hold on to common sense and the belief that truisms are true, that the 'solid world exists; its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet' (Orwell 1960, 60–68) is not to establish the basis of an understanding of the complexities of the physical world or a convincing case for encouraging Walter Raleigh to pursue his attempted world history.

A major factor that assisted in establishing the Party's monopoly in identifying reality was the concept of doublethink. Doublethink entails holding simultaneously two contradictory ideas and believing in both. This is precisely the state in which Arendt's policy scientists found themselves during the Vietnam War. The concept is not a new one. It was used in biblical times, for example, when alms givers were advised, 'let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth'. Orwellian doublethink is not basically different, requiring us to 'use logic against logic' (Orwell 1960, 31). Some theorists have invested this concept with considerable philosophical significance (Martin 1984, 319). David Rudrum has linked the apparent contradiction of doublethink to the kinds of ambiguity inherent in Wittgenstein's exploration of the differences between the statements 'I know' and 'I believe' (Rudrum 2003, 2–6). But Orwell had not read Wittgenstein and anyway he had written earlier about the power of holding mutually contradictory ideas, though then he called it schizophrenia, a vice that flourished in politics, he said (Orwell 1946).

Orwell's elaborate structure of doublethink was not as substantial as these theorists think; in fact he undermined it himself, for as Winston made clear, 'the subtlest practitioners of doublethink are those who invented doublethink and know that it is a vast system of mental cheating' (Orwell 1960, 171). The rhetoricians and metaphysicians of the Inner Party do not hold a system of ideas mysteriously incorporating seemingly contradictory articles of knowledge and belief simultaneously: they only pretend to. This was an idea that Orwell had entertained for some time, writing in 1939 for example: 'It is quite easy to imagine a state in which the ruling caste deceive their followers without deceiving themselves' (Orwell 1939). Members of the Inner Party, Oceania's rulers, recognised doublethink for what it was: a sophisticated and sophistical method of social control through manipulating the truth so that war may be represented as peace and slavery as freedom. If once they *really* came to believe their own truths then they would *ipso facto* have lost the power to manipulate them just as they chose. They would have surrendered that Machiavellian ability that Arendt's image makers and policy

scientists cherished, of creating whatever 'truths' served their purpose. When Arendt's policy scientists created associational or vicarious 'truths', sanctioned by the greater truth, they were engaging in doublethink.

Language and Truth

Another area of social control that Orwell explored, fitting hand in glove with doublethink, was language, that 'repository of forgotten experience' as Margaret Canovan called it (Canovan 1992, 123), and its Oceanian variety newspeak. While they were lunching together, Winston's friend Syme, who was working on the 11th edition of the newspeak dictionary, explained the nature of his project. Its object was to narrow the range of thought by paring vocabulary to its irreducible minimum. 'In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it' (Orwell 1960, 45). This process, he went on, involved the destruction of the entire literary heritage and with it all the old ways of thinking which had created that heritage and then become embedded in it. Only then will the revolution have been completed: 'Newspeak is Ingsoc and Ingsoc is Newspeak' (ibid.). Winston found himself listening to a man at a nearby table, an important figure from the Fiction Department. He was speaking about the 'complete and final elimination of Goldsteinism' but Winston found himself imagining that it was not a human brain that was speaking but only a larynx. This was not speech in any real sense: it was a noise, a simple repetition of meaningless phrases 'like the quacking of a duck' (Orwell 1960, 47).

