

# *'The General Discouragement of the Generation': Orwell and the Politics of Language*

## I

As is well known, decisive among the weapons deployed in the panoptical dystopia portrayed in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the conscious engineering of language itself, such that 'modes of thought' contrary to those willed by the regime would be, because of being linguistically inexpressible, literally unthinkable. The idea is a suggestive one, so much so that some of its related vocabulary – 'doublethink', 'thought crime', 'unperson', 'memory hole' – have passed into everyday, 'normal' English. The phenomenon of 'Newspeak' of course comes to us as rather more than a mere narrative caprice: not only does Orwell's projection continue to fascinate and horrify, its theoretical premise, that language and its limits, once set, condition and delimit thought, is one that has enjoyed a significant pedigree.<sup>1</sup> The question that I address here is as to how seriously Orwell himself took the proposition. Was Orwell the writer really a partisan of this form of linguistic determinism; and, if he was, to what degree did this belief inform his practice as a writer?

That second question can already be posed as valid, because there seems to be more than a little evidence supporting an affirmative answer to the first. In the opening to one of his best known essays – 'Politics and the English Language',<sup>2</sup> which he published in 1946, i.e. while he was already working on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*<sup>3</sup> – Orwell argued the following:

Our civilisation is decadent and our language – so the argument runs – must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes.

But such a view, he went on, would be false:

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(In the notes below, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, 4 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1976, 1977, 1982 and 1978) is abbreviated to CEJL I, CEJL II, etc.)

<sup>1</sup> As the so-called 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis': 'Actually, thinking is most mysterious, and by far the greatest light upon it that we have is thrown by the study of language. This study shows that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systemisations of his own language – shown readily enough by a candid comparison and contrast with other languages, especially those of a different linguistic family. His thinking itself is in a language – in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern-system, differing from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.' Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, MA, 1956), p. 252. See also the overview in George Steiner, 'Whorf, Chomsky and the Student of Literature', *New Literary History* 4.1 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 15-34.

<sup>2</sup> CEJL IV, pp. 156-70, an essay described by Michael Sheldon (*Orwell: The Authorised Biography* (London, 1991), p. 430) as 'his most influential'.

<sup>3</sup> Although the work was published in the summer of 1949, it seems that Orwell had already been working on what was to become *Nineteen Eighty-Four* since at least late 1943. See Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Harmondsworth, 1992), p. 479.

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

Foolish thoughts engender foolish language; but the effect is reciprocal, for foolish language in turn provokes foolish thinking.

A year before, Orwell had gone as far as to suggest conscious intervention to protect the English language from deleterious lexical change:

If one cares about the preservation of the English language, a point one often has to decide is whether it is worth putting up a struggle when a word changes its meaning. [...] Possibly, [...] the degradation which is certainly happening to our language is a process which one cannot arrest by conscious action. [...] [But] I would like to see the attempt made.<sup>5</sup>

What was motivating Orwell above all was the concern that lexical indeterminacy had its own disarming political consequences:

Of all the unanswered questions of our time, perhaps the most important is: 'What is Fascism?' [...] [I]n internal politics [...] this word has lost the last vestige of meaning. For if you examine the press you will find that there is almost no set of people – certainly no political party or organised body of any kind – which has not been denounced as Fascist during the past ten years. [...] It will be seen that, as used, the word 'Fascism' is almost entirely meaningless.<sup>6</sup>

These fragments, as we shall see, are reflective of a deep-going concern in Orwell's work as to the mechanics of writing and its political and moral ramifications; the assumptions suggested in them appear – *appear* – to fit strongly with the priorities implied by 'Newspeak', and not just in a technical sense, as a description of how language influences thought, but morally, for they indicate a prescription for how language *should* be used, both as much to put a brake on the political disability wrought by linguistic 'decay' as to foment the type of language harmonious to uncorrupted and uncorrupting thought. My intention here will be to pursue these themes, to interrogate Orwell's work with respect both to his descriptive programme of language and to the prescriptive account of its use to be found therein, with the aim of establishing both the continuities as well as the ruptures in Orwell's thinking in this field. What I shall show with respect to this will be that we can indeed discern in Orwell's writings (excluding *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) a coherent *theory* of language, but a theory which is flawed both on the theoretical as well as on the practical levels; *inter alia*, I shall establish what a 'theory of language' needs to be in order to be so considered. I will also show that this theory, the theory accounted for in Orwell's work excluding *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, contradicts the theoretical premises on which the project of Newspeak is based. I shall then go on to argue that, just as theories of language are inseparable from a conception of the world and human engagement of it in the broad sense, Orwell's own theory goes hand in hand with a politico-philosophical outlook which demonstrates itself as plainly inadequate in dealing with the events and processes that it purports to, a weakness that expresses itself sharply in the work of Orwell's present-day champions.

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When a reader engages with a text, she is under no obligation to do so on the terms with which the author would have her do: the priorities of the producer of a text enjoy no special privilege in the relationship between author and reader. Nevertheless, if there is a necessary dialectical tension between producer and consumer in the construction and reception of meaning in general then it is also true that this tension is most keenly felt in the case of texts about *texts*, and since here we shall be concerning ourselves with the status of Orwell's own theory

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<sup>4</sup> 'Politics and the English Language', p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> 'As I Please' (26 January, 1945), *CEJL* III, p. 371.

<sup>6</sup> 'As I Please' (24 March, 1944), *CEJL* III, pp. 135-8.

of the relationship of meaning, author, and reader we need to be aware of the necessary methodological difficulty. A single example will illustrate the point.

In 1968 the American Harry Zohn undertook the translation into English of Walter Benjamin's *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (*The Task of the Translator*).<sup>7</sup> Benjamin's essay, which formed the preface to his own translation into German of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, takes the form of a treatise on the theory and practice of translation, and argues, amongst other things, that what is essential to a text lies not in its *semantic* content but consists in its syntactic *structure*. The translator, according to Benjamin, must therefore allow herself to be confined at the level of the 'words' of the text to be translated, not at the level of its sentences: at the level of syntax, rather than that of 'meaning' itself.<sup>8</sup> The true translation must therefore be as faithfully literal to the *form* of the source text as possible.<sup>9</sup> But in his own translation Zohn chose an especially 'free' strategy; he thus not only offers us a *translation* of Benjamin's text but by rejecting Benjamin's own prescriptions an implicit negative commentary on it too, and for this reason Zohn's translation remains controversial – and not only for perceived inaccuracies<sup>10</sup> – to this day. Of course, no translation is an 'innocent' translation, but the very nature of Benjamin's text meant that Zohn's was *necessarily* less innocent than most: whatever his private views on translation strategy, the subject matter of his source text surely presented him with a dilemma as to how – not whether – to make his own views on the text's imperatives public.

A similar dilemma presents itself when we read Orwell. Robert Resch has argued<sup>11</sup> that both Orwell's admirers and his detractors have over the years 'fallen under the spell' of both his persona and a 'prose style aiming at the "clarity of a windowpane"'.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the world has never been shy of those literary positivists for whom the study of a text is always merely *reading*, rather than *a* reading; nevertheless, when we come to Orwell this problem is compounded by the fact that explicit in his prose is the stricture that *they* be subject to reading, rather than *a* reading: that *his* prose, *his* texts, be taken at *their* superficial face value. But just as Harry Zohn was under no moral imperative to follow the circumscriptions of the text he was working with, neither are we so obliged when we read Orwell; nevertheless the pressure, and the temptation, are there. For what Resch is accusing is that we have tended to take Orwell's writing – both his fiction and non-fiction – at face value, without engaging it in a process of interrogation, without penetrating its surface narratives to sample its deeper structures and

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' (trans. Harry Zohn), in Lawrence Venuti (ed.) *The Translation Studies Reader* (London, 2002), pp. 14-25.

<sup>8</sup> Although Benjamin's argument is that it is at the level of syntax that 'meaning' in its most fundamental sense is really to be found.

<sup>9</sup> Ever since Cicero and St Jerome in the western tradition, i.e. for over two thousand years, a debate has run over whether one should strive for fidelity in meaning over fidelity to form and structure, lexis and grammar in translation, the general terms of reference of which being the superiority (or otherwise) of word-for-word over 'free' – 'sense-by-sense' – translation. And not only in the western tradition. In the Arab world, the highly advanced and copious translation activity (principally of scientific and philosophical texts from ancient Greek) centred on Abassid Baghdad saw similar debates around the same concepts. There is even evidence that the ancient Chinese tradition (which was centred on the translation of Buddhist texts) was also ideologically configured around similar terms of reference.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Rendall, 'A Note on Harry Zohn's Translation', in Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, pp. 23-5.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Paul Resch, 'Utopia, Dystopia, and the Middle Class in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*', *boundary 2* 24.1 (1997), pp. 137-8.

<sup>12</sup> The quotation within the quotation is from Orwell's 'Why I Write' [1946], *CEJL* I, p. 30. It is unfortunate that this (much-cited) essay is placed right at the beginning of volume 1 of the *CEJL*, rather than in its correct chronological place (which would have been somewhere towards the end of volume 4). The *CEJL* is arranged by date, according to Sonia Orwell's introductory rationale: 'The material is arranged chronologically for two reasons. The first and most important one is that it is extremely difficult to pigeonhole Orwell's essays and journalism [...]. The second [...] was to give a continuous picture of Orwell's life as well as of his work' without disobeying his request that no biography be written. ('Introduction', *CEJL* I, pp. 16-17) The placing of 'Why I Write' at the opening of the collection distorts this intention, for the essay is not a statement of *future* intent but an explanation of *past* practice, and needs to be read with this in mind (a point of some importance, to which I shall return). On this point, see also Peter Marks, 'Where He Wrote: Periodicals and the Essays of George Orwell', *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.4 (Winter 1995), pp. 266-83.

matrices; in a phrase, *reading* the texts, without engaging in *a* reading of them, and this quite simply because these texts demand, because of the theory of language and of writing they expound which is at its *weakest* always implicitly expressed in them, that they be so taken. As a consequence, the tendency has been to take Orwell as *textually* straightforward, and thus precisely unworthy of a theoretical interrogation at the level of language itself.

The elementary point here is that, insofar as assessment of Orwell's work does *not* engage with his theory of language, it necessarily accepts it *de facto*. This is especially pernicious for Orwell's admirers of the left, for whom what has always been decisive about Orwell is his apparently avowed stance as an anti-Stalinist socialist,<sup>13</sup> and for whom, this established (principally through *Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*, along with a certain reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) there is really very little more of substance to be said: as Resch argues, this left has thus been far too much engaged with 'Orwell's cold war appropriators' to engage with substance of his work itself<sup>14</sup> (and hence the theory of language which runs through it) such that it has always been the case that the more *anti*-Orwell left – Deutscher, Thompson, Williams – have come up with a far more incisive commentary, both in terms of the political superstructure of Orwell's writing as well its more subterranean ambiguities.<sup>15</sup> That Stalinism itself, if not all of its effects, has now gone, and with it too the stamp of 'anti-Stalinist' as *point d'honneur*, perhaps explains why Orwell has rather slipped off the left's radar in recent – post-Stalinist – years; and why, as Resch argues, this alone stands as a good reason to return to him.<sup>16</sup>

But if Orwell no longer holds so much sway for the left, he remains of great importance to a certain tendency of the right – a tendency that I call the 'clash-of-civilisations' right.<sup>17</sup> In the introduction to a recent recollection of Orwell's writings<sup>18</sup> the historian and commentator Timothy Garton Ash put the case for Orwell's continuing relevance along these lines:

If I had to name a single quality that makes Orwell still essential reading in the twenty-first century, it would be his insight into the use and abuse of language. If you have time to read only one essay, read 'Politics and the English Language'. This brilliantly sums up the central Orwellian argument that the corruption of language is an essential part of oppressive or exploitative politics. 'The defence of the indefensible' is sustained by a battery of euphemisms, verbal false limbs, prefabricated phrases, and all the other

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<sup>13</sup> Some examples, which may be taken as representative of this point of view: Peter Sedgwick, 'George Orwell International Socialist?', *International Socialism* 37 (June/July 1969), pp. 28-34; John Newsinger, 'Orwell and the Spanish Revolution', *International Socialism Journal* 62 (Spring 1994), <<http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj62/newsinger.htm>> [retrieved 4 April, 2007]; Anna Chen, 'George Orwell: A Literary Trotskyist?', *International Socialism Journal* 88 (Winter 1999), <<http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj85/chen.htm>> [retrieved 4 April, 2007]; Darren Williams, 'Orwell's Legacy', *Workers Action* 30 (August 2006), <[http://www.workersaction.org.uk/24Articles/24\\_Orwell.htm](http://www.workersaction.org.uk/24Articles/24_Orwell.htm)> [retrieved 4 April, 2007]

<sup>14</sup> 'Utopia, Dystopia', pp. 137-8.

<sup>15</sup> Isaac Deutscher, "'1984' – The Mysticism of Cruelty", in Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions: Essays from Four Decades* (London, 1984), pp. 61-70; E P Thompson, 'Outside the Whale', in E P Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), pp. 1-33; and Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1981), pp. 384-92.

<sup>16</sup> 'Utopia, Dystopia', pp. 137-8.

<sup>17</sup> This label is a caprice of my own design; to give a flavour of its contours, it is that principally anglophone and largely British intellectual tendency that champions what it sees as the global moral superiority of western European and north American society, sees the principal force for evil in the world in what it sees as 'Islamism' or – worse – 'Islamofascism', and is thus prepared, if in certain of its regions reluctantly, to endorse those military adventures (in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans) carried out at the behest of Washington. Chief among its personnel would count Martin Amis, David Aaranovitch, Ian Buruma, Nick Cohen, Timothy Garton Ash, Norman Geras, Christopher Hitchens and (on the other side of the Atlantic) David Horowitz, amongst others. If it has a political programme, it would be the so-called 'Euston Manifesto' (*Euston Manifesto*, <[http://eustonmanifesto.org/?page\\_id=132](http://eustonmanifesto.org/?page_id=132)> [retrieved 1 September, 2008]). And far from irrelevant is the fact that Orwell's legacy, at least in the form of lip-service to it, forms a more or less central plank for the outlook of each of the major names associated with this current.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Davison (ed.), *Orwell and Politics: 'Animal Farm' in the Context of Essays, Reviews and Letters Selected from the Complete Works of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth, 2001).

paraphernalia of deceit that he pinpoints and parodies. [...] [P]olitical writers should be the window cleaners of freedom. Orwell both tells and shows us how to do it. That is why we need him still, because Orwell's work is never done.'<sup>19</sup>

What makes Orwell here 'essential' here is precisely his use *of* language, and his ideas *on* the use of language, to the point that – this apart – it is far less important *what* he said than *how* he said it.

So it is significant that this argument finds an almost exact echo in the judgement of Christopher Hitchens, whose recent book *Orwell's Victory*<sup>20</sup> (published in the United States under the rather more didactic title *Why Orwell Matters*) also makes a priority of *how* Orwell used language over what he actually said. What Orwell illustrates, argues Hitchens,

by his commitment to language as the partner of truth, is that 'views' do not really count; that it matters not what you think, but *how* you think; and that politics are relatively unimportant, while principles have a way of enduring, as do the few irreducible individuals who maintain allegiance to them.<sup>21</sup>

Again, we are not just left with Orwell's theory of language, but the fact that form of language which this theory appears to demand is the substance of his legacy.

Which leads to the following interesting conclusion. For the twenty-first century (i.e. post-Soviet, post-Stalinist) left, Orwell's relevance as a point of reference recedes into the distance as time passes; for what I am calling the clash-of-civilisations right, his significance at the same time both grows as it increasingly *reduces* itself to his use of language and his views on the use of language. The right (to whom the ground is ceded), for its own reasons, accepts his theory of language as fundamentally sound, while the left has accepted it *de facto* by *failing* to engage with it (and is left with increasingly little to say). Hence what remains outstanding is a *critical* engagement with Orwell at this level, at the level of his theory of language: to identify what this theory is, what its merits or its demerits are, and how it sits with Orwell's work and thought in a general sense.

It is towards this end that this essay is directed.

## II

The difficulty, to which I have already alluded, which emerges when one approaches Orwell is that so much discussion of him reduces itself to attempts to lay claim to his legacy. Of course, Orwell was nothing if not a political writer; in one sense, then, that this should be the case is quite understandable. The problem arises when one makes an attempt to define what that legacy really *is*. Such are the difficulties in establishing this that, in dealing with commentaries on Orwell, the question as to *whose* Orwell is being talked about thrusts itself to the

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, 'Orwell for Our Time' *Guardian Unlimited* (4 May, 2001), <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/politicsphilosophyandsociety/story/0,,486093,00.html>> [retrieved 12 March, 2007]. In this article, an edited version of the book's introduction, Garton Ash goes on to compare Orwell to Solzhenitsyn, Camus, Brecht, Popper, von Hayek, Hannah Arendt and Sartre, and arrives at the frankly preposterous conclusion that 'each made an impact more limited in duration or geographical scope than did this short-lived, old-fashioned English man of letters.' Garton Ash's affinities with Orwell are perhaps emphasised by the fact that in 2006 he won the George Orwell Memorial Prize for the Journalism category. The Prize is judged by the George Orwell Memorial Fund (set up by Orwell biographer Bernard Crick) and the *Political Quarterly*, which means that at the time of writing Garton Ash was awarded a prize on the basis of a decision made in part by a journal on whose editorial board he currently sits.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *Orwell's Victory* (London, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211. Compare the same author's *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 63: '[W]hat really matters about any individual is not what he thinks, but how he thinks.'

fore.