Since the time of Engels, communists and other political scientists have been notorious for duckspeak. But they have been far from alone. Military spokesmen, perhaps more than any other group, have developed vocabularies specifically designed to anaesthetise and mislead the public upon whose support they rely. They have created grotesque euphemisms, a particularly obnoxious form of ungood duckspeak. 'Friendly fire' and 'collateral damage' are only the most obvious examples but from the Vietnam War came 'ambient non-combatant personnel' for refugees, 'pacification programmes' for the widespread destruction of villages and the fearful 'pre-emptive defensive strike' for acts of unprovoked aggression. As chilling as any example of duckspeak, though, is the modern phrase 'extraordinary rendition'. Who could guess that it denoted the alleged transportation of suspected terrorists from the USA to countries whose techniques of interrogation were illegal in the USA? On a more everyday level, the institutional reforms initiated by the Thatcher and Blair governments in the United Kingdom as part of the general process of liberalising state structures were accompanied by a new vocabulary that had to be learned as much by the opponents of reform as by its supporters.[15] Institutions such as universities have been decisively shaped by duckspeak over the last 20 years. Marcuse (1964) and Foucault (1980) have famously written about the undemocratic nature of dominant discourses, the latter referring to a one-dimensional language that restricted thought and debate to the terms and interests of the establishment. Significantly, Marcuse referred to this as 'Orwellian language' (Marcuse 1964, 89; Kellner 1984).

To acknowledge the importance of the relationship between language and politics is one thing; to believe that a state can actually manipulate not merely the percep-

tion but the behaviour of all citizens is quite another. Orwell's picture of the state commandeering language for political goals in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* describes a process far more systematic than the almost casual manipulation that had alarmed Arendt. In pre-war London the communist literati had been willing advocates of the Soviet line on Spain, brooking no opposition; in Oceania Syme supported the Party's far greater control of the media with the intention of affecting social behaviour through a manipulation of language more systematic than Marcuse could have imagined.

What emerges from this discussion is that the relationship between truth and untruth is by no means as straightforward as Orwell seemed to think. But if objective truth reveals itself as problematical, what about the other half of the relationship, the autonomous individual?

The Limits of Autonomy

Enlightenment Man, Winston Smith's direct ancestor, had no sooner emancipated himself from the clutches of the church and declared himself to be an autonomous moral being 'who carried his dignity within himself' (Arendt 1967, 291) than he disappeared again, to become a member of the people. He sacrificed part of his individuality the better to defend autonomy. For liberal thinkers the state must allow, indeed encourage, a plurality of institutions in which individuals could, in Arendt's words, recreate themselves as social beings. Arendt is drawing an important distinction here between autonomy, which is essentially social, and something quite different: the individual in isolation. Bakunin, certainly no lover of the state, recognised the distinction when he cried that he did not want to be 'I'; he wanted to be 'We' (Nomad 1939, 180). He wanted, that is to say, not isolation but autonomy.

J. S. Mill, who, like Orwell, sought to champion the cause of moral autonomy, insisted upon the importance of this social dimension. If truth were to be nailed it would not be by individual experience and reason alone, but by discussion, by 'the steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others' (Mill 1957, 82). Truth, then, like rationality, is seen as the product of Habermas's illusive public sphere (Habermas 1962, *passim*; Welton 2001, 20–34). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell portrayed the struggle for individual autonomy as part of a wider struggle over the nature of truth and reality fought out between the state and the isolated (but not, in Mill's or Arendt's sense, autonomous) individual, a fight with only one possible winner.

Orwell wrote about a state in which civil society had been utterly crushed and the rule of law traduced so the social dimension of truth, Mill's collecting and collating, was entirely absent. Without the endorsement of the formal and informal institutions that make up civil society, without the safeguard of the rule of law, the isolated individual simply cannot build any safeguard against the all-powerful state. As Arendt suggested in respect of her Enlightenment Man, autonomy can only be defended by sacrificing part of it to civil society, for example by becoming part of 'the people'. Moreover, the isolated individual's ability to reason, clumsily exem-

plified here by the equation 2 + 2 = 4, is, if Dostoevsky or Huxley are to be believed, just as likely to be an emblem of tyranny as of autonomy.

We cannot doubt that Orwell recognised Winston's deficiencies as a morally autonomous agent, not least because Winston himself was very clear about them. He had no family in which to ground his values; the Party had destroyed family loyalties. He belonged to no social group. He was not part of any wider system of inherited, traditional values that might be passed on to his children. For Orwell such values were incorporated in ordinary language. How else can we descry and describe the truth? Newspeak and its stablemate doublethink made it practically impossible for any individual to perceive, let alone articulate any moral truth. 'The first step in liquidating a people', said Milan Kundera's Hubl, 'is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have someone write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was' (Kundera 1983, 157). Not having a set of customs and values to pass on to one's children was an Orwellian preoccupation, and a *cri de coeur* of another Orwellian solitary man, George Bowling.[16] Winston's first diary entry had been a dedication 'to the future, or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone—to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone' (Orwell 1960, 26). In stark contrast, Smith's world, like Franz Kafka's, was peopled by 'a humanity that no longer knows anything, that lives in nameless cities with nameless streets or streets with names different from the ones they had yesterday, because a name means continuity with the past and people without a past are people without a name' (Kundera 1983, 157).

Distraught at his social deprivation, Winston's sense of loss of privacy is even more keenly felt. The temple of privacy, as the tramp Bozo had told Orwell when he was down and out in London (Orwell 1969, 147), was inside the skull, and the Party had desecrated that temple. By taking away freedom of speech and the possibility of creative socialisation, the space inside the skull so prized by Bozo had become a void and the Party, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

Nineteen Eighty-Four shows the consequences of the destruction of civil society and the rule of law, but it does not tell us in detail how these things happened. Rather it gives a harrowing account of the destruction of the last individual to survive these processes. Why? There are two principal reasons, the first a personal one: Orwell himself was always a very private man, especially after the death of his fist wife, and became increasingly so as his illness claimed him. He detested all '-isms'; his only political allegiance was a rather half-hearted flirtation with the Independent Labour party (though like Winston, he found the prospect of revolutionary *action* alluring). In this sense Winston can be said to represent Orwell himself. More important, perhaps, is the second, the political dimension. If we were to categorise Orwell's political thinking, it would come closest to ethical socialism,[17] distinguished by its faith 'above all [in] the good sense of ordinary people' (Dennis and Halsey 1988, 4–5). Other socialists, including some leading Fabians, believed that, left to their own devices, ordinary people would be moved principally not by good sense but by ignorance and prejudice.[18] Orwell fiercely opposed this elitism, and argued that any hope for a democratic future rested with ordinary people: hope lay with the proles.

He was not referring to organised labour and its agents but to individual ordinary men and women, of whom Winston was the last in Europe. But what Winston Smith represents is not the 'ordinary people' of ethical socialism, 'clinging together against the dark' (Rorty 1989, 168) in allegiances of family, religion, class, regional identity and so on, who emerge so triumphantly from the pages of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936), but isolated people shorn of all the attributes that made their ordinariness socially and politically valuable.

This is why Winston's *cri de coeur* echoed Bakunin's: it was not, after all, the cry of the 'I' who wants to remain 'I', the champion of isolation dressed up as individual moral autonomy, but the cry of the 'I' who craves the 'We' of some collective social or political agency for which he would be willing to sacrifice his autonomy. Not part of it, but all of it! Far from being a champion of the individual as an autonomous moral agent, Winston Smith turns out to have been a closet collectivist and indeed a potential terrorist, just as willing as Rousseau to force other people to be free. Alan Sandison, we saw, likened Winston Smith to Martin Luther—the last and the first men in Europe (Sandison 1974, *passim*). The comparison stands better if we remember that Luther's attack on the church led not to an entirely new relationship between God and millions of morally autonomous men and women but to a rival institution to the church, boasting a similar orthodoxy, demanding a similar loyalty. Winston Smith was prepared to die and kill for the elusive Brotherhood. What *Nineteen Eighty-Four* suggests is that isolated individuality (of which Julia is the true champion) turns out to be inimical to 'real' autonomy, and our capacity to recognise the truth must be social, and the truth we recognise must therefore be social: a product of our loyalty to the groups in civil society to which we belong, a product of public discourse.[19] The importance of a vibrant civil society has been recognised by modern theorists, none more so than Habermas (Flyvberg 1998, 210–232), and observers of democratic government (Keane 1988) and was certainly recognised by traditionalists like Burke, whose opposition to the French Revolution was triggered by the fear that, if imported to Britain, its ideas would be destructive of the customs and practices of civil society (Burke 1992, 196).