In his recent book Christopher Hitchens argues that Orwell is important because he was right with regard to 'the three great subjects of the twentieth century [...] imperialism, fascism, and Stalinism', by which the rest of the 'the intellectual class' 'were fatally compromised', either partially or totally.<sup>22</sup> That Hitchens' own intellectual trajectory, from radical leftist to reinvented conservative,<sup>23</sup> is something of a well-trodden path, and that, in this journey, it has often been the name of Orwell that has been invoked as camouflage, is not irrelevant here, and we shall return to it. But for now, the difficulty of this lies in the fact that if what is fundamental to Orwell (i.e. to Hitchens' Orwell) is his *opposition* to these 'three great subjects', we are not necessarily enlightened as to what Orwell was *for*. The problem with this approach in Orwell's case is that Orwell was at one time or another against so many things – imperialism, fascism, communism, modern capitalism,<sup>24</sup> middle-class socialism, Trotskyism, nationalism, war, pacifism, feminism, Jews, homosexuals,<sup>25</sup> vegetarians, birth control, and, surprisingly but obsessively, aspirin. It is unlikely that Orwell would have admitted to not being generally right had he been asked (who would?) but whether he would have agreed at a given point with Hitchens on what the key questions of the age were is a different matter. And, of course, that Hitchens titled the American edition of his book *Why Orwell Matters* and not *Why Orwell Mattered*<sup>26</sup> indicates that the claim is not that Orwell *was* right but that he still *is*.<sup>27</sup>

Yet maybe it is Orwell's very inconsistency that explains in good part why he has been such a perennial figure, claimed by so many different points of view: whatever one's outlook, there is always something in Orwell to buttress it. But if this is the reason for Orwell's ecumenical appeal, by the same token this inconsistency makes his real legacy, if it is to actually amount to something, all the more difficult to establish: if Orwell really is to speak to us today then there has to be some kernel of consistent position beneath, or perhaps despite, apparent superficial inconsistencies. The problem brings with it a special methodological danger: if what contradicts what is seen as fundamental in Orwell is derogated as secondary, then on what grounds is the distinction between fundamental and secondary made other than the fact that the fundamental is fundamental for not being contingent and the contingent contingent for not being fundamental? Away from the caprices of the appraiser, why is it that what Orwell said on one subject is more important than what he said on another? Without anchoring, the procedure can only follow a circular path of tautology emanating from an *a priori* judgement according to which the material is catalogued (and, frequently, selectively quoted from<sup>28</sup>).

This is, of course, the substance of the general problem of literary reception. In one recent study of Orwell,<sup>29</sup> which is, in the author's own words, a 'study of reputation as an historical and sociological issue',<sup>30</sup> John Rodden

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<sup>22</sup> *Orwell's Victory*, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Richard Seymour, 'The Genocidal Imagination of Christopher Hitchens: The Lighter Side of Mass Murder', *MRZine* (26 November, 2005), <<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/seymour261105.html>> [retrieved 3 July, 2007].

<sup>24</sup> See Paul Street, 'Hitchens, Orwell, Capitalism, and the Real Threat to Democracy', *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 26 (2004), pp. 61-4.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Miller's defence of Orwell's frequent recourse to the epithet 'pansy left' is simply pathetic. Far from being homophobic, he argues, 'by pansy he is referring more to a leftist's lack of respect for the military virtues than to his sexual orientation. He had a number of homosexual friends.' 'Orwell Once More', *Sewanee Review* 112.4 (Fall 2004), p. 600.

<sup>26</sup> As John Rodden ('Fellow Contrarians? Christopher Hitchens and George Orwell', *The Kenyon Review* 28.1 (2006), p. 164, n. 52) points out, Hitchens' first choice of title, *The Power of Facing* (borrowed from Orwell's own 'Why I Write' (p. 23)), proved unacceptable to his publishers.

<sup>27</sup> Ron Capshaw (reviewing Hitchens): '[...] fascism, Stalinism and imperialism are no longer relevant, or at least no longer captained by the same nationalities.' ('Orwellian Pundit', *American Book Review* 24.5 (July-August), 2003, p. 15)

<sup>28</sup> The pioneer in this field was Norman Podhoretz, who, through – let us put it no stronger – creative ellipsis, sought to enlist Orwell to the camp of 1980s' north American neoconservatism: 'If Orwell Were Alive Today', *Harper's* 266 (January, 1983), pp. 30-37.

<sup>29</sup> *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of St George Orwell* (New Brunswick, N.J. and London, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> John Rodden, 'The Orwell Century?', *Society* 40.5 (2003), p. 64.

argues that what is customary in the evaluation of the reputation of a dead writer is for one of her defining features to be prioritised over all others, within which which feature is chosen in a given set of circumstances informs the context and nature of the reception in each case. For Rodden, ‘reputations are [both] used and abused’; and his approach to Orwell was to trace how ‘the practice of “extending” his work and “predicting” his posthumous stands has not been an innocent pursuit [but] [...] one of the main instances of the “claiming” – or literary grave-robbing – of a major writer, largely conducted via selective quotation from his corpus’ in a process of ‘a *personalising of the historical and a historicising of the personal*,’<sup>31</sup> allowing the identification of how what has been adjudged to be defining has been so judged and how the way it has been evaluated has varied with the politico-intellectual times.

The problem with this – symptomatic in general of the study of literary reception – is that it tends to see only one end of the literary chain: such a procedure is at the outset hindered by its own priorities in telling us about the deeper architecture of the literary object of reception itself – about, rather than what there is in it that lends itself to this or that reception, why what is there that so lends itself *is* there in the first place. For the study of literary reception ultimately rests on the assumption that reception, while constitutive of the literary work, is, at the same time *external* to it. But reception is no mere *contingent* fact upon literature: the relationship between literary producer and consumer forms neither an unmediated continuum nor consists in a formal opposition; rather, writer and reader are united by a dialectic, and, since the consumption of literature is *as* constitutive of it as its production is, *although in a different way*, the ‘implied reader’<sup>32</sup> – be she objectively or subjectively so implied – herself needs to be identified in the historical configuration of the work itself in order that reception in its full sense be *accounted* for. Therefore, what really needs to be identified is that dialectic that unites production and consumption, writer and reader, text and reception, so that the manner of reception informs our understanding of the text.<sup>33</sup> Thus, while we clearly need to ask as to why, for example, Hitchens (*et al*) choose to present Orwell in *one* particular way, the matter of substance, and thus the ultimate goal of inquiry, needs to be why it is *Orwell* that is chosen to be so presented – to find, as it were, the implied Hitchens (*et al*) in Orwell.

In the case of Hitchens and Garton Ash (as the representatives of the clash-of-civilisations right) this dialectic, as we have seen, reduces itself to *language*. Garton Ash in fact expresses himself badly: ‘the central Orwellian

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<sup>31</sup> John Rodden, ‘My Orwell Right or Left’, *Canadian Journal of History/ Annales canadiennes d’histoire* 24.1 (April, 1989), pp. 1-2 (my emphasis).

<sup>32</sup> That image of the text’s potential consumer that is written into the ideological architecture of the text itself; that figure who ‘embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader.’ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London, 1978), p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> And not the other way round. One could here, by way of metaphor, allude to the Kantian problematic of the inherent unknowability of the realm of the noumenal, the realm of ‘things-in-themselves’. But this problematic (as Hegel demonstrated) is false in that it opposes the realm of the noumenal to that of its phenomena (i.e. sense-impressions) as a *formal* – categorical – opposition. But phenomenal knowledge is phenomenal not because it *excludes* noumenal knowledge but in virtue of being *how* the noumenal *is* known: ‘direct’ (i.e. unmediated by the processing of sense-impression) knowledge of things-in-themselves is indeed impossible, but it is impossible because it conceives knowledge-in-itself as separate from the active human subject, i.e. it is not just impossible but a contradiction in terms. The opposition between the noumenal and the phenomenal may be real, but it is a *dialectical* opposition, the content of which is given by human engagement with material reality, i.e. by human practice. If we substitute here the ‘text-in-itself’ as the noumenal element in this metaphor and its reception as the phenomenal, then we can see that the reception of a literary work, rather than constituting a form of its existence distinct from the ‘text-in-itself’, is the way in and through which the real work is known: that production and consumption (and consequent reflection and representation), rather than constituting categorically distinct moments in the life of a text form together a single articulated structure. Nevertheless, to continue the Kantian analogy, it is clear that, while noumena and phenomena are but moments in the unity of the appropriation of knowledge, the two realms are not *causatively* equivalent, for, while phenomenal manifestation is the mechanism by which the noumenal reality is grasped, it is the noumenal, given the presence of the active human subject, that ‘generates’ the phenomenal, without which it would not exist. Texts, in this sense, ‘generate’ receptions; receptions do not generate texts.

argument [is] that the corruption of language is an essential part of oppressive or exploitative politics'<sup>34</sup> should read 'the central Orwellian argument [is] that the corruption of language is *the* essential part of oppressive or exploitative politics', for, as we shall see, Orwell's label for 'oppressive or exploitative politics', what he called 'totalitarianism' – his fundamental definition of what this was – was founded *on* his theory of language. Given that one of my arguments here will be that one of the defects of the concept of 'totalitarianism' *qua* 'oppressive or exploitative politics' is that it focuses on superficial political features, and thus dehistoricises concrete systems of state power,<sup>35</sup> and another that this dehistoricisation of actual politics is constitutive both of Orwell's perception and that of the clash-of-civilisations right, something that in its own way explains the mechanism through which they find ideological justification in Orwell and his views on language, the point to recognise is that once Orwell is stripped the historically contingent<sup>36</sup> – i.e. of anti-Fascism, anti-Communism,<sup>37</sup> and anti-imperialism<sup>38</sup> – what *remains* is the transcendental theme of language and the consequences of its use.

What material that there is that deals with Orwell's views on language – and given the central importance of Orwell's theory of language in his work and to its understanding (including here its reception too) it perhaps surprises that it occupies such a subordinate place in the Orwellologists' output – can be categorised into three general groups. The far greater part of it is purely descriptive, complementing Orwell on his 'plain' and 'clear' writing style, and often praising (while taking them at face value) the *prescriptive* aspects of Orwell's writing; the comments of Hitchens and Garton Ash in this vein stand as typical of the field.<sup>39</sup> One could classify as an interesting subcategory here that (very minority) literature which encompasses critical comment on Orwell's style in which such apparent clarity of exposition that one finds in Orwell arouses suspicion.<sup>40</sup> Of the rest, we can discern two groups. One is composed of those commentaries which do make a pretence at dealing with Orwell's views at the level of theory but which reduce themselves, largely to the exclusion of comments on language that

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<sup>34</sup> 'Orwell for Our Time'.

<sup>35</sup> 'Since 1945, of course, the strength of emotional anti-Fascism has greatly diminished, and to a large extent has become merely a mechanical slogan on the left, while it has been subsumed by the right and by cold-war liberals under the pseudo-concept of totalitarianism. [...] [N]ot only is this notion in fact aimed (usually in conscious intention, always in objective effect) at Communism rather than Fascism, but it is also, and above all, the ideal liberal concept, in that it diverts attention firmly from problems of structure to derivative phenomena, from problems of history and man's attempt to make it to an abstract critique which logically presumes an unchanging, hypostasised world in which ideas contend for mastery.' Quentin Hoare, 'What is Fascism?', *New Left Review* 20 (Summer 1963), p. 101. As Michael Parenti put it, between Fascism and Communism, 'industrialists and bankers could tell the difference. And certainly the Communists and the Fascists could tell the difference.' ('Fascism: A False Revolution', <http://sonic.net/~doret/k/ArchiveARCHIVE/M%20P/Parenti%20on%20Fascism.html>) [retrieved 25 August, 2008]

<sup>36</sup> As Garton Ash himself argues, 'to say "read him because he mattered a lot in the past" will hardly attract new readers'. ('Orwell for Our Time')

<sup>37</sup> Or what Orwell would call 'Communism'; others might call it 'Stalinism'.

<sup>38</sup> Some will argue that this 'anti-imperialism' retains contemporary validity. But Orwell's anti-imperialism always took the form of an opposition (sometimes rather half-heartedly expressed) to direct colonialisation. Whatever injustices remain in the relations between first and third worlds – and in my opinion they are considerable both in number and in weight – they are no longer largely enforced through the imposition of *direct* colonial rule.

<sup>39</sup> (The references which follow here, and in the next five footnotes, are intended only to illustrate my point; I make to pretence to be comprehensive.) For further complementary commentary on Orwell's writing style, and praise for Orwell's prescriptions, see: Steve Kogan, 'In Celebration of George Orwell on the Fiftieth Anniversary of "Politics and the English Language"', *Academic Questions* (Winter 1996-1997), pp. 13-30; Jeffrey Meyers, 'Orwell on Writing', *The New Criterion* (October 2003) pp. 27-33; Sanford Pinsker, 'Musing about Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" – 50 Years Later', *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 73.1 (Winter 1997) pp.57-71; and Stephen K Roney, 'Postmodernist Prose and George Orwell', *Academic Questions* (Spring 2002), pp. 13-23.

<sup>40</sup> For example, R K Meiners, 'Dialectics at a Standstill: Orwell, Benjamin and the Difficulties of Poetry', *boundary 2* 20.2 (1993), pp. 116-139: 'Orwell's celebrated and desired clarity, that transparently varnished style that he lays down over all experience, becomes suspicious at nearly the same rate as it avoids any suspicion of itself.' (p.132) Compare this with Raymond Williams' comment: 'Orwell's strategy is always to try to write as if any decent person standing where he was would be bound to see things in this way.' (*Politics and Letters*, p. 388)

Orwell makes elsewhere, to dealing with Orwell's presentation of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>41</sup> Newspeak is then judged on its level of internal coherence and consistency – taking into account its potential effectiveness given, first, its aims, and, second, its structure as Orwell presents it – against standard linguistic models; or it is assessed from the point of view of the possibility of its application – or the application of something similar – in an imagined but real-world situation (and against the background of what is seen as the linguistic balance-sheet of twentieth-century Fascism and/or Communism). Sometimes, the conclusion is drawn that Orwell (or at least his theory) was a partisan of a Sapir-Whorf 'linguistic determinism'.<sup>42</sup> A final, minority, current simply refuses to dignify Orwell's views with the status of 'theory' properly understood, relegating them to the status of the opinions of a more (or less) informed 'amateur'.<sup>43</sup> But rare is the commentary that deals with Orwell's views on language *both* on a level broader than that of the schemas of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and at the status of a theory. Given this, certain works do deserve specific comment here.

In the only full-length work that I know of which maintains a pretension to cover the kind of ground which to me appears necessary, Andrei Reznikov<sup>44</sup> sets out what he sees as Orwell's theory of language based on an examination of twenty-one separate items of Orwell's non-fiction – essays and journalism – in which this theory is expressed,<sup>45</sup> a 'mosaic' to which Newspeak stands as but one piece,<sup>46</sup> but a piece which has the function of acting as an 'ideal-type' model of language,<sup>47</sup> within which the theory presents itself:

Newspeak, apart from being a device to express Orwell's message in his novel, is, at the same time, the way he describes his theory of [...] language. [...] Orwell's model of Newspeak [...] is an ideal model that does not exist, but [...] [which] enables him to describe the characteristics of real languages.<sup>48</sup>

Central in the theory, naturally developed with reference to English, which Reznikov identifies in Orwell is the latter's concern at the deterioration of available lexical richness – expressed in an excessive borrowing (especially from German and Russian) and an over-use of the Latin over the 'Saxon' English word-stock, the deployment of 'ready-made phrases' and jargon, and a prevalence of 'dead metaphors'; in other words, at the level of vocabulary. What worries Orwell (in Reznikov's reading) is precisely that such 'prefabricated' language eliminates the need to think when using language (let us remember the stress that Orwell makes on the use of language in the *political* sphere). Although the whole process reflects a social deterioration, between thought and language a two-way determination evidences itself, a two-way determination in which these 'totalitarian habits' in thought corrupt language, and, in turn, corruption in language corrupts thought. In the mutual orbit of thought and language, the circle is closed.

It would be pertinent here, for both our purposes and Reznikov's, to cite A M Tibbetts' summary of Orwell's general propositions on language as they appear in 'Politics and the English Language':

1. The English language is susceptible to misuse and corruption.

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Paul Chilton, 'Orwell, Language and Linguistics', *Language & Communication* 4.2 (1984), pp. 129-146; Florence Lewis and Peter Moss, 'The Tyranny of Language' in Crispin Aubrey and Paul Chilton (eds.), *Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984* (London, 1983), pp. 45-57; Bob Hodge and Roger Fowler, 'Orwellian Linguistics' in Roger Fowler, *Language and Control*, (London, 1979), pp. 6-25; Nigel Love, 'Science, Language and Linguistic Culture', *Language & Communication* (2008), article in press: doi:10.1016/j.langcom.2008.04.001; and John W Young, *Totalitarian Language: Orwell's Newspeak and Its Nazi and Communist Antecedents* (Charlottesville, VA, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Or 'linguistic relativism', according to taste.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, W F Bolton, *The Language of 1984: Orwell's English and Ours* (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>44</sup> Andrei Reznikov, *George Orwell's Theory of Language* (Lincoln, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>47</sup> A conclusion echoed in John E Joseph, 'Orwell on Language and Politics', *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics* 10 (2000): 'Newspeak is directly connected to the ideas expressed [...] in "Politics and the English Language". As the ultimate language for the suppression of thought, Newspeak represents the horrific end of the road Orwell describes English as travelling [...]' (p. 56)

<sup>48</sup> Reznikov, *George Orwell's Theory of Language*, p. 24.

2. The process of misuse and corruption is circular: Foolish thinking leads to bad English, which in turn leads to more foolish thinking.
3. Bad English has moral as well as political implications: The ‘necessary dialects’ of bad English are ‘designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind’ [...].
4. One can do something about the corruption of English by (a) appealing to reality to find meaning; (b) letting the ‘meaning choose the word, and not the other way about’ [...].<sup>49</sup>

From this, Tibbetts elicits what he calls ‘Orwell’s Principle’, *viz.* ‘corruption of language leads to corruption of human beings, a process which can be halted, in part, by improving our use of the language so that *it better fits reality*.’<sup>50</sup>

The circle may be thus either vicious or virtuous; in vicious form, it manifests itself in Reznikov in the ideal-type Newspeak in the following form: a progressively diminishing word stock and polysemic scope, and the increasing transformation of words into ‘empty shells deprived of any definite meaning, as capable of denoting one thing as its opposite’;<sup>51</sup> over-reliance on ‘ready-made phrases and abbreviations’; the deployment of antonymous euphemisms; the destruction (in part through re-writing) of the literature of the past; and the existence of an external system of regulation which sets out what the end point of the language’s development will be and ensures that it gets there.<sup>52</sup> Reznikov posits this ideal-type Newspeak language as the binary opposite of an ‘ideal’ ideal-type language (which he calls ‘Humanspeak’), a language ‘ideal for human communication, storing and disseminating information and expressing human emotions.’<sup>53</sup>

Basing himself on the foregoing, Reznikov’s thesis is a double one. First, he argues that Orwell argues that ‘there is a correlation between the type of society and the type of language the society is using’;<sup>54</sup> that the more ‘totalitarian’ the society, the more its language will resemble the ideal-type of Newspeak in its features:

[...] [W]hen society functions normally [*sic*], the language always functions normally. Society fulfils all its functions, and so does the language. [...] [But] [w]hen society gets into crisis – politically, economically, socially – it starts to deteriorate [...]. This movement inevitably tells on the language, which sooner or later starts deteriorating too. Roughly speaking, if society gets closer to the totalitarian political model, the language will inevitably acquire some or most of the features of the Newspeak language.<sup>55</sup>

One presumes (though this is unstated) that this occurs *because* of the two-way determination between thought and language.

Secondly, he suggests that, since the society-language correlation is mutually causative, that ‘[...] there exists, says Orwell, the reverse correlation too: we can improve the society by improving the language first, “starting at the verbal end”’.<sup>56</sup>

Thus far, this is what Reznikov says that Orwell says; but this is not all he says, for he also presents a set of arguments to suggest that Orwell was *right*. This aspect of Reznikov’s thesis lies largely beyond what I can address here, other than to say that this part of his argument, based with regard to the first part of his thesis on a limited set of observations regarding the use of English in contemporary north American politics, of German in Nazi Germany and of ‘Soviet Russian’, and with regard to the second on the effect of ‘bias-free’ (i.e.

<sup>49</sup> A M Tibbetts, ‘What Did Orwell Think about the English Language?’, *College Composition and Communication* 29.2 (May, 1978), pp. 165-6. Internal quotations are from ‘Politics and the English Language’.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 166 (my emphasis).

<sup>51</sup> The quotation is from F A Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago, 1994), p. 174.

<sup>52</sup> Reznikov, *George Orwell’s Theory of Language*, pp. 43ff. This last feature is, of course, a societal and not a linguistic one.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-5.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 115. The quotation within the quotation is from Orwell’s ‘Politics and the English Language’, p. 170.

politically correct) language in the United States, is neither rigorous nor convincing (as well as being, in the latter case, decidedly underwhelming).

For Reznikov, the function of Newspeak for Orwell is as an end-point on a scale to which the languages which exist in 'totalitarian' societies will approximate; it is therefore clear that, in itself, it has no independent, 'real', existence.<sup>57</sup> This is a point which echoes Richard J Voorhees' comment that Newspeak – as other totalitarian features laid out in the novel – are *extrapolations* of what was actually happening around Orwell as he wrote and had written:

Orwell's point [...] is not that a perfect version of totalitarian language will someday be created, but that workable versions have already been created. The danger lies, as it were, not in the eleventh edition of the [Newspeak] *Dictionary*, but in the tenth. In his earlier essay on the same theme, 'Politics and the English Language,' Orwell does not exaggerate the trend of totalitarian linguistics; in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he does, and readers have mistaken caricature for prophecy.<sup>58</sup>

If we follow these observations, of course, then criticism of Newspeak as implausibly realisable in the 'real' world will have little weight. We shall have to bear this in mind as we proceed.

If for Reznikov Newspeak represents some kind of consummation of a theory of language elsewhere set out in Orwell's work, for Carl Freedman<sup>59</sup> Newspeak is this theory's *antithesis*. The central characteristic of Orwell's theory, in principal (but not exclusively) as set out in 'Politics and the English Language', is a linguistic 'voluntarism', founded on 'a simplistic empiricism that assumes an easy, unproblematic adequation between an abstract language-manipulating subject and an equally abstract non-linguistic object.'<sup>60</sup> This leads Orwell to a distrust of

words whose definition involves any obvious, and obviously inescapable, complexity. [...] Accordingly, Orwell (in his prescriptions, *not* always in his own style) must attempt to avoid such words altogether in favour of those whose use does not make so evident the weakness of voluntaristic empiricism. The result is a dogmatic distrust of generalization and an extreme preference for the particular – and for the 'concrete' [...].<sup>61</sup>

But this 'concretisation' of language is precisely a feature of Newspeak as well:

Newspeak has no difficulty with words like *bit*, *run*, *dog*, *tree*, *sugar*, *house*, and *field*, that is, just the sort of terms that are least objectionable to Orwell's anti-generalising bias. On the other hand, it banishes such words which Orwell judged meaningless [in 'Politics and the English Language'] as *democracy*, *justice*, and *science*, while *freedom* and *equality*, to which Orwell similarly objected, are purged of all political and intellectual senses. In Newspeak the terms of everyday life are deprived of all 'ambiguities and shades of meaning' so that they cannot be used 'for literary purposes or for political or philosophical discussion' [...].<sup>62</sup>

In addition, Orwell's prescription in 'Politics and the English language' to the effect that 'if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out'<sup>63</sup> in turn finds its reflection in Newspeak, one of whose principles is the 'reduction of vocabulary [...] regarded as an end in itself.'<sup>64</sup> The appendix of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which deals with the technical structure of Newspeak cites the United States' Declaration of Independence, and notes that it would

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<sup>57</sup> Reznikov, *George Orwell's Theory of Language*, p.102.

<sup>58</sup> Richard J Voorhees, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four: No Failure of Nerve', *College English* 18.2 (November, 1956), p. 102 (emphasis added).

<sup>59</sup> Carl Freedman, 'Writing, Ideology, and Politics: Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and English Composition', *College English*, 43.4 (April 1981), pp. 327-340.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 330-1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>63</sup> 'Politics and the English Language', p. 169.

<sup>64</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1947-8] (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 242.

be ‘quite impossible to render this into Newspeak while keeping to the sense of the original.’<sup>65</sup> Freedman admonishes:

Precisely; and it would be equally impossible to ‘render’ Jefferson’s highly generalized and rhetorical sentences, which are full of Latinate words, into anything remotely similar to what the author of ‘Politics and the English Language’ could logically approve.<sup>66</sup>

From this, Freedman draws the following arresting conclusion:

‘The Principles of Newspeak’ is, I think, best read as a devastating, if *unconscious*, satire on ‘Politics and the English Language.’ Obviously, the anti-totalitarian author of the earlier piece would be horrified by Newspeak. Yet the construction of Newspeak does represent a serious attempt to put into practice both Orwell’s linguistic voluntarism and the tendency of the detailed advice that is based on it.<sup>67</sup>

John E Joseph provides us with an interesting twist on the relationship between Newspeak and the rest of Orwell’s theory.<sup>68</sup> In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he notes, Smith overhears a argument over the lottery between two proles:

‘Can’t you bleeding well listen to what I say? I tell you no number ending in seven ain’t won for over fourteen months!’

‘Yes, it ’as, then!’

‘No, it ’as not! Back ’ome I got the ’ole lot of ’em for over two years wrote down on a piece of paper. I takes ’em down reg’lar as the clock. An’ I tell you, no number ending in seven-’

‘Yes, a seven ’as won! I could pretty near tell you the bleeding number.’<sup>69</sup>

Not only is this conversation conducted in ‘irregular’ English (‘archetypal’ Oldspeak), but the fact that the conversation concerns numbers (when for Party members  $2 + 2 = \dots$  what?) lends credence to Orwell’s observation in the novel that only the proles have ‘stayed human’<sup>70</sup> (‘free’ use of language being constitutive of humanity) and also to his observations elsewhere to the anaemic nature of ‘Educated English’.<sup>71</sup> Here, susceptibility to corrupt language appears class-based: the middle (‘educated’) classes appear more prone to its effects than the working class. This is a significant *motif* to which I shall return.

Thus far, it seems, there is little disagreement among the commentaries with regard to the *features* of Orwell’s general theory of language – although, *a fortiori* in the case of Freedman, there is clearly no unanimity of *judgement* of it. Where tension does occur between these accounts is with regard to the status which Newspeak enjoys with regard to this theory. Does it conform to it? Does it contradict it? Does Newspeak act as a representation – be it caricature or no – of the ill effects of language corrupted by thought? And where does Orwell’s view of the beneficial effect of re-engineering language – improving society by ‘starting at the verbal end’ – fit in? These are questions I shall attempt to answer in the following sections.

### III

We now turn to Orwell’s own writings, to elicit his theory of language in his own words. We shall be

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Freedman, ‘Writing, Ideology, and Politics’, p. 333.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 333-4 (emphasis added)

<sup>68</sup> Joseph, ‘Orwell on Language and Politics’, pp. 57-8.

<sup>69</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 71.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>71</sup> ‘The English People’, [1943], *CEJL* III, pp. 43-4, 51.

constructing the theory logically, not chronologically, building up from its most fundamental premises to its practical outcome. For reasons that will become clear, we shall forego discussion of Newspeak for the moment.

As we saw at the outset of this essay, Orwell noted a congruence between the collapse of society and the failure of language; against the accepted explanation that the former induced, as an automatic consequence, the latter, such that there was really very little that could be done about it, he posited a *reciprocal causal relation* between language and thought.<sup>72</sup>

Beneath the view that the corruption of language was an inevitable outcome of the corruption of society was 'the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes';<sup>73</sup> against this view, language, because it is *made*<sup>74</sup> – Orwell seems to be suggesting – determines, as well as being determined.

As we have seen, Orwell was specifically motivated by the corruption of language in the political sphere:

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. [...] Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. [...] When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases [...] one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.<sup>75</sup>

The problem (or one of them) with this was that it disabled one politically:

Stuart Chase<sup>76</sup> and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don't know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism?<sup>77</sup>

But the process is reversible:

One need not swallow such absurdities as this, but one ought to recognise that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end.<sup>78</sup>

The difficulty, of course, is that words are only defined by other words:

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<sup>72</sup> 'Politics and the English Language', p. 157.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> All languages, that is, are made; and not just 'artificial' languages like, say, Newspeak, for in this view *all* languages are artificial (although maybe some are more 'artificial' than others).

<sup>75</sup> 'Politics and the English Language', pp. 165-6. The resonance between this last image, of the *unconscious* uttering of language, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* depiction of Newspeak is striking: 'Ultimately it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all.' (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 249) The 'eyeless' image too appears in the novel: 'His head was thrown back a little, and because of the angle at which he was sitting, his spectacles caught the light and presented to Winston two blank discs instead of eyes. What was slightly horrible, was that from the stream of sound that poured out of his mouth it was almost impossible to distinguish a single word. [...] As he watched the eyeless face with the jaw moving rapidly up and down, Winston had a curious feeling that this was not a real human being but some kind of dummy. It was not the man's brain that was speaking, it was his larynx.' (Ibid., pp. 46-7) Yet the similarity is more apparent than real, as we shall see.

<sup>76</sup> An American economist and engineer who also dabbled in semantics and political economy.

<sup>77</sup> 'Politics and the English Language', p. 171.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 169-70.

Merely talking about definitions is futile; one can see this whenever it is attempted to define one of the words used by literary critics (e. g. 'sentimental', 'vulgar', 'morbid', etc.). All meaningless – or rather, having a different meaning for everyone who uses them. What is needed is to show a meaning in some unmistakable form, and then, when various people have identified it in their own minds and recognised it as worth naming, to give it a name. The question is simply of finding a way in which one can *give thought an objective existence*.<sup>79</sup>

Orwell now asks: how does one guard against this kind of use of language, a use which involves words detached, at least in part, from reality? How does one 'give thought an objective existence? The answer he comes up with is a particular way of *thinking*.

What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way around. In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is surrender to them. When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualising you probably hunt about until you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.<sup>80</sup>

Here we see that words act as a distorting medium between thought and 'meaning', and this can be so severe that it is better to think without them as much as possible (as well as to think in terms that are not too 'abstract'). In this empirical model of language pure, i.e. 'wordless', thought is able to capture meaning; the problem comes when language – words – break the unity between thought object and real object. In this way, words corrupt 'meaning', i.e. they break the unity of mental concept and 'out there' entity. But how?

The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. [...] When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.<sup>81</sup>

Conscious insincerity ('corrupt thought': the 'gap between one's real and one's declared aims') lies at the heart of the problem. But there is another factor too:

A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better. The debased language that I have been discussing is in some ways very convenient. [...] This invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases [...] can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetises a portion of one's brain.<sup>82</sup>

The problem is that once corrupted language tends to stay corrupted. And the consequence of this linguistic inertia is that, should the author not be on her guard, corrupted language, in the form of words, sneaks in and takes over the control of meaning. But all is not lost:

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly [...].<sup>83</sup>

What is necessary here is for the individual author to be on her guard against the corrupting effects of language and to engage in that 'clear thinking' able to restore meaning by reuniting concepts and things in their natural unity. 'Meaning' for Orwell here is clearly the natural unity of thought object and real object, between reality and conceptual (i.e. 'wordless') thinking, a unity broken by ill-chosen words. The duty of the writer, then, is to 'let the meaning choose the word'; and it is her duty not to interpose *herself* in this process. In this way she either expresses the unity, or facilitates the union, of mental concept and external entity, and she does this by semantically eliminating herself from the act of writing: '[O]ne can write nothing readable unless one constantly

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<sup>79</sup> 'New Words' [1940?], *CEJL* II, p. 24 (emphasis added).

<sup>80</sup> 'Politics and the English Language', pp. 168-9.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a window pane.<sup>84</sup>

Here we see with some clarity that the very problem of 'corrupting' words arises from the author's own failure: as interference, words enter the writing process through the door opened by the writer's own idiomorphic personality. The author has to be a craftsman, not a demagogue; words, rather than being allowed to have an independent existence themselves are directed by the writer to act as the mechanism to regain the pristine union of meaning and reality.<sup>85</sup> Language needs to be a plain unobtrusive bridge to the truth.

Orwell's model thus posits an identity between meaning and external reality, an identity which only manifests itself in discourse when language – 'words' – do not sunder it. This is a classical empiricist view: 'reading' reality is possible because reality is transparent, and reality is (can only be) transparent because there is an underlying identity of the real object and the 'reading' subject. 'Meaning' lies immanent and accessible in reality; and the writer, who has learned to read the real, has before her the simple task of setting it forth in unobtrusive, non-distorting prose. When this is done successfully, and it is only done successfully when the writer absents her own presence from her text, this last acts as to represent reality *wie es eigentlich ist*. The text becomes the 'window pane' on reality.

But what must the writer do to achieve this presentation of the real in textual form? How does she efface her own personality, semantically to absent herself from the text? The key concept here is 'sincerity'. It is the task of the writer *to be sincere*:

The whole of modern European literature [...] is built on the concept of intellectual honesty [...]. The first thing that we ask of a writer is that he shall not tell lies, that he shall say what he really thinks, what he really feels. The worst thing we can say about a work of art is that it is insincere. And this is even truer of criticism than of creative literature, in which a certain amount of posing and mannerism, and even a certain amount of downright humbug, doesn't matter, so long as the writer is fundamentally sincere. Modern literature is essentially an individual thing. It is either the truthful expression of what one man thinks and feels, or it is nothing.<sup>86</sup>

It is the duty of the writer to be sincere, to express truthfully what she thinks and feels, for if she is, then, rather than language obscuring the real, it expresses it. In the sincerity of the author lies not only the aesthetic in literature, but what is fundamental – 'literary' – to literature itself, its very essence. In other words, sincerity is not just an aesthetic characteristic of 'good' literature, it is categorically definitional of literature *per se*.

Both the essence of literature, and hence its aesthetic *merit*, consists in the sincerity of the author; and not even in the phenomenological sense, for it appears to consist entirely in her *attitude*. Yet it must also have an objective manifestation, for otherwise it would be categorically impossible not only to differentiate 'good' literature from 'bad' but even to ascertain the existence of literature itself. We now need therefore to enquire as to how literary sincerity manifests itself objectively, so as to know how to identify it: again, we shall need to follow Orwell's own (sometimes roundabout) logic to answer this question.

For Orwell, in the time in which he was writing, language, and literature, were in crisis, and this crisis, which manifested itself as a crisis of growing insincerity, was both a literary event and a political one.

[T]his is not a critical age. It is an age of partisanship and not of detachment, an age in which it is especially difficult to see literary merit in a book with whose conclusions you disagree. Politics [...] have invaded literature [...] and this has brought to the surface of our consciousness the struggle that always goes on between the individual and the community. It is when one considers the difficulty of writing honest unbiased criticism in a time like ours that one begins to grasp the nature of the threat that hangs over the whole of literature in the coming age.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> 'Why I Write', pp. 29-30.

<sup>85</sup> The point as to whether or not the writer needs to be conscious of this as she writes, or whether being so would constitute interposition is problematic, and we shall return to it.