The State, the Citizen, Language and Truth

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell analyses the relationship between truth and power. Arendt showed how, for too long, policy-makers in America were able to use their power to create an alternative truth about Vietnam. Orwell explored the conditions under which such a state of affairs might be made permanent. His was an imaginative world and the picture he painted is even more chilling than Arendt's real world, for here no truth emerges nor ever will emerge. Moreover his conceptualisation of the psychology of those private institutions of government, in the shape of doublethink and its formal expression newspeak, crystallised Arendt's fears. Doublethink, newspeak, the Ministries of Love and Truth and above all the caring embrace of Big Brother entered into the consciousness of a generation and helped to shape the world in which we live.

The destruction of Oceanian civil society brought about by the erosion of its cultural base, especially its language, provides a picture of the threat posed by all modern

governments and indeed corporations, which to a greater or lesser extent have a propensity, enhanced by modern information technology, to control public opinion by destroying the individual's hold on what Orwell called objective truth—and what we might prefer to call societal or consensual truth—and hence their autonomy. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is deficient in its lack of clarity and conviction concerning the nature of the objective truth to be defended. Its great strength is the force and poignancy with which it demonstrates the crucial importance of civil society, of the communal or societal setting of the moral autonomy to be marshalled in the defence of objective or social truth. Moreover the social institutions that are so ominously absent in Oceania are under threat in the modern world much in the manner that Orwell foresaw, and none more than the family. Moreover, here and almost everywhere in his writings Orwell identified the crucial field of battle for liberals who wish to sustain consensual truth: plain language. Plain language is far more difficult to conscript to serve corrupt and despotic purposes with their vicarious truths than the various forms of duckspeak that sully so much of modern public life, both in state and corporate arenas. Newspeak has the propensity to undermine civic culture and social values, and thereby to make Oceania, or something like it, a reality and not just a figment of Orwell's powerful imagination. Monolithic, totalitarian states might seem anachronistic today (though North Korea remains and Pol Pot is less than 10 years in his grave), but other hegemonic structures of domination proliferate, and the growing power of the broadcasting media provides means of articulating such domination.

Difficult to conscript in the service of despotism, plain language is also democratically inclusive and as such is a *sine qua non* of government by consent, which must, by definition, be based upon trust. If we believe that, through their insidious use of duckspeak our politicians are trying to deceive us almost as a matter of course, how can we possibly be said to consent to their actions? And if we cannot, what is the basis of representative government? Who or what is being represented?

Liberals should remember that power and language are inextricably linked: newspeak is ingsoc and ingsoc is newspeak. Orwell's harrowingly imaginative novel forces us, as no work of political science or philosophy could, to confront a range of dimensions concerning the nature of public truth and lying. Philosophically limited though it is, its very limitations invite reflection. Moreover, Orwell identifies the agents of his objective truth in civil society; more significantly for us today he unerringly locates the field where the battle for truth must be fought: public language. Plain language is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for Orwell's cherished autonomy to flourish and the flourishing of that autonomy is a prerequisite for government by consent. Liberals should fight everywhere and anybody for plain language, for that is the truly autonomous individual's only prospect of performing Pinter's mandate of 'seek[ing] out and adher[ing] to the "real truth"'. When Frederick Warburg read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* before publication he wrote: 'This is amongst the most terrifying books I have ever read ... It is a great book but I pray I may be spared from reading another like it' (Davison 1968, 479–481). Orwell's warning, whatever its philosophical limitations, must be taken as seriously in these days of duckspeak and sophisticated official smoke and mirrors as it was in the days of Stalinist communism, for as Patrick Reilly's rhetorically asks: 'Who writes a warning against an impossibility?' (Reilly 1986, 294).

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Notes

1. I have attempted to do this in my *Narratives of British Socialism* (2002). See chapter 1, 'Narratives and politics'.

2. We remember Shakespeare's porter in *Macbeth*, who rails against the 'equivocator' who could 'swear in both scales against either scale', but who, finally and tellingly, would not be able to equivocate his way into heaven (Act II, Scene III).