<sup>86</sup> 'Literature and Totalitarianism', *CEJL* II [1941] (a *Listener* transcript of a BBC talk), pp. 161-2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

This growing insincerity is the stuff of what Orwell understands by *totalitarianism*;<sup>88</sup> for Orwell, the essence of totalitarianism – more fundamental to it than simple repression on the part of the state – is *systematised* and *systematic* dishonesty:

The organised lying practised by totalitarian states is not, as is sometimes claimed, a temporary expedient of the same nature as military deception. It is something integral to totalitarianism, something that would still continue even if concentration camps and secret police forces had ceased to be necessary.<sup>89</sup>

And this manifestation of dishonesty in literature leads to crisis as much aesthetic as political:

Literature has sometimes flourished under despotic regimes, but, as has often been pointed out, the despotisms of the past were not totalitarian. Their repressive apparatus was always inefficient, their ruling classes were usually either corrupt or apathetic or half-liberal in outlook, and the prevailing religious doctrines usually worked against perfectionism and the notion of human infallibility. Even so it is broadly true that prose literature has reached its highest levels in periods of democracy and free speculation. What is new in totalitarianism is that its doctrines are not only unchallengeable but also unstable. They have to be accepted on pain of damnation, but on the other hand, they are always liable to be altered on a moment's notice.

[I]t is [...] certain that literature is doomed if liberty of thought perishes. Not only is it doomed in any country which retains a totalitarian structure; but any writer who adopts the totalitarian outlook, who finds excuses for persecution and *the falsification of reality*, thereby destroys himself as a writer. There is no way out of this.<sup>90</sup>

But while liberty of thought is disappearing in our world, it has not yet disappeared completely.

Meanwhile, totalitarianism has not fully triumphed anywhere. Our own society is still, broadly speaking, liberal. To exercise your right of free speech you have to fight against economic pressure and against strong sections of public opinion, but not, as yet, against a secret police force. You can say or print almost anything so long as you are willing to do it in a hole-and-corner way.<sup>91</sup>

There is still a fight to be waged, then, against the systematic insincerity that is totalitarianism. But who, in this fight, is an enemy?; and who a friend? As to the first of these, Orwell is absolutely clear:

[T]he conscious enemies of liberty are those to whom liberty ought to mean most. [...] The direct, conscious attack on intellectual decency comes from the intellectuals themselves.<sup>92</sup>

(We should note here, if here only in passing, that the notion that it is the intellectuals – *middle-class thinkers* – who are the villains of the peace is not merely a key (in the sense of very important) plank in the structure of Orwell's literary theory but that it is a key (in the sense of unlocking) for understanding not only his mature political conceptions (*Road to Wigan Pier*) but also the principal source of narrative tension in his fiction, both of which centre on middle-class *failure*.<sup>93</sup> Put another way, Orwell's theory of language again presents itself not as an interesting yet optional aspect of his work but rather as a thread which informs his *oeuvre* in whole. I shall return to this point.)

We are now able to answer the question that we put earlier as to the form of the *objective* manifestation of literary sincerity. Orwell's model is constructed on an opposition between sincerity and *politics*, such that we can define 'politics' quite simply as *insincerity*, and 'sincerity' as *an absence of politics*. And since it is in the sincerity of the author that the literary aesthetic is found, politics is also anathema to criticism.

To dislike a writer's politics is one thing. To dislike him because he forces you to think is another, not necessarily incompatible with the first. But as soon as you start talking about 'good' and 'bad' writers you are

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<sup>88</sup> See note 36 above.

<sup>89</sup> 'The Prevention of Literature' [1946], *CEJL* IV, p. 85.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 95 (emphasis added).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Compare this with Joseph's observation, noted above, as to the class-based susceptibility to corrupt language suggested in *Nineteen Eighty Four*: 'Orwell on Language and Politics', pp. 57-8.

tacitly appealing to literary tradition and thus dragging in a totally different set of values. For what is a 'good' writer? Was Shakespeare 'good'? Most people would agree that he was. Yet Shakespeare is, and perhaps was even by the standards of his own time, reactionary in tendency; and he is also a difficult writer, only doubtfully accessible to the common man. [...] Left-wing literary criticism has not been wrong in insisting on the importance of subject-matter. It may not even have been wrong, considering the age we live in, in demanding that literature shall be first and foremost propaganda. Where it has been wrong is in making what are ostensibly literary judgements for political ends. [...] The deadly sin is to say 'X is a political enemy: therefore he is a bad writer.'<sup>94</sup>

So there is 'good' writing, judged so on literary merit; and there is politics in writing; and the two things are not only not the same thing, they are incompatible. The 'good' in good writing lies in its aesthetics, in its sincerity; its politics in its 'subject-matter' and in the opinions of the writer, and this latter is not the subject for literary judgement.

Whether a poet, as such, is to be forgiven his political opinions is a different question. Obviously one mustn't say 'X agrees with me: therefore he is a good writer', and for the last ten years honest literary criticism has largely consisted in combating this outlook. Personally I admire several writers (Céline, for instance) who have gone over to the Fascists, and many others whose political outlook I strongly object to. But one has the right to expect ordinary decency of a poet.<sup>95</sup>

This conception of literature – literature as sincerity – also implies a responsibility for the *reader*: not only must the writer not write politically, but the reader (and *a fortiori* the critic) is obliged not to *read* politically:

[W]hat is the relationship between agreement with a writer's opinions, and enjoyment of his work?

If one is capable of intellectual detachment, one can perceive merit in a writer whom one deeply disagrees with, but enjoyment is a different matter. Supposing that there is such a thing as good or bad art, then the goodness or badness must reside in the work of art itself – not independently of the observer, indeed, but independently of the mood of the observer [...]. [A]esthetic judgement can be upset [...] disastrously by political or moral disagreement. If a book angers, wounds or alarms you, then you will not enjoy it, whatever its merits may be. If it seems to you a really pernicious book, likely to influence other people in some undesirable way, then you will probably construct an aesthetic theory to show that it has no merits. Current literary criticism consists quite largely of this kind of dodging to and fro between two sets of standards. And yet the opposite process can also happen: enjoyment can overwhelm disapproval, even though one clearly recognises that one is enjoying something inimical. [...] It is often argued, at least by people who admit the importance of subject-matter, that a book cannot be 'good' if it expresses a palpably false view of life. We are told that in our own age, for instance, any book that has genuine literary merit will also be more or less 'progressive' in tendency. This ignores the fact that throughout history a similar struggle between progress and reaction has been raging, and that the best books of any one age have always been written from several different viewpoints, some of them palpably more false than others.<sup>96</sup>

Orwell uses the word 'false' twice towards the end of this excerpt – to distance himself from the view that a book cannot be good if it 'expresses a palpably false view of life', and to affirm that good books can be written from 'false' viewpoints. His use of the word is curious, and problematic, and we need to enquire as to what he means by it. We can either read it as meaning 'contrary to the truth': in this sense, given what we have surmised about Orwell's overall theory, it must be coterminous with 'insincerity'. But if this were true, then 'falsity' in literature would contradict the literary, for the literary and sincerity are themselves coterminous. This cannot be what Orwell wishes to say.

But there is another way we can read him. In his well-known essay on Dickens, Orwell made the following point:

I have been discussing Dickens in terms of his 'message', and almost ignoring his literary qualities. But every writer, especially every novelist, *has* a 'message', whether he admits it or not, and the minutest details of his

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<sup>94</sup> 'Literature and the Left' [1943], *CEJL* II, pp. 335-6.

<sup>95</sup> 'As I Please' (28 January, 1944), *CEJL* III, p. 106.

<sup>96</sup> 'Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of *Gulliver's Travels*' [1946], *CEJL* IV pp. 257-60.

work are influenced by it. All art is propaganda. [...] On the other hand, not all propaganda is art.<sup>97</sup>

But if all art – i.e. all literature too – is propaganda, then whence the theory of literary sincerity? My reading of this remark, which in its effect Orwell was to repeat a number of times in his writing,<sup>98</sup> is that, since propaganda – that intent, ‘directly or indirectly, to impose a vision of life that seems to [the writer] [...] desirable’<sup>99</sup> – is perennially present in literature, it is not in *this* aspect that literary merit resides. That

propaganda in some form or other lurks in every book, that every work of art has a meaning and a purpose — a political, social and religious purpose — [means] that our aesthetic judgements are always coloured by our prejudices and beliefs.<sup>100</sup>

Like the pantheism of the seventeenth-century English Ranters, whose declaration that God resided in all things effectively banished deity from their ontological coordinates, the belief that all literature is propaganda eliminates propaganda from literature as a yardstick of its merit, leaving only sincerity (or its lack), as Orwell has defined it, as its measure. To the degree that the writer, while expressing ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ – *despite* expressing ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ – is *also* capable of ‘the truthful expression of what one man thinks and feels’; and to the degree too that the reader is ‘is capable of intellectual detachment’ – this is where sincerity lies. For the reader, then, discernment of literary merit on the one hand, and political agreement on the other, are activities as distinct as are sincerity and political motivation for the writer.

Given the extreme times in which Orwell is living in, times in which it seems to him that the world is sliding inexorably towards the totalitarian abyss, what, then, is to be done? Concretely – and *writing* as a writer – what does Orwell see as the right course of action for the *writer* in that (relatively) non-totalitarian society of his in which free expression, although under attack, is still more or less exercisable? Surely, we might surmise, now is the time for political action, for the writer to get her hands dirty, intellectually speaking, and engage in politics. But the symptom of totalitarianism in art is precisely the corruption of creative work by politics. Absolutely, Orwell answers, the writer must engage in politics: *but not as a writer*. Bearing in mind here that Orwell’s own practical engagement with politics not only involved carrying a gun but also taking a bullet through the throat that came within a fraction of a millimetre from killing him, his conclusion is at first sight so extraordinary that his own justification of it merits citation at some length.

The problem with politics, Orwell argues, is that it encourages *collective* over individual loyalty:

Group loyalties are necessary, and yet they are poisonous to literature, so long as literature is the product of individuals. As soon as they are allowed to have any influence, even a negative one, on creative writing, the result is not only falsification, but often the actual drying-up of the inventive faculties.

But this does not mean that the writer should abstain from politics; far from it:

[...] [N]o thinking person can or does genuinely keep out of politics, in an age like the present one. I only suggest that we should draw a sharper distinction than we do at present between our political and our literary loyalties, and should recognise that a willingness to do certain distasteful but necessary things does not carry with it any obligation to swallow the beliefs that usually go with them. When a writer engages in politics he should do so as a citizen, as a human being, but not as a writer. I do not think that he has the right, merely on the score of his sensibilities, to shirk the ordinary dirty work of politics. [...]

And when a writer writes about politics, she does not do so *as a writer*:

But does all this mean that a writer should not only refuse to be dictated to by political bosses, but also that he should refrain from writing about politics? Once again, certainly not! There is no reason why he should

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<sup>97</sup> ‘Charles Dickens’ [1939], *CEJL* II, pp. 491-2.

<sup>98</sup> A few years earlier he had commented, rather more trenchantly, that the ‘propagandist critics [...] praise or dispraise a book *because* its tendency is Communist, Catholic, Fascist or what-not; but at the same time they pretend to be judging it on purely aesthetic grounds. Few people have the guts to say that art and propaganda are the same thing.’ (‘Review’ (of *The Novel Today* by Philip Henderson) [1936], *CEJL* I, pp. 289-90)

<sup>99</sup> ‘The Proletarian Writer’ [1940], *CEJL* II, p. 57.

<sup>100</sup> ‘The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda’ [1941], *CEJL* II, p. 152.

not write in the most crudely political way, if he wishes to. Only he should do so as an individual, an outsider, at the most an unwelcome guerrilla on the flank of a regular army. [...] Sometimes, if a writer is honest, his writings and his political activities may actually contradict one another. There are occasions when that is plainly undesirable: but then the remedy is not to falsify one's impulses, but to remain silent.

Thus the writer must keep her literary loyalties *apart* from her political ones.

To suggest that a creative writer, in a time of conflict must split his life into two compartments, may seem defeatist or frivolous: yet in practice I do not see what else he can do. To lock yourself up in an ivory tower is impossible and undesirable. To yield subjectively, not merely to a party machine, but even to a group ideology, is to destroy yourself as a writer. We feel this dilemma to be a painful one, because we see the need of engaging in politics while also seeing what a dirty, degrading business it is. And most of us still have a lingering belief that every choice, even every political choice, is between good and evil, and that if a thing is necessary it is also right. We should, I think, get rid of this belief, which belongs to the nursery. In politics one can never do more than decide which of two evils is the lesser, and there are some situations from which one can only escape by acting like a devil or a lunatic. [...] For most people the problem does not arise in the same form, because their lives are split already. They are truly alive only in their leisure hours, and there is no emotional connection between their work and their political activities. Nor are they generally asked, in the name of political loyalty, to debase themselves as workers. The artist, and especially the writer, is asked just that – in fact, it is the only thing that politicians ever ask of him. If he refuses, that does not mean that he is condemned to inactivity. One half of him, which in a sense is the whole of him can act as resolutely, even as violently if need be, as anyone else. But his writings, in so far as they have any value, will always be the product of the saner self that stands aside, records the things that are done and admits their necessity, but refuses to be deceived as to their true nature.<sup>101</sup>

This then, is the essence of Orwell's theory, and the nub of its practical consequences. Literature and politics are *incompatible* activities: the essence of literature is sincerity, and politics is a 'dirty business', such that the intrusion of politics into literature would represent the intrusion of insincerity, and, given that the nature of the age is one coloured by the slide into totalitarianism, then the writer who engages in literature politically is participating objectively in this process. The responsibility of the writer, then, is precisely to oppose herself to the drift to totalitarianism, which means *refraining* from political engagement when she writes as a *writer*.

Nevertheless, there is rather more than a whiff of contradiction here. The duty of the writer, in her writing, is to abstain from politics, to pursue literary sincerity: rather than trying to persuade, she must simply as far as she can depict things as they are, through the 'window pane'. But what if one wants to depict things as they really are *so as* to persuade (or to persuade *by* depicting things as they really are)? How is this to be classified: as sincerity; or as politics? And if the world is being subsumed by a tide of totalitarianism, understood as systematic and systematised insincerity, does not depicting things as they really are like this constitute a political act, a blow against totalitarianism itself? Can we really not imagine the possibility of a 'sincere politics'? (And it is important to bear in mind here that one does not need to be *right* to be sincere, just sincere.) We shall have cause to return to this point.

There is another matter we need to emphasise here. For Orwell, the mark of true literature is sincerity, and literary sincerity and the political motivation of the author are not only categorically distinct but potentially (up to practically) mutually opposed to each other. This can only mean that it does not really matter what one writes, as long as one writes it with sincerity: it is not, in other words, *what* one says that matters but *how* – or, perhaps more accurately, *why* – one says it<sup>102</sup> (such that it would be better to be a fascist-inclined poet writing with sincerity than a socialist-inclined one writing for political gain); and this conclusion, logically unavoidable in Orwell's model, is practically indistinguishable from the interpretation we encountered in Garton Ash's and Hitchens' assessments at the outset of this enquiry.

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<sup>101</sup> 'Writers and Leviathan' [1948], *CEJL* IV, pp. 468-70.

<sup>102</sup> There is here an interesting resonance between this view of literature and that of Walter Benjamin that we encountered earlier. As we saw, in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, Benjamin precisely argued that the essence of a text lay not in its semantic content, i.e. in *what* it said, but in its syntactic form, in *how*.

We shall return to these two points below.

## IV

What we have now identified, through Orwell's own words, is the delimitations of his theory of language; we now have to make an assessment of it.

My comments will be directed at three levels. First, I shall outline in what a satisfactory theory of language needs to consist in order to be so considered; this will necessitate a commentary on the development of the linguistics prevailing in Orwell's time. Orwell's theoretical views, as we have elicited them, will be situated in this conceptual framework. Second, I shall examine the coherence of the theory from the point of view of Orwell's own *practice*. Finally, and in the light of the above, I shall comment on the relation between Orwell's theory as we shall have summarised it, and the model of Newspeak he develops in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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If, without prejudging the matter too much, we can say that language, at some level, manifests itself as social communicative practice (i.e. in verbal communication between people),<sup>103</sup> it seems clear to me that any *theory* of language – whether it holds itself to be a theory or not<sup>104</sup> – must, to count as a theory (and not a mere description), take account not only of actual verbal discourse but also of the relationship *both* between that discourse and the extraverbal world (i.e. what is 'talked about') *and* between discourse and human thought in the form of consciousness of that world. The concept of 'meaning', i.e. both what is (and is not) communicated with language, and how it is so communicated, seems to me to lie within, and be defined by, the configuration of the relations between these three elements: discourse (i.e. communicative practice) itself; objectively existing material reality; and human consciousness of that reality (however the epistemo-ontological statuses of these elements be conceived). A theory of language, in other words, to be genuinely explicative, i.e., and in the full sense, *theoretical*, needs to be both an ontology and an epistemology, *as well as* a linguistics.<sup>105</sup> Theories which fail in scope to cover this necessary ground simply fail to *be* theories, and can be, at best, nothing more than descriptions, even if they may end up being highly useful descriptions; theories which do cover the ground but

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<sup>103</sup> To be more precise, for my part, I subscribe to a theory of language which holds it to be a social practice in which ideological knowledge – the conceptualised representation of material reality in thought generated through human engagement with material reality through social practice (including verbal social practice) – is socially manifested among people as meaning in the form of speech or speech-derived entities, i.e. through the manipulation and deployment of a system of verbal signs configured by the given material and social conditions of its production. Space, and subject-imposed limitations, preclude further elaboration of this thesis here; it will, however, appear as implicit in a good deal of what follows here below.

<sup>104</sup> 'Theoryness' in this sense is a condition which has an objective existence; theory is, on this reading, as theory does: 'hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion to one's own.' Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA, 1996), p. x.

<sup>105</sup> Which is precisely what Raymond Williams was saying in the highly pregnant statement that a 'definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world.' *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), p. 21.

do so inadequately simply fail in the end as theories.<sup>106</sup>

In what does Orwell's theory then consist?

The first point to register is Orwell's view that language and literature are in grave crisis, and this crisis has been provoked by the political climate of the age in which he lived. Everything he wrote on the subject – indeed, everything he wrote full stop – has to be viewed in this context.

Between language and thought lies a two-way determination: corrupt thinking produces corrupt language and corrupt language produces corrupt thinking. Corrupt language manifests itself when the natural union between thought and meaning is disrupted by the interposition of ill-chosen words, and occurs for two reasons. First, and causatively, because of corrupt thought: conscious insincerity and the intention to deceive; second, through a kind of 'linguistic inertia', as linguistic bad habits accumulate. The use of corrupt language will be avoided if the writer achieves 'clear thinking', and clear thinking consists in re-uniting thought and meaning, concept and thing, disregarding 'our prejudices and beliefs' when we write, through the sincere use of words, expressing the world as it really is and not how it is perceived to be by the writer. Prose should aspire to be a 'window pane', not a distorting lens.

This sincerity – clear thinking involving the correct, honest and decent, use of words, so as to achieve 'the truthful expression' of what the writer 'thinks and feels' – is, in fact, the essence of literature, and literature stands as a polar opposite to that corrupt use of language which is politics. Politics, which may be a necessary evil, implies insincerity, implies propaganda, involves a use of language not to depict reality through the true feelings of the writer but to mask the gap between the writer's real and declared aims. Propaganda consists in transposing the mind of the author, rather than the world as it really is, into text.

The world is in political crisis – it is sliding into totalitarianism, which is characterised by systematic and systemised insincerity: conscious dishonesty as *modus vivendi*. The battle against totalitarianism is waged on (at least) two fronts: through the 'dirty business' of politics, and through literature. But politics is politics and literature is literature, and for literature to remain literature it must remain untainted by political insincerity. Therefore the writer, as a writer, must abstain from politics: her work, to remain literature, must consist in the use of language to portray the world sincerely, honestly and with decency, rather than to present a political message. The essence of the literary is sincerity, and the essence of sincerity lies in the attitude of the writer.

Can we dignify Orwell's views on language as expressed here as a *theory* of language? According to my definition, which insisted that a theory, to qualify as such, needed to account for not only the relation between linguistic forms and thought-objects (concepts) but also the relation between discourse itself and extraverbal reality, i.e. had to cover the epistemo-ontological plane as well as the linguistic one, then Orwell clearly passes, for his theory is *specifically* concerned with the relation – concretely, actual disjunction – between discourse (literature) and reality as words break the unity between extraverbal reality ('meaning', in Orwell's vocabulary) and thought.<sup>107</sup>

To bring us to a position in which we are able to develop an assessment of this theory – to see its strengths and its weaknesses, its contradictions and lacunae – we need to situate it in the context of the then prevailing linguistic thinking, to set it against the backdrop of already existing theories of language.

In his 'As I Please' column of 18 August, 1944, Orwell made the following comment:

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<sup>106</sup> For the sake of completeness of exposition, for me, for a theory to be considered as a theory it must also have a *function*, which means that it must be explicative, or predictive, or both. The exact nature of the function is contained within the theory itself, either explicitly or implicitly; theories of language, because of their nature, are principally explicative, and not predictive (while the theory of gravity, for example, is heavily predictive). I do not, therefore, hold with the notion of 'falsifiability', at least in the Popperian sense, since Popperian scientific philosophy requires a positivist reification of a notion of science to function; for me, theories (and hence science itself) are 'ideological' (in the sense that I define ideology in below); against the falsifiability principle I would thus propose an 'efficacy principle'.

<sup>107</sup> And it the risk of stating the obvious, it should be clear that a theory doesn't need to be *right* (however 'rightness' be construed) to count as a theory.

One argument for Basic English is that by existing side by side with Standard English it can act as a sort of corrective to the oratory of statesmen and publicists. [...] In Basic, I am told, you cannot make a meaningless statement without it being apparent that it is meaningless – which is quite enough to explain why so many schoolmasters, editors, politicians and literary critics object to it.<sup>108</sup>

‘Basic English’ was the brainchild of the British linguist Charles Ogden;<sup>109</sup> first outlined in 1930, it was projected as a re-engineered English in which a vocabulary of 850 headwords (famously being able to be laid out in tabulated form on a single sheet of paper) would be capable of expressing everything that one would reasonably want to express.<sup>110</sup> Of course, the idea of an easy-to-learn version of English, suitable for all everyday practical purposes, had a value of its own in 1930s imperial Britain (Churchill was strongly in its favour), but it is also clear that Ogden was motivated by ideals loftier than giving the sepoys a good training in the language of their masters, since it seems that he really felt that the turbulence of the times in which he carried out his most respected work was, in good part, a product of a ‘crisis of meaning’, a crisis whose amelioration, also in good part, lay in the control of the meaning of words potentially open to demagogic abuse. The resonance of this notion with those of Orwell’s is clear.

The *theoretical* premise of Basic had already been laid out some years earlier by Ogden in his and Ivor Richards’ influential *The Meaning of Meaning*,<sup>111</sup> a work explicitly conceived in opposition to the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. Up until the nineteenth century, the necessary reference for western scholars of language had been a Socratic-platonic model in which the problem of language was reduced to the problem of ‘naming’. This conception posited meaning as eidetic, consisting in a fixed relation between ‘word’ and ‘thing’ through the metaphysics of ‘essences’; it was the wresting of language theory from this idealism was to be de Saussure’s (and our) gain.

At the heart of his model was the concept of the ‘sign’ (crudely, ‘word’), and the identification of its two internal elements, the signifier (the sign’s contingent *form*) and the signified, the *concept* (i.e. ‘thought-object’) to which the sign referred in an internal architecture which was absolutely fixed (if arbitrarily determined).<sup>112</sup> That behind this binary system of signifier and signified lay implied a far more complex trinary one of signifier, signified and *referent*, the last term referring to the ‘real’<sup>113</sup> object which language sought to grasp lay beyond the scope of the system: what the Saussurian model refused to address was precisely the *extralinguistic* nature of the concept, the relation between the concept and the real object in the realm of conscious human engagement (including through language) with objectively existing reality. The project therefore said nothing about how the signified concept came to be, and thus neither could nor wanted to say anything about the relationship between language and reality, and reality and thought.<sup>114</sup> In transforming linguistics from an alchemy into a ‘science’, de Saussure dealt with the epistemo-ontological terrain in language theory through eliminating it altogether.

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<sup>108</sup> CEJL III, p. 244

<sup>109</sup> C K Ogden, *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar* (London, 1930).

<sup>110</sup> For an account of Basic, and the debates it provoked, see A P R Howatt, *A History of English Language Teaching* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 250-55. It should be noted that the number of 850 should not really be taken too seriously, for, while Ogden’s Basic included only 18 verbs (auxiliaries and modals included), the fact that that the system permitted the noun endings – *ing* and –*ed* (permitting, for example, *acting* and *acted*, but not *acts*) simply looked like cheating in this respect (*A History of English Language Teaching*, p. 252).

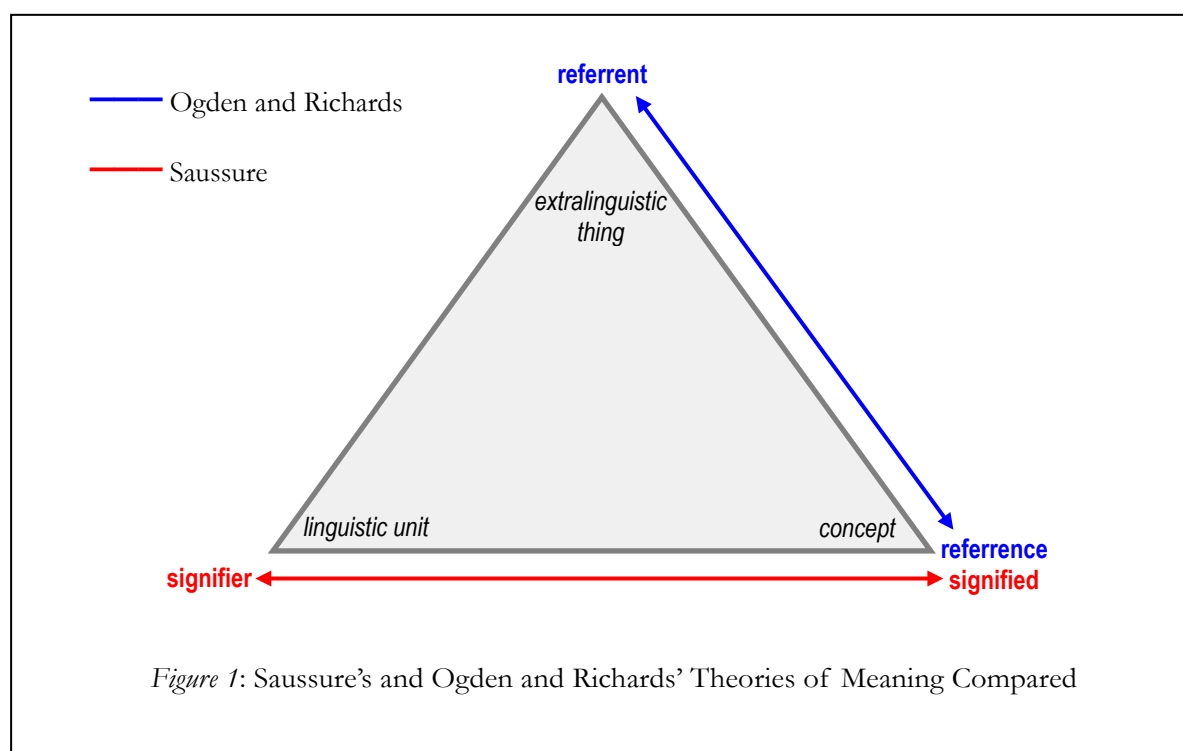
<sup>111</sup> C K Ogden and I A Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (London and New York, 1923)

<sup>112</sup> And not just ‘fixed’ as independent entities difficult to separate, but ‘fixed’ in the sense of being *two expressions of the same thing*: ‘La langue est [...] comparable à une feuille de papier : la pensée est le recto et le son le verso; on ne peut découper le recto sans découper en même temps le verso ; de même dans la langue, on ne saurait isoler ni le son de la pensée, ni la pensée du son [...]’ *Cours de linguistique général* (Paris, 1971), p. 157.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Real’ in the sense of ‘extralinguistic’ rather than ‘real’ in the sense of ‘actually existing’. Little green men from Mars are real in the first sense but not in the second.

<sup>114</sup> A point on which de Saussure himself was clear: ‘Le signe linguistique unit non une chose et un nom, mais un concept et une image acoustique.’ *Cours de linguistique général*, p. 98.

As Ogden and Richards quite correctly argued, the Saussurian ‘theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of verification’;<sup>115</sup> in other words, given that language was analysed in isolation from the real world it tried to grasp (including the world of social practice), in the Saussurian model there could be no objective criteria outside of the linguistic system itself against which meaning could be determined. Nevertheless, Ogden and Richards’ theory, empiricist in essence, in turn suffered from its own defects. The relation between the symbol and the referent (between the ‘word’ and the ‘thing’ it refers to) was mediated by the *reference*, the concept that the word represented, which each individual held in her head.<sup>116</sup> Both the relation between symbol (‘word’) and reference (‘concept’), and that between reference (‘concept’) and referent (‘thing’), were ‘more or less direct.’<sup>117</sup> (The two systems are compared graphically in figure 2. below.) Thus in each *individual* case, while the reference (concept) interposed itself between symbol (word) and referent (thing) it did not *mediate* the relation for its relation with both other terms was a (‘more or less’) direct one. The mediation provoked by the reference only occurred when two or more people *communicated*, for now, while both the symbols they used and the things they referred to were identical, the reference held by each either, being dependent on idiomorphic experience, would, or might, be different. The absurd conclusion that we arrive at here is that language is only fully effectively *communicative* outside of communication between individuals.



Ogden and Richards thus only arrived at a kind of diluted pre-Saussurian eideticism, in which signified concepts simply interpose themselves in communication as interference between the unity of things and words (a unity which logically pre-exists, and is therefore categorically distinct from, actual communicative practice). For Ogden

<sup>115</sup> *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 8. This is, philosophically understood, in substance the exact same charge that Hegel laid against Kant in the introduction to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.

<sup>116</sup> Compare the triadic model set out by the American philosopher Charles Peirce: ‘A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen.’ C Hartshorne and P Weiss (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. Vol. 2: Elements of Logic* (Cambridge, MA, 1932), p. 135.

<sup>117</sup> *The Meaning of Meaning*, p. 11.

and Richards, as for Plato, language is reduced to the problem of *naming*, and misunderstanding occurs because names are *interpreted*, according to differences in individual experience, differently.<sup>118</sup>

But if communicative practice breaks down through the distorting effect of words, then the *immediate* problem is not now differential human experience but ambiguous human vocabulary. More precise definitions of words would suggest itself as a solution here; but, since words are defined by other words, this is a solution which would methodologically create as many problems as it solves. But if the problem is the word, then why not just get rid of it? Could it not be the case that, if the ambiguously understood vocabulary was removed from the language, then this problem of communicative misunderstanding might disappear too?<sup>119</sup> Thus Basic English closes the empiricist linguistic circle which was opened in *The Meaning of Meaning*: if the possibility to miscommunication is opened by the differentiability of individual human experience, allowing for different concepts to be associated with given words, then a 'fix' is available through the elimination of potentially ambiguous lexical items.<sup>120</sup>

And it is in this that we find the apparent similarity between Ogden and Richards' theory and Orwell's: both are concerned with what their formulators perceive as a contemporary 'crisis of meaning', and both identify the phenomenal manifestation of this crisis as the injudicious use of words. But here the similarities end.

For Ogden and Richards, the ill-use of words arises fundamentally because experience of extraverbal reality varies between individuals: communication fails as soon as we begin to communicate because when we communicate that the concepts which are communicated vary between individuals manifests itself. The fundamental flaw with this argument, as I have intimated, is that it allows for 'stability of meaning' – a harmonious interaction between word, concept and thing – only in the case of the *individual*, i.e. it either posits the possibility of language outside of social communicative practice (in which case it mystifies language) or it transposes the notion of 'meaning' onto a hypothetical, ideal case, never-to-be-realised plane – in which case the theory mystifies *itself*. For Ogden and Richards, language, in its formal aspect, appears *outside* of communication. What is missing here, of course, is the necessary account of *how* mental concepts are formed: precisely by separating conceptualisation from communication – a logical inevitability once conceptualisation is individualised – language and thought become discrete elements. But I would argue (and shall emphasise below) that human conceptualisation of reality is necessarily social, that it is through the deployment of language between and among people that concepts are formed.

Orwell's theory, at first sight at least, appears rather more securely anchored. Language is not given, as it is for Ogden and Richards (and in a different way, for de Saussure), it is *made*, and as such it is fashioned – we fashion it – for our own ends. For Ogden and Richards, the distorting effect of words appear as something of a 'natural effect' of language – or of human existence, or both – since the idiomorphic nature of human conceptualisation of reality makes some level of miscommunication of concepts inevitable. Reengineering language – removing the more semantically slippery lexical items – presents itself as a possible *amelioration* of this unfortunate natural effect, but no more than this. In Orwell, miscommunication is precisely *not* inevitable, but the product of determinate human practice, and hence – one assumes – potentially eradicable in its totality.

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<sup>118</sup> And the obvious question, which is evaded, is this: if the referent, the word and their relation are fixed, *how* do mental concepts come to vary between individuals?

<sup>119</sup> According to Richards' recollection: 'After writing the chapter of the book on definitions, at the end of it we suddenly stared at one another and said, "Do you know that this means with under a thousand words you can say everything?"'. R. Koeneke, *Empires of the Mind: I A Richards and Basic English in China, 1929-1979* (Palo Alto, CA, 2004), p. 92.

<sup>120</sup> Fredric Jameson is precise on this point: '[...] the force of the Anglo-American terminology, of the word "symbol", was to direct our attention to the relation between words and their [...] referents [...]. Indeed, the very word "symbol" implies that the relationship between word and thing is not an arbitrary one at all, that there is some basic fitness in the initial association. It follows that for such a viewpoint the most basic task of linguistic investigation consists in a one-to-one, sentence-by-sentence search for referents, and in the purification from language of non-referential terms and purely verbal constructs.' (*The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton, N.J., 1974), pp. 31-2, emphasis added)

But Orwell's problem is in fact rather grave.<sup>121</sup> I noted earlier that for Orwell the task of the writer was to facilitate the reunion of mental concept and external entity. 'Re-union is the key concept here, for what Orwell posits is not a relation between thought object and extraverbal ('real') object, but their *identity*: when (ill-chosen or ill-intentioned) words interpose themselves between these two elements they do not *distort* but break into two what was once one. '[O]ne can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a window pane.'<sup>122</sup> When Orwell is praised for his 'clear' and 'plain' style, it is statements like this that stand as that style's methodological justification: that it is the writer's job to get out of the reader's way, offering the latter an unmediated view of what the writer is writing about.

The difficulty here is that the meaning of a text can *never* simply be given like this, independent of the mind of the writer; for once we accept that the objectively real on the one hand and human knowledge and consciousness of the real on the other are not reducible the one to the other we have to acknowledge that even the finest of window panes will refract the passage of light. Naturally, the writer will construct her text both according to how she sees what she sees 'out there' and according to in which way she wishes to present this to the reader. But how she sees what she sees and the ways in which she presents what she sees in the text result from no privileged union of consciousness and being, symbol and referent, or word and meaning, but from how she as a conscious social being engages with the objective world within a given set of variable and historically conditioned social, political and ideological conditions. For language is neither given, nor an unmediated reflection of the objective world, nor a purely mental ideal product: language is a *practice*, fashioned in and by a social process of production and consumption in which reality is taken hold of and through which human knowledge itself is formed.