3. In his recent novel *Birds Without Wings*, Louis de Berniere's Leyla Hanm instructs the young Philothei on the secret art of appearing beautiful: 'My secret is that the secret of being beautiful is to make people believe that you are, until you believe it yourself, and *then it becomes true*' (de Berniere 2005, 217, emphasis added). The commercial implications of this secret are obvious; the political ones only slightly less so.

4. Alan Sandison (2003) argued that if Winston Smith was the 'last man' in Europe, Martin Luther was the first.

5. This letter to Richard Rees was dated 3 March 1949. Orwell had commented earlier, in a letter to Julian Symons dated 29 October 1948, on one of Sartre's works: 'I doubt whether it would be possible to pack more nonsense into so short a space'. He went on: 'I have maintained from the start that Sartre is a bag of wind, though possibly when it comes to existentialism, which I don't profess to understand, it may not be so' (Davison 1998, 461).

6. It is an analytical statement and thus one that simply could not be perverted even under the conditions of absolute human isolation or indeed under the ravages of brutal torture. According to A. J. Ayer, Poincaré argued that mathematics 'cannot amount to anything more than an immense tautology' (Ayer 1971, ch. 4, *passim*).

7. Hume was savagely attacked by his contemporary James Beattie (1996) in his *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*. Beattie's faith in evidential truth based upon the reliability of the senses, unlike Hume's scepticism, has not stood the test of time. Most commentators would tend to side with Hume, who referred to the work as a 'horrible large lie'.

8. Frayn was not necessarily convinced of the absolute consistency even of mathematical and logical propositions and created the philosopher *Yeswell Sortov* as an imaginary exponent of their ambiguities.

9. It is no coincidence that G. E. Moore, whose ideas Orwell follows elsewhere, wrote an essay entitled 'Common Sense' (1968) from a similar standpoint.

10. Orwell (1949) argues convincingly that many British intellectuals, themselves the champions of reason, failed to see the unreason of totalitarianism, chiefly because the 'order of the state' was based upon reason; but it was employed in the service of unreason.

11. For example Isaac Deutscher, 'The Mysticism of Cruelty' (Hume 1962, 38). Bernard Crick is nearer the mark, however, when he describes Zamyatin's novel as grist to the mill but 'neither the grain nor the stone' (Crick 1992, 148).

12. Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* begins with a story of senior Czech political figures appearing before a Prague crowd. The leader has no hat on and a faithful lieutenant, careful of the leader's health, loans him his own fur hat to ward off the snow. Many copies of the resulting photograph were made. Four years later the lieutenant was hanged for treason. 'The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history, and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well', says Kundera. All that remained of him was his hat, on the leader's head.

13. Brecht's Galileo, too, we may remember, longed for a day 'when we no longer have to look over our shoulder like criminals when we say that twice two is four'.

14. Somewhat disappointingly Keynes was speaking originally of investments (Keynes 1923, ch. 3).

15. See Fairclough (2000), *New Labour, New Language*. The overall effect on political communications of the mass media and their manipulative models of narrative is discussed in Meyers and Hinchman (2002), *Media Democracy*. Poole's (2006) *Unspeak* provides a chilling recent commentary on these issues.

16. Bowling is the chief character of Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*, written in 1938.

17. I have argued elsewhere (Ingle 2006) that Orwell is not in the final analysis an ethical socialist at all; nevertheless this is how he is frequently portrayed, for example by Dennis and Halsey (1988) in their influential account of English ethical socialism.

18. This was certainly Bernard Shaw's belief, as set out, for example, in his early play *Major Barbara*. The Fabian Beatrice Webb once famously queried the theory that by multiplying ignorant opinion indefinitely we produce wisdom.

19. A caveat must be placed on this claim. Social groups that shut themselves off from the rest of society, such as some religions, can be just as hostile to autonomy as the Party. Autonomy requires a commitment to pluralism and the rule of law on the part of such social groups.

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