But human knowledge of the material world is, in turn, ultimately a theoretical (mental) construction, neither reducible to that world nor equivalent to it. The classical 'dualist' expression of the problem poses a *categorical* opposition between the noumenal and the phenomenal, denying the possibility of any real knowledge of the former.<sup>123</sup> The problem with the dualist paradigm is that it is necessarily unable to develop a satisfactory epistemology, because it can only see knowledge as the result of contemplation, as the passive reception of sensory data, and not as a product of practical human engagement with the physical world.<sup>124</sup> Against this model, I argue that human knowledge results not from simple contemplation but is rather the product of the *active* subject. 'Production' is the key concept here, for human beings *produce* their knowledge<sup>125</sup> as they produce everything else in their material lives – not as 'free' individuals but as individuals producing within the limits and possibilities within which their engagement with the material world occurs. What conjoins the noumenal and phenomenal is precisely this act of *productive labour* through which knowledge, which is its product, is won. From this point on, by the term 'ideology' what I shall be referring to will be this socially constructed set of conditions, in the form of already existing ideas, concepts and theories, wrought from material human practice, within which the production of new knowledge takes place.

Thus while the mental conceptualisation of the objective world which arises through human interaction with it is clearly predicated on the extra-conceptual existence of the real, it cannot be the case that it follows from this that mental concepts, and far less words, function as mere conceptual labels attached to real entities. Human consciousness in the form of ideological conceptualisation (as I have defined ideology above) takes place within that set of variable and historically conditioned social, political and ideological conditions operative at a given

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<sup>121</sup> It is necessary with regard to the following pages to acknowledge a debt to the model of criticism set out in brilliant fashion in the second and third chapters of Terry Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London and New York, 1978), pp. 44-101, a work on the subject of its main title yet to be surpassed.

<sup>122</sup> 'Why I Write', p. 30.

<sup>123</sup> Of course, to say that nothing categorical can be said about something is precisely to say something categorical about it.

<sup>124</sup> The monist view of mind and matter, on the other hand, which does permit the possibility of 'absolute' human knowledge, but only at the cost of demanding the identity of thought and substance, is in turn ultimately unable to explain why this possibility is not permanently at reach, and either sinks into empiricism or is driven into idealism.

<sup>125</sup> To take Terry Eagleton (*Criticism and Ideology*, p. 65) slightly out of context, 'not as a conjurer produces a playing card but as a carpenter produces a chair.'

temporal, physical and social point, and is in turn overdetermined by the individual variability of human existence (which is in turn overdetermined by the set of variable and historically conditioned social, political and ideological conditions then and there operative, and so on). The limits of human consciousness at any moment are not determined by some grand Hegelian ascent towards an absolute truth nor by a simple linear process of accretion of new layers of understanding but by the ideological conclusions that fit best with determinate human practices within the multifaceted and constantly changing social interrelation between people and their physical environment. The rise and fall of ideological concepts can be seen as a kind of process of ideological natural selection (paraphrasing Althusser and seeing ideology as the ‘representation of the imagined relation of individuals with their real conditions of existence’<sup>126</sup>) in which it is those ideas which ‘fit’ better with concrete human practices in a specific set of given conditions which predominate. While ‘truth’ is absolute – what exists does indeed exist – human knowledge of this can only be (relatively) relative; and if truth is to be measured against the efficacy of theory this efficacy is itself a measure of its authenticity. In this way the question is not whether human thought accords with an anyway unknowable noumenal reality but how human knowledge – in the form of ideology, of theoretical conceptualisation, of language – is formed through the *grasping* of this reality.<sup>127</sup> Ideas do not fall from heaven, true, but neither do they sprout spontaneously from the earth ready for harvest, and although we produce our own concepts we produce them not under circumstances that we ourselves choose nor in a vacuum but under those already existing – *made* – conditions in which we find ourselves.

Thus once divine intervention as a generative factor in the development of human ideas has been removed, and empiricist and idealist monisms eliminated, all that is left to explain the formation of human ideology are the chains of determination which join social consciousness to social being in historical contexts. But it needs to be repeated that concepts are manufactured, not harvested, and human consciousness, because it *is* human, demands, amongst other things, a previously constructed atmosphere of consciousness within which to breathe. For the conceptualisation of reality evidently requires not only an accumulation of sense-data but the processing of such data within an already socially-manufactured ideological framework. This is why appearances *do* deceive. It is said that Wittgenstein once asked of a colleague how it could be that people thought that the Earth went around the sun, rather than seeing that it was the Earth that was revolving. The answer came back, as one would expect: ‘Because that is how it looks.’ ‘Yes,’ snapped the philosopher, ‘But what how would it have looked had it looked as if it was the earth that was rotating?’<sup>128</sup> Appearances are deceptive not because of any intrinsic defect in our sense organs but because the already-existing theoretical and ideological framework within which the appropriate data are processed is already pushing us towards wanting to draw certain types of conclusions over

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<sup>126</sup> ‘Paraphrase’, because Althusser defines ideology as ‘a “representation” of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.’ (Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)’, in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York and London, 1971), p. 162) The problem here is that designating this relationship as ‘imaginary’ implies that it is delusional, but, as I am trying to argue, our mental conceptualisation of our relationship to our real conditions of existence, by dint of being of being a conceptual product realised within determinate conditions, is as real as anything else that we produce. By positing this conceptualisation as ‘imaginary’, Althusser intimates that our consciousness of the real is false, and not the least problematic aspect of the notion of ‘false consciousness’ is that it implies the possibility of a ‘non-false’ one. ‘Any such “interventionist” model of ideology holds out the possibility of looking behind the obstruction to observe reality; but [...] [t]he real is by necessity empirically imperceptible, concealing itself in the phenomenal categories [...] it offers spontaneously for inspection.’ (Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 69) The whole point here is that a *conceptualised* picture of our place in the material world is the only picture on offer: human consciousness of reality is mediated by theoretical conceptualisation (i.e. is ‘ideological’) by definition. The irony is that the possibility of there being some unequivocally ‘correct’ way of contemplating the world is precisely the very empiricist trap that Althusser’s intervention is ostensibly aimed at discrediting.

<sup>127</sup> ‘The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question.’ Karl Marx, ‘Concerning Feuerbach’, in Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth and London, 1992), p. 422.

<sup>128</sup> At least according to a character in Tom Stoppard’s *Jumpers* (London, 1972), p. 66.

others. It is not so much that we see what we want but that we want to see what will not challenge too many of the other certainties that we have with respect to how things are (including how things look). And this chicken-and-egg dialectic driving ideological conceptualisation is neither a precondition nor a consequence of human existence but one of its constitutive elements.

How we see and interpret both the production and the consumption of the written text needs to be informed by this framework. The writer of a text – and it is not important here to differentiate between different ‘types’ of text (reportage, narrative, and so on<sup>129</sup>) – will compose it according to how she sees ‘how things are’. But how she sees how things are is a function of the author’s ideology as socially constructed through her active engagement with the natural world at the level of social practice. But just as ideology is no mere ‘representation’ of the objectively existing world, but an actively constructed product, a ‘working’ of reality, neither is the writer’s text a mere ‘representation’ of ideology. The text, too, is a product, in this case a ‘working’ of ideology, in the form of language. The text is in this sense the result of a *double* act of production: of the real worked into ideology, and of ideology worked into text. Were this not so, then the text, although not allowing us a direct view on reality, would at least allow us a direct view into the writer’s mind: would, in other words, act as a window pane not on the world itself but on the writer’s ideological insertion in it. But the text is always more allusive than this; the text, whatever its form, whatever it says – even *despite* its form and what it says – cannot be taken on its own terms. Text is a product, not a medium: what we read when we read is neither an unmediated reflection of reality, nor the mind of the writer, but the *product* of that mind.<sup>130</sup>

Thus, just as what the real is ‘really’ like amounts to far more than how it superficially appears to be, what the text ‘really’ says involves far more than the superficial appearance with which it presents itself.<sup>131</sup> But in order for what a text says to be ‘known’, it must, necessarily, be *read*. And the reader herself occupies no privileged position with regard to the intellectual atmosphere in which she reads compared to that in which the writer wrote: what is sauce for the writer in this respect must be sauce for the reader too, for the latter equally works within a socially constructed ideological framework. I have already suggested that the relationship between literary production and literary consumption is neither a causally equivalent one nor one composed of formal oppositions: that there is a dialectic that relates the two moments that needs to be clearly grasped. It is true that the text is a text not only in virtue of being a work produced by its author but also for the fact of its consumption by its reader (who can and will also be its commentator). But reading (‘consumption’) and writing (‘production’) are neither categorically distinct acts nor reducible to being either the same one or the expression of another, common one: they are but two distinct dialectical moments in the text’s own self-realisation. We can neither say that a text has an independent existence, ‘in-itself’, nor that its nature is reducible to its reception.

An analogy will help us here. A commodity produced for the market, to be sold, will consist, aside from its material form, in value (its potential price), which will be realised in its sale. But, until it is sold, this value remains immanent: for the commodity to realise its value it needs to *be* sold, and, if it is not, or if it is sold below its value, the value, either in whole or in part, locked within it, which accrued to it during its production, will be

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<sup>129</sup> ‘Literature used not to be divided in these external ways. The rigid distinction between “documentary” and “imaginative” writing is a product of the nineteenth century, and most widely distributed in our own time. Its basis is a naïve definition of the “real world”, and then a naïve separation of it from the observation and imagination of men. If there is real life and its recording, on the one hand, and a separable imaginative world on the other, two kinds of literature can be confidently distinguished, and this is much more than a formal effect. In the naturalist and positivist theories this effective dualism of “the world” and “the mind” is at least clearly recognisable. But the conventional dualism of most orthodox literary theory has scarcely been noted, let alone challenged. Terms like “fiction” and “non-fiction”, “documentary” and “imaginative” continue to obscure many of the actual problems of writing.’ Raymond Williams, *Orwell* (London, 1971), pp. 41-2. Williams is undoubtedly right here; nevertheless, it is necessary to quail at his use of the word ‘naïve’, at least understood in its modern sense suggesting foolishness, for ‘dualism’ is far from such.

<sup>130</sup> ‘[L]ike private property, the [...] text [...] appears as a “natural” object, typically denying the determinants of its productive process.’ Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 101.

<sup>131</sup> ‘All science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence.’ (Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 3, (Harmondsworth and London, 1981), p. 956)

effectively lost. The commodity needs to be sold (i.e. ‘consumed’) and not only produced in order to realise its full potential *as a commodity*. Thus, from the point of view of the manufacturer of the commodity the production and consumption of commodities are not categorically discrete actions but two ends of the chain of moments in the commodity’s own self-actualisation *as a commodity*, i.e. as a good produced for the market.<sup>132</sup> But, obviously, neither of these moments is reducible to the other, or to a common third essence, for while it is clear that a commodity can be produced without being consumed it is equally clear that it cannot be consumed without being produced (even if the perceived probability of it being consumed may determine whether or not it is produced in the first place).

Such it is with regard to the literary work (the ‘text’). Without being produced, i.e. written, a work of literature clearly has no material existence. But, as such, like our commodity, this simple fact of existence is not sufficient for its full and effective self-realisation: for this, it also has to be read, i.e. consumed. In other words, while it is the conditions under which the literary work is produced that determine its ‘noumenal’ nature, which indeed has an objective existence, this nature only comes to ‘life’, can only be grasped, worked with, understood and criticised – become ‘phenomenal’ – through reading, through the work’s consumption. But this consumption itself has no independent existence: while it is constitutive of the text’s self-realisation it is not constitutive of the text’s *material* existence, even if its material existence depends on its ultimate consumption. So, although it is here, with consumption, that we engage with the work – the consumption of the text is ‘our’ end of the chain, so to speak – the work is clearly not reducible to the act of consumption itself. Rather, the act of consumption, the manner of which is determined by the conditions under which it occurs, is the manner in which the ‘real’ work is known, is how the text-in-itself is grasped.

Thus if writing is the working of ideology into text, then reading must also consist (‘must’, for otherwise we would literally not *understand* even the most banal of texts) in the working of text into ideology, but, again, ideology not simply in the sense of the reader’s own personal *Weltanschauung*, but in that of her own insertion in her own general socially-constructed ideological culture of her world.

The literary text is a text [...] because it is read; with it as with any other social product the act of consumption is itself constitutive of its existence. *Reading is the ideological decipherment of an ideological product* [...].<sup>133</sup>

The full self-realisation of the text as a text is the negotiation of a process of intellectual production that at least covers two people, one social system<sup>134</sup> and four acts: from objective reality to the writer’s personal insertion into the ideological framework of a given moment, from this ideology to text, and from text to ideology in the act of reading according to the reader’s own personal ideological insertion – acts which are themselves overdetermined by the experiences of race, class, sex, nation, geography and so on as well as by the mundanities of individual biographical insertion into the real world.

For if a text really were a pellucid transposition of the real onto the textual plane, if the text were to me, as a reader, as nitidly accessible as both the author’s and my own experience of the real *appear* to be, then one would be pressed to find a motivation for reading at all, (even if anyone had previously come up with a good enough one for writing actually to have written anything in the first place). For if we really could gaze out on reality through the text as through a window pane, then there would be little reason not to open the window itself and

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<sup>132</sup> ‘Production is also immediately consumption [...] consumption is also immediately production. [...] Production mediates consumption; it creates the latter’s material; without it, consumption would lack an object. But consumption also mediates production, in that it alone creates for the products the subject for whom they are products.’ (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, (Harmondsworth and London, 1973), pp. 90-91)

<sup>133</sup> Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 62 (emphasis added).

<sup>134</sup> ‘[...] [S]igns do not arise between any two members of the species Homo Sapiens. It is essential that the two individuals be *organised socially*, that they compose a group (a social unit); only then can the medium of signs take shape between them. The individual consciousness not only cannot be used to explain anything, but on the contrary, is itself in need of explanation from the vantage point of the social, ideological medium.’ Valentin Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, (Cambridge, MA and London, 1973), p. 12.

step out into the patio of the objectively existing world directly. Naturally, this is a model that even the most cursory and unselfconscious experience of reading would rule out, for reading clearly gives us something that neither an apparently dispassionate gaze on reality nor the direct 'lived' experience of it can.

All this is lost in Orwell's theory. As a consequence, he finds himself caught up in the same kind of methodological paradox that Ogden and Richards observed in Saussure. If meaning is potentially obfuscated by the writer's use of words that do not conform to their 'meaning', and the presence of 'good' writing indicated by the use of words which do harmoniously conjoin concepts and reality, how are we then to know, case by case, whether or not a given piece of writing is a faithful representation of the real or not? How are we to know whether in a given text the words chosen really do act as the sublime union between concept and thing when the words from which the text is woven are the only objective criterion we have to judge the matter?

The answer, of course, is that we can never know, at least not like this, for the model Orwell suggests for the relation between linguistic elements and forms, human thought, and material reality, is false. For Orwell, there exist essentially two types of writing (or, perhaps, a scale between these two points according to which writing can be judged): the sincere, the literary, in which reality is faithfully represented through well-chosen words; and the insincere, the political, in which words are used to distort, deceive and misinform. In the latter, the writer's presence is – literally – writ large; in the former, she is absent, and we 'read' unmediated reality directly.

But this conception of the literary as it stands is at once both positivist and objectivist: language is produced by the merely contemplating subject, who either stands as if outside reality, or who functions as no more than a passive passer of 'messages'. The idea of meaning as a socially constructed product wrought from human engagement with the material world – as neither 'given', nor mere representation, mediated or no – is entirely absent (as it is, in different ways, in Saussure and in Ogden and Richards too<sup>135</sup>). Orwell demands that the writer absent herself from her text, but to say this is simply to evade the problem of where the text comes from and what function the writer plays in its elaboration.

In the appendix to the 1992 edition of his celebrated biography of Orwell, Bernard Crick recalls a conversation with Sonia Orwell in one of London's more chic café restaurants. 'Of course he shot a fucking elephant!' Orwell's widow screamed at him from across the table. 'He said he did! Why do you always doubt his fucking word?'<sup>136</sup> In Orwell's empiricist wysiwyg theory of language the writer is a mere conduit for the real, her task to channel reality into a text unmediated by ideological experience. If I, as a reader, can see myself looking through the same window pane as the writer, then this latter has achieved her task. But how can I know I can? All I can see is what I can see, not what she sees. How can I know whether my own dispassionate gaze on reality is really the same as hers? The answer – which is anyway tautological – that language itself guarantees the successful realisation of the unmediated transmission of reality through being a *faithful* instrument of transmission does not here hold true with regard to in Orwell for other reasons, because, in his model of language, while meaning is fixed to reality, language only faithfully reproduces this unity *if* and *only* if the writer is either sufficiently well-intentioned or insufficiently corrupted by the accumulated ill intentions of others; and this, divorced from the criterion of what Marx once called 'real, sensuous activity',<sup>137</sup> is, in Orwell, simply a matter that can only be taken on trust.

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<sup>135</sup> Although while it is true, as we have seen, that Orwell does regard the view that language 'is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes' ('Politics and the English Language', p. 157) as fallacious, the context in which he offers us this observation reduces it to the banal.

<sup>136</sup> Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, p. 583.

<sup>137</sup> 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism [...] is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. [...] Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity.'

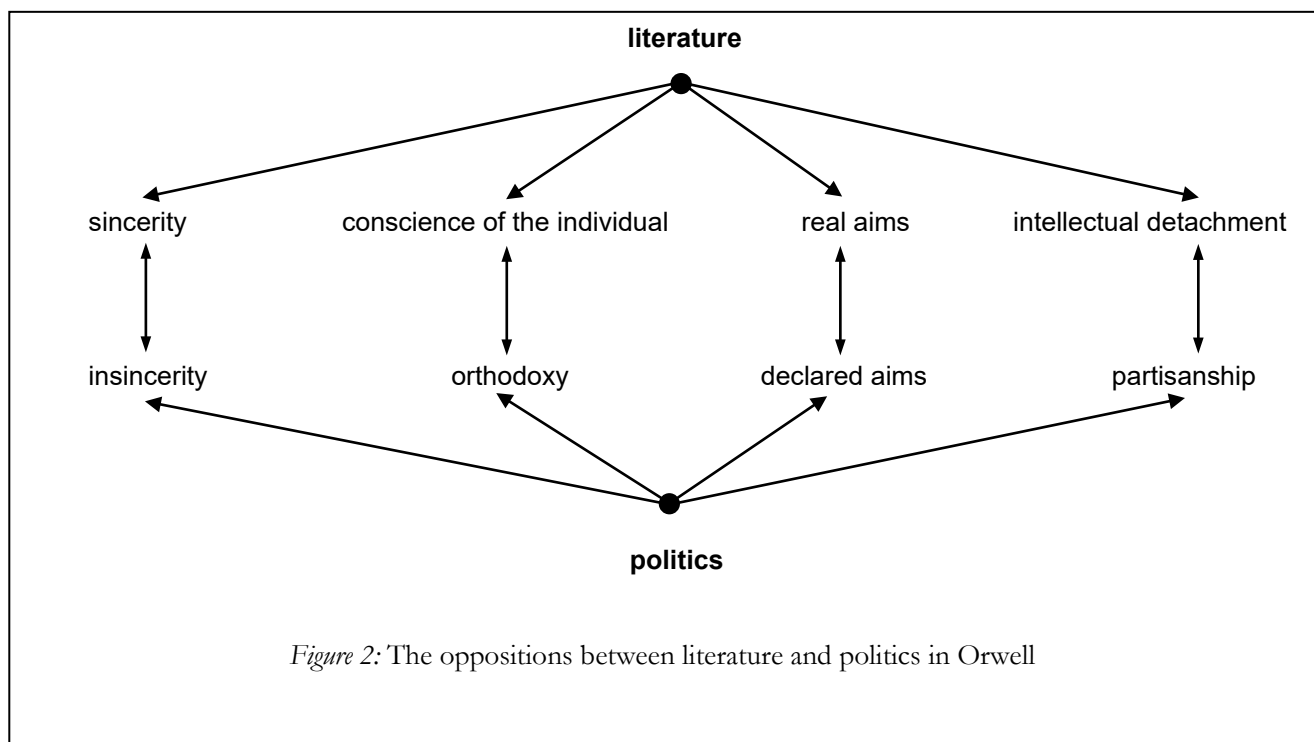
'Concerning Feuerbach', p. 421.

On these grounds alone, I think, the premise underlying Orwell's theory – unity of real object and thought object facilitated by authorial sincerity – is simply, at the theoretical level, untenable.

Earlier, I suggested that a theory, to count as a theory, must have, amongst other things, a *functional* scope: it must be able to explain, or predict, or both. Rejecting Popperian positivism, I proposed an 'efficacy principle', which simply means that a theory needs to prove itself of utility by demonstrating an appropriate explicative and/or predictive efficacy. Does Orwell's theory, as we have identified it, help us, or hinder us, then in understanding why his writing is as it is?

Orwell, as we have seen, constructs a categorical discretion of sincerity and politics, to the extent that, for Orwell, a 'sincere politics' would be oxymoronic. But in addition to insincerity Orwell adduces a further set of characteristics that 'politics' displays. Looking at the material cited earlier, we can identify the following: 'orthodoxy' (which, according to 'Politics and the English Language', 'seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style'); 'a gap between one's real and one's declared aims' ('Politics and the English Language'); 'group loyalties' ('Writers and Leviathan'); the need to 'decide which of two evils is the lesser' ('Writers and Leviathan'); and the fact that the presence of politics brings to attention 'the struggle that always goes on between the individual and the community' ('Literature and Totalitarianism').

From these citations we can infer a set of oppositions which we can map onto that between sincerity and politics. For politics, for Orwell, pertains to the group, and as such is opposed to the individual. Politics therefore, we can surmise, demands group loyalty, which, we can further surmise, is what Orwell denotes as 'orthodoxy', which now stands logically opposed to the conscience of the individual. 'Orthodoxy' must here be equivalent to 'one's declared aims'; as opposed to the individual conscience, from which springs one's real ones. Thus by 'politics' here we are clearly talking about *party* politics, *organised* politics, the politics of the *group*. These oppositions between politics and literature are set out in the diagram below:



It is curious then to read in Orwell something like this:

In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer. [...] And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug

The only way we can understand this observation is to impute that Orwell is talking about a different *type* of politics to that indicated above, a ‘sincere’ politics, sincere because of arising from intellectual detachment, a politics expressing the real aims of the individual conscience rather than those arising from the declared aims of the group. The ‘political purpose’ that Orwell refers to here is ‘political’ in this ‘non-party’ sense. But where does this politics come from, and how? Clearly not from the terrain of the ‘ideological’ as we have been using the term here, for the production of ideology in this sense is the product of the active subject and social being, and Orwell’s literary prescriptions are crystal clear: reality and thought form a natural unity, which has too often been sundered by the corrupt use of language, such that the task of the writer is to reunite reality and thought, and she does this by telling it like it is – *wie es eigentlich ist*. The ‘politics’ Orwell refers to in the above citation is clearly a politics that arises in this act; in other words, if the politics which animates Orwell’s work allows him to avoid ‘sentences without meaning’ it can only do so in virtue either of being a ‘politics’ that lies immanent in reality or a ‘politics’ that lies immanent in Orwell; and it is in this sense that we can read the word ‘forced’ in the previous citation. Orwell has not been turned into a ‘pamphleteer’ (a deliberately self-deprecatory word) because he is outraged at what is happening in the world, but simply in virtue of the fact that *he* is depicting reality as it really is. All the writer has to do is to achieve a sufficiently serene state of intellectual detachment and sincerity will then come, if it does, naturally, granting her work a ‘political’ (in this second, non-party sense) character automatically. What she absolutely must not do is *try* to be political, for to do this would be to open the breach to insincerity.

There is an uncomfortable conclusion to be drawn from this. In order to depict reality as it really is one must reach a state of intellectual detachment: one must not consciously do this, for this would be to allow the author a presence in her text, and, since this will occlude reality, this is to be avoided. One must not *try* to write, therefore, one must just *write*,<sup>139</sup> and if one does this, what is immanent in reality will carry one along in the act of writing.<sup>140</sup> It just happens, for Orwell, that in *his* case this results in a ‘sincere politics’; but this is not a talent that he permits anyone else.

Orwell’s judgement on the efficacy of political motivation for the aesthetic quality of his work is a clearly retrospective one:<sup>141</sup> ‘looking back’ he ‘sees’ that his best work has been politically motivated – he cannot at all be suggesting that this state of affairs arose on the basis of a conscious decision to write politically, for this would negate the whole theory: all he did was tell the truth, and, unconsciously, in doing this, it just ‘happened’ that he found himself being ‘political’ (in the individual, sincere, sense). But now, *post festum*, aware of this fact, he can say this:

When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.<sup>142</sup>

But this has to be *description* and not *prescription*: the lie that is to be exposed is exposed not on the basis of a

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<sup>138</sup> ‘Why I Write’, pp. 26, 30.

<sup>139</sup> Orwell’s comment of 1936 is thus rather ironic. ‘On the last occasion when *Punch* produced a genuinely funny joke, which was only six or seven years ago, it was a picture of an intolerable youth telling his aunt that when he came down from the University he intended to “write”. “And what are you going to write about, dear?” his aunt inquires. “My dear aunt,” the youth replies crushingly, “one doesn’t write *about* anything, one just *writes*.” This was a perfectly justified criticism of current literary cant.’ ‘Review’ (of *The Novel Today* by Philip Henderson), pp. 288-9. Interestingly, Orwell was to repeat the anecdote in the 1939 essay ‘Inside the Whale’ [1939-40], *CEJL* I, p. 557.

<sup>140</sup> There is an interesting resonance here with the point that Raymond Williams once made, that it was of more value asking, rather than ‘what did Orwell write?’, ‘what wrote Orwell?’, for sincerity, in this model, manifests itself in the writer, rather than writing, letting herself be written. Williams did not make this point with that resonance in mind, however. See *Politics and Letters*, pp. 388-9.

<sup>141</sup> A fact occluded by the placing of ‘Why I Write’ at the opening of the *CEJL*: see note 12 above.

<sup>142</sup> ‘Why I Write’, p. 28.

conscious decision on the part of the writer but simply because reality has expressed itself in this way through her. To do otherwise would run the risk of being 'political' (in the negative, group sense). But by what gift of divine insight is this unconscious capacity to be 'political' (in the positive sense) granted? Orwell, by his own account, has it, but there is no evidence in his work that anyone else does; it is therefore unfortunately inescapable to conclude that Orwell is effectively claiming the ability to allow reality to write *politically* through him as a writer, an ability that he neither can nor will recognise in others. For Orwell, then, it appears that all writers are equal, but that some writers (himself, for example) are more equal than others.<sup>143</sup> The irony is that what started out as simple plain speaking and telling the truth, depicting as true what any sensible, detached observer would see as obvious, has revealed itself to be a posture of no little arrogance. And a further irony is that Orwell, the creator of Newspeak and the concept of 'doublethink', can only maintain fidelity to his own theory of language as applied to his own work by deploying the word 'political' with two different, hardly related, meanings: one for him, and one for everyone else.

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To conclude, we need now to determine how the Newspeak model squares with Orwell's general theory of language. In order to do this, we need first to remind ourselves of the former's aims:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. [...]. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever. [...] The grammar of Newspeak had two outstanding peculiarities. The first of these was an almost complete interchangeability between different parts of speech. [...] Ultimately it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all.<sup>144</sup>

Newspeak thus had a dual function: through limiting the available word stock, the intention was to reduce the fields open to discourse; through morphological, syntactic and semantic restructuring, the construction of discourse in general would require less conscious intervention on the part of the speaker.

What are the theoretical premises of this operation: 'theoretical' in the sense that I earlier identified the necessary prerequisites of a theory of language, i.e. that it needs to account not only for the formal aspect of language but also for the relations between extraverbal reality and human consciousness of that reality?

It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. [...] Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.<sup>145</sup>

Here, the language ('words') act as the medium through which otherwise ungraspable extraverbal reality is

<sup>143</sup> A remark not as facile as it might at first appear (although it is not intended as flattery). Anthony Kearney points out that the slogan Orwell deploys in its final, modified form in *Animal Farm* ([1944] (London: Longman, 1977), p. 92) is, even if not deliberately so, more ambiguous than it at first sight appears ('Orwell's *Animal Farm* and 1984', *The Explicator* 54 (Summer 1996), pp. 238-40), for 'equal' does not only refer to equality as a desirable state of affairs but also indicates *sameness*. Indeed, as Kearney goes on to suggest, that this play of meaning forms a consciously constructed textual element in this work, and explicitly so in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

<sup>144</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, pp. 241-9. Paul Chilton comments ('Orwell, Language and Linguistics', p. 142) that '[t]he first half of the sentence takes language to be a vehicle for thought, the second takes thought to be delimited and determined by language.' But there is no *necessary* contradiction here: if language is a 'vehicle' for thought, i.e. is what 'transports' thought, then it is not inconsistent (though it is not the only possible determination) to propose that language *delimits* thought.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

conceptualised. Language does not just mediate or facilitate the mental grasping of material reality, i.e. the conjoining of real object and thought object, whatever the character of the product of that conjoining might be, it is *demand*ed by it, in the sense that without the necessary forms of language cognisance is impossible. But if this is what language does, then it does it ‘externally’, categorically prior to cognisance: language does not arise in the act of cognisance, it is not formed as the real is conceptualised and through that conceptualisation; rather, conceptualisation can occur if – and *only* if – the requisite verbal tools *already* exist. No word: no concept – independently of whether the real object exists outside thought or not.

Now, Newspeak exists, if it exists at all, as the conscious product of human beings: it was designed, constructed and implemented consciously by people, for already established ends. But this is immaterial for our theoretical purposes: for the project to *work*, language *in general* must function as we have just described it<sup>146</sup> – language, in its finished form, must *already* exist outside of and independent from human conceptualisation of the material world, and, as such, outside of human communicative practice. Language here is *not* made; it precisely *is* given.

It should be evident quite how little these theoretical premises have in common with those of Orwell’s general elsewhere-generated theory. In the latter, depending on how the writer wrote, the sublime unity of thing and concept either manifested itself *in* language or was sundered *by* language, such that, for example, to avoid the latter effect, Orwell expressly recommended thinking *without* words, something that would be quite expressly impossible within the theoretical confines of Newspeak.

To my judgement, then, it is illegitimate to consider that Orwell’s general theory, and Newspeak itself, form a similar project. Newspeak is not an extrapolation of Orwell’s theory, nor a satire on it, nor an ideal-type through which it can express itself. Orwell’s general theory of language, and the theory underlying Newspeak, are simply two different theories.

Neither is it possible to see Newspeak as a critique of the kind of re-engineering project envisaged by Basic English. The theoretical premise of Basic was not, as in Newspeak, that words were necessary for human knowledge of the extraverbal real but that they were necessary for the communication of knowledge already formed: the motivation for the project being that ambiguous vocabulary hindered this communication. Again, the theoretical premises are simply different.

Of course, it may well be the case that Orwell simply misunderstood the Basic project, or was unaware of its theoretical premises in Ogden and Richards’ theory of language. Yet, even allowing for these possibilities, if Orwell did hold Basic in low esteem, he did so not because he perceived in it any pernicious intent, but simply because he thought it unnecessary for the aims which it set itself. In 1944 he made the following comment:

*Tribune* may before long print one or more articles on Basic English. If any language is ever adopted as a world’s second language it is immensely unlikely that it will be a manufactured one, and of the existing natural ones English has much the best chance, though not necessarily in Basic form.<sup>147</sup>

Orwell was of the opinion that standard English was already well-suited to the tasks of Basic: he did not think it especially difficult to learn, and he could envisage it in normal form becoming a *lingua franca*. Hence in 1947 he remarked:

English is well fitted to be the universal second language, if there ever is such a thing. It has a large start over any natural language and an enormous start over any manufactured one, and apart from the spelling it is very

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<sup>146</sup> Paul Chilton is therefore wrong when he suggests that, with regard to the structure of Newspeak, ‘Orwell does not seem to be saying that this is how language works in general, but rather, and more interestingly, that in particular cases (i.e. under certain social and political conditions) that is how language may be conceived and how it may indeed be used.’ (‘Orwell, Language and Linguistics’, p. 142) But *all* manifestations of language are manifestations of ‘language in general’; if language ‘in general’ did not work like this then language could not be used as if it did, whatever the social and political conditions that obtained; if language in general does not work like Newspeak is intended to work then the Newspeak project is theoretically unimplementable and therefore, in the context of the novel, meaningless.

<sup>147</sup> ‘As I Please’ (28 January, 1944), p. 108.

Nor can we regard Newspeak as an expression of disgust on Orwell's part at the corruption of language with which he was surrounded and at which he had already directed so many polemics. Orwell's criticism of the corruption of language in politics and literature was directed at the use of language for political ends, not at the use of language to manipulate thought: in Orwell's theory *ex-Newspeak* the corruption of thought was an *effect* of the corruption of language not the latter's conscious design. What Orwell criticised as insincerity in literature was the use of language to convince, persuade, encourage, cajole, deceive even, for political ends, but not consciously and deliberately to make whole fields of human thought and extraverbal reality unthinkable.

It is certainly true that Orwell expected 'totalitarianism' in politics to take its toll on language.<sup>149</sup> Yet there is no evidence in his writings that I know of that indicates that Orwell thought that 'totalitarian' regimes were *deliberately* setting out to manipulate language, and *a fortiori* so as to prevent the possibility of thought, either totally, or in relation to one or more areas of human activity and thought. It is also highly questionable in my view as to whether they did.<sup>150</sup> Andrei Reznikov, in his study cited above, makes great play of observable changes in German and Russian that can be put down to the changes in ordinary life wrought by the exigencies of, respectively Nazi (his word) and Stalinist (my word) rule.<sup>151</sup> Yet, as he presents his case, that there was an actual *impoverishment* of language *in general* stands as distinctly not proven.<sup>152</sup> But even if this is the case, that the experience of 'dictatorship' either can or did impoverish language, this says nothing to justify the claim that here we have practical case of a 'Newspeak-type' development, for, *ceteris paribus*, all this demonstrates is that changes in the material conditions in life can be accompanied by observable changes in language, which is, without further elaboration, as much an uncontroversial statement as it is *not* what Orwell was suggesting through his model of Newspeak.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> 'As I Please' (14 March, 1947), *CEJL* III, p. 351.

<sup>149</sup> In 'Politics and the English Language' he wrote: 'When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find – this is a guess which I have not sufficient knowledge to verify – that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years, as a result of dictatorship' (p. 167).

<sup>150</sup> I am not aware of *quantifiable* – as opposed to *anecdotal* – studies which indicate such a phenomenon; but maybe this is just down to ignorance on my part. Nevertheless, this allowed for, three things, were they to be demonstrated to be true, would astonish me: that 'dictatorship' brought about a positive lexical *enrichment* at the 'public-official' (in the sphere of politics, and, allowing for the existence of censorship, in that of the mass media) level of discourse; that dictatorship brought about an absolute lexical *impoverishment* – in terms of the *quantity* of lexical resources both available and used – at the level of 'private' discourse (roughly, the 'language of the street'); and that there were no observable changes, as a consequence of the experience of 'dictatorship', in the conceptual *subject matter* of discourse available at both these levels.

<sup>151</sup> Reznikov, *George Orwell's Theory of Language*, pp. 76-93.

<sup>152</sup> But even if this were demonstrated, demonstrating that such impoverishment of language actually delimited thought would be another matter. Proponents of such linguistic determinist ideas, it seems to me, have been unable to demonstrate the necessary causal relationship between language and thought: that material and social being influences thought, and hence language, seems to me a trivial observation; the reverse proposition is another matter. To cite just one example, Stanford University's Lera Boroditsky, a prominent modern-day Sapir-Whorfian, once demonstrated experimentally that English speakers' and speakers of Mandarin Chinese's spatial conception of past time is different, and reflective of determinate differences between the two languages ('Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time', *Cognitive Psychology* 43.1 (August 2001), pp. 1–22). But, while I have no doubt about the empirical conclusions of the study, it seems to me that no *causal* link was established. E P Thompson long since argued ('Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present* 38 (December, 1967), pp. 56-97) that the regulation of time in modern society arises from the social necessity to organise the activities of large groups of people, and that 'modern time' is understood in a quite different way from how time was understood in pre-industrial European society. Social being here indeed determines social consciousness; not in any sense the other way around.

<sup>153</sup> There are, in addition, substantial practical objections one could make to the possibility that a Newspeak-type project – as it is laid out in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – could ever be implemented in the real world, whatever the political, economic and social conditions that obtained (as set out, for example, in Nigel Love, 'Science, Language and Linguistic Culture', pp. 2-3). Yet to object to Newspeak on these grounds would be beside the point, for the argument that it is of a piece with Orwell's

In fact, and in conclusion, it is difficult to see what role Newspeak fulfils in the novel as *language*; all of the features associated with it – the manipulation of the past, the suppression of critical politics, even synonymical dissonance (*‘Arbeit macht frei’* needed no team of Sapir-Whorfian-guided grammarians before it could burn itself into our consciousness) – could be depicted without reference to any programme of *linguistic* restructuring. My own view is that Newspeak does not function in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a linguistic device at all, but rather as a *symbol* of the kind of absolute power that Orwell chose – for good or ill – to depict. Naturally, we can only speculate as to what was going on in Orwell’s mind as he wrote, but I argue, independently of this, that my interpretation makes more *sense*, both as to the place of Newspeak in the book, and with regard to the relation between it and Orwell’s other writings on language.

## V

If we accept the foregoing argument, then we can say that we have reached the following conclusions. First, that, given its epistemo-ontological scope, it is right and proper to dignify Orwell’s views on language and the use of language with the status of theory. Second, that the theory, because of its empiricist nature, is both untenable theoretically and inefficacious practically. And, third, that the theory that Orwell sets out in the form of Newspeak is not, because of being premised differently, representative of that theory; stands as, in other words, a *different* theory. There is no need to repeat here what has already been said to this effect. No: by way of a conclusion it would be much more fitting to address the question of *why all this should matter*.

I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that Orwell’s writings on language by virtue of their number and frequency at least form no marginal element within his work; but, beyond this, I would also say that, given their *scope* (in the sense just summarised) they also form the basis on which the superstructure of his political thought is erected. Orwell’s *Weltanschauung* – his theory of politics based in turn on this theory of language thus constructed – is then, first, a reliance on the superficial, apparent and static (and hence of its textual representation), rather than on the underlying, essential, and on process; and, second, compounding the issue, encompasses an unwillingness to envisage complexity (hence his horror of ‘abstract’ concepts and thinking). In short, it is both empiricist and rationalist: empiricist in its ontology, in its unquestioning acceptance of what presents itself as real and rationalist in its epistemology, in its assumption that the human subject manoeuvres herself in uncomplicated concordance with this reality. Absent from this outlook is any sense of contradiction, both in terms of how reality presents itself to us and with regard to how human behaviour is conditioned by that experience of reality.<sup>154</sup> In this sense Orwell’s outlook is well rooted in a tradition of thought – a ‘very English brand of common sense that believes mostly in what it can touch, weigh and taste’<sup>155</sup> – which has not only enjoyed a distinct historical pedigree but, and this is the answer to the question just posed, still does so. And this is precisely the tradition which lauds *how* what is said over *what* is said: ‘British empiricism and conservatism was on the whole an instinctive, *ad hoc* affair. It shunned theory even in its rejection of theory. *It was a style, not a*

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thinking on language in general is not founded on the probability of its actual implementation (even if, as we have seen, such issues can arise as supporting evidence).

<sup>154</sup> That ‘rationalism’ and ‘empiricism’ represent opposing modes of thought is itself an ‘rational empiricist’ – i.e. positivist – error: see Louis Althusser, ‘The Philosophical Conjuncture and Marxist Theoretical Research’, in Louis Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966-67)*, (London, 2003), p. 4ff. Ironically, Althusser’s intention is to praise, rather than condemn, the trend.

<sup>155</sup> Terry Eagleton, ‘Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching’, *London Review of Books* (19 October, 2006)  
<[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eagl01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eagl01_.html)> [retrieved 1 September, 2008]

If one had to define the mature Orwell's political outlook in one word (even if a compound word) it would be 'anti-totalitarianism'. The difficulty in pinning down concretely what this really means that I have alluded to goes with the territory: 'totalitarianism', because of its necessary anchoring in the superficial, in world of formal appearance, is a slippery term (and, in many instances of its use, advantageously so). This is – and I shall re-emphasise the point in a moment – Orwell's political weakness. But his political weakness is founded on a philosophical one, for it is as one with his theory language. For Orwell, as we have seen, the essence of totalitarianism was *systematised* and *systematic* dishonesty, and the manifestation of that essence took textual form.<sup>157</sup>

To my mind it is significant in this sense that practically all of Orwell's developed writings on language date from the period from 1939 and after. For if his earlier work, up until 1937 (the cycle from *Burmese Days* to *The Road to Wigan Pier*), chart his gradual movement to a clearly revolutionary socialist conviction, it is in this latter cycle, typified in his fiction by *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that the theme of the hope of socialism becomes increasingly obscured by the cloud of betrayal. It is in this period – which we can date as beginning with the essay 'Inside the Whale'<sup>158</sup> – that the problem of the 'totalitarian' menace (principally in the form of Soviet and Soviet-directed 'Communism'<sup>159</sup>) is increasingly played in major key. It is commonly held that this is a consequence of Orwell's own experience of Stalinism, principally in Spain, but also, subsequently, in the form of the British Communists and their fellow travellers; but this is only partly true. What really projects the theme of betrayal so forcefully in his later work are the seemingly impassable obstacles to socialism that make themselves felt: not even world war could shake the working class – figuratively represented by the 'proles' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – or the middle class – the Outer Party – from their complacency. As the consequent seemingly inevitability of the betrayal of socialism settled in on him, Orwell developed a theory of literature which claimed the status of the truly literary only for that work free of political motivation on the part of the

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<sup>156</sup> Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review* I/50 (July-August 1968), p. 19 (emphasis added).

<sup>157</sup> The organised lying practised by totalitarian states [...] is something integral to totalitarianism, something that would still continue even if concentration camps and secret police forces had ceased to be necessary. ('The Prevention of Literature', p. 85)

<sup>158</sup> 'What is quite obviously happening, war or no war, is the break-up of *laissez-faire* capitalism and of the liberal-Christian culture. Until recently the full implications of this were not foreseen, because it was generally imagined that socialism could preserve and even enlarge the atmosphere of liberalism. It is now beginning to be realised how false this idea was. [...] [L]iterature, in the form in which we know it, must suffer at least a temporary death. The literature of liberalism is coming to an end and the literature of totalitarianism has not yet appeared and is barely imaginable. As for the writer, he is sitting on a melting iceberg; he is merely an anachronism, a hangover from the bourgeois age, as surely doomed as the hippopotamus. [F]rom now onwards the all-important fact for the creative writer is going to be that this is not a writer's world. That does not mean that he cannot help to bring the new society into being, but he can take no part in the process *as a writer*. [...] Progress and reaction have both turned out to be swindles. Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism – robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale – or rather, admit you are inside the whale (for you are, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it.' 'Inside the Whale', pp. 576-7.

<sup>159</sup> It is a curious fact that, despite this fixation on 'totalitarianism', and Orwell's clear anti-fascist stance, direct references to the Holocaust are rare in his writings (see Kristin Bluemel, 'St George and the Holocaust', *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 14.2 (2003), pp. 139-40, n. 2). There are in fact observable similarities between Orwell's Romantic conception of socialism and certain ideological features of Nazism: 'The worlds of both Orwell and Hitler are based on the traditional virtues of the petty bourgeoisie, the ideological unity of the middle and working classes, and superior individuals defined in terms of moral purpose as well as strength of will.' (Resch, 'Utopia, Dystopia and the Middle Class', p. 176) In this light, Orwell's comments in his review of *Mein Kampf* are revealing, especially his admiration for Hitler's Promethean 'self-sacrificing hero who fights single-handed against impossible odds', and for the fact that 'he has grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude to life. [...] Whereas Socialism [...] [has] said to people "I offer you a good time," Hitler has said to them "I offer you struggle, danger and death," and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.' (*CEJL* II, p. 29) Needless to say, there is nothing comparable in Orwell directed at Stalin.

author. And this proposition can be read from the point of view of a textual character that Orwell himself created – an authorial voice which tells us as true what any sensible, detached observer would see as obvious. In this way he reserved for himself a privileged power to interpret on our part, a power he could not grant to anyone else. naturally, this ‘voice’ is nothing more than a literary device, but, to paraphrase Raymond Williams, ‘the literary point *is* the political point.’<sup>160</sup> In this way, the manner in which he textually portrays himself, backed up by a theory of what textual portrayal is, is a way of telling us that this, what he tells us, is how, objectively, unmediated by interpretation, ideology or experience, things and people really are.

This outlook had the effect of making Orwell signally unable to grasp the nature of the events that encircled him as he wrote. Isaac Deutscher, who knew Orwell personally, once made the following comment regarding his empirical-rationalist outlook:

Like most British socialists, Orwell had never been a Marxist. [...]. From instinct rather than consciousness he had been a staunch rationalist. The distinction between the Marxist and the rationalist is of some importance. Contrary to an opinion widespread in Anglo-Saxon countries, Marxism is not at all rationalist in its philosophy: it does not assume that human beings are, as a rule, guided by rational motives and that they can be argued into socialism by reason. Marx himself begins *Das Kapital* with the elaborate philosophical and historical inquiry into the ‘fetishistic’ modes of thought and behaviour rooted in ‘commodity production’ – that is, in man’s work for and dependence on, a market. The class struggle, as Marx describes it, is anything but a rational process. This does not prevent the rationalists of socialism describing themselves sometimes as Marxists. But the authentic Marxist may claim to be mentally better prepared than the rationalist is for the manifestations of irrationality in human affairs, even for such manifestations as Stalin’s Great Purges. He may feel upset or mortified by them, but he need not feel shaken in his *Weltanschauung*, while the rationalist is lost and helpless when the irrationality of the human existence suddenly stares him in the face. *If he clings to his rationalism, reality eludes him. If he pursues reality and tries to grasp it, he must part with his rationalism.*<sup>161</sup>

One does not have to agree with Deutscher’s injunction of Marxism as the most effective antidote to rationalism (although I for one do) to accept the view that the ‘irrationality’ of human existence requires rather more than the empiricist window-pane to decipher it. But this is all Orwell offers us.

An example of the inadequacy of this method of viewing the world would be in order. In 1945 Orwell published the essay ‘Notes on Nationalism’,<sup>162</sup> in which he contrasted the notion of ‘patriotism’, which he defined as ‘devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force on other people’, and nationalism proper:

inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.<sup>163</sup>

The phrase ‘other units’ is significant here, for what Orwell was doing was extending the concept of ‘nationalism’, *as he defined it*, to

such movements and tendencies as Communism, political Catholicism, Zionism, Antisemitism, Trotskyism and Pacifism. It does not necessarily mean loyalty to a government or a country, still less to one’s own country, and it is not even strictly necessary that the units in which it deals should actually exist. To name a few obvious examples, Jewry, Islam, Christendom, the Proletariat and the White Race [...].<sup>164</sup>

The common characteristics that devotees of these ‘units’ shared, definitional for ‘nationalism’ in this essay, were obsessiveness, and the ability to ignore inconvenient truths: in other words, ‘power for power’s sake’,<sup>165</sup> and ‘insincerity’ (the hallmark of ‘totalitarianism’).

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<sup>160</sup> *Orwell*, p. 52.

<sup>161</sup> “‘1984’ – The Mysticism of Cruelty”, pp. 67-8 (emphasis added).

<sup>162</sup> *CEJL* III, [1925], pp. 410-31.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 411-2.

<sup>165</sup> ‘The object of power is power,’ as O’Brien explains to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s Winston Smith.

Orwell concluded the essay with these remarks:

The reason for the rise and spread of nationalism is far too big a question to be raised here. [...] As for the nationalistic loves and hatreds that I have spoken of, they are part of the make-up of most of us, whether we like it or not. Whether it is possible to get rid of them I do not know, but I do believe that it is possible to struggle against them, and that this is essentially a *moral* effort. [...] If you hate and fear Russia, if you are jealous of the wealth and power of America, if you despise Jews, if you have a sentiment of inferiority towards the British ruling class, you cannot get rid of those feelings simply by taking thought. But you can at least recognise that you have them, and prevent them from contaminating your mental processes. The emotional urges which are inescapable, and are perhaps even necessary to political action, should be able to exist side by side with an acceptance of reality.<sup>166</sup>

This is a pristine example of the kind of rationalism that I identified above. Irrational, obsessive and insincere nationalist desires – inescapable emotional urges – form a part of our make-up, and are thus, even if resisted, to be accepted. The irrational is beyond explanation, not a part of reality, but something which exists ‘*side-by-side*’ with it. And it *must* be like this, for to accept the irrational *as* real would precisely necessitate parting with rationalism itself. What escapes Orwell is the fact that the irrationality of ‘nationalism’ *is* real: a fixation on the superficial effect proves unable to penetrate – immediately, in the style of the window-pane, invisible – deeper processes. Rationalist empiricism results in the elusion of reality.<sup>167</sup>

Which is not just Orwell’s problem but that of his present-day supporters, the would-be *Orwellistas* of the twenty-first century, who too turn to a rationalist-empiricist view on the world. I have defined this current as the ‘clash-of-civilisations’ *right*; but, of course, terms like ‘left’ and ‘right’ are themselves rather slippery in nature, and among the interesting features of this current is that it does not consider itself a right at all.<sup>168</sup> In fact, that it is peopled by ex-socialists (even if some would still consider themselves ‘socialists’), even ex- (if would-be) *revolutionary* socialists – David Aaronovitch, for example, was, in his salad days, a member of the British Young Communist League, Norman Geras a distinguished member of the Trotskyist International Marxist Group, and Christopher Hitchens a journalist on *Socialist Worker* – is clear in its own significance. Commenting on the enormous impact of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* around the world, and its specific reception as an ‘anti-communist’ work, Raymond Williams observed that, to have had the impact that it had, the book

had to be written by an ex-socialist. It also had to be someone who shared the general discouragement of the generation: an ex-socialist who had become an enthusiast for capitalism would not have had the same effect.<sup>169</sup>

And this is precisely the territory that people like Aaronovitch, Geras and Hitchens occupy: as figures of ‘non-Stalinist’ left vintage (Aaronovitch is generally regarded to have been a ‘Eurocommunist’ in his Party days), their conversion to the role of cheerleaders for the United States’ current military adventures has the considerable weight and effect that it has precisely because it comes from *ex*-socialists, who too could be seen to share the ‘general discouragement’ of their generation.

It is also striking the homage that the leading personnel of this current pay almost to a man (and, curiously, they are ‘almost to a man’ men) to Orwell and his method. Of course, the intellectual trajectory from radical leftist to reinvented conservative, is something of a well-trodden path; and it is not difficult to see in this passage from radical left to (neo-) conservative right an echo of Orwell’s own trajectory or the attraction for someone

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<sup>166</sup> ‘Notes on Nationalism’, pp. 430-1.

<sup>167</sup> Scott Lucas suggests the following sub-text, that the essay ‘was penned to distinguish his ‘patriotism’ from the ‘nationalism’ of all his opponents: political Catholics, communists, ‘Celtic’ nationalists, ‘neo-Tories’ and the left-wing British intelligentsia.’ (Scott Lucas, ‘The Socialist Fallacy’, *New Statesman* (29 May, 2000), p. 48) This may be true, but misses the general point.

<sup>168</sup> Alan Johnson, ‘Introduction: Towards a Decent Left’, in Alan Johnson (ed.) *Global Politics After 9/11: The Democratiya Interviews* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre and *Democratiya*, 2007), pp. 10-22. *Democratiya* is the closest thing this current has to a ‘house journal’.

<sup>169</sup> *Politics and Letters*, p. 390.

following this itinerary of citing his example. Yet the invocation of Orwell on the part of this new right is far more than a simple question of the need for historical legitimacy: the *method* of politics, founded on a view of language and its concomitant politico-philosophical world-view, is of the same class as Orwell's. I have already cited Garton Ash's and Hitchens' views on language, on the priority of *how* one expresses oneself over *what* one expresses; I shall cite one more example here, by way of illustration.

In 2007 Christopher Hitchens published *God Is Not Great*, an impassioned attack from an atheistic standpoint on religion in all its forms. The near coincidence of the appearance of this book with *The God Delusion*, written by Richard Dawkins (of 'selfish gene' fame) led some to talk about the appearance of a 'new atheism' movement.<sup>170</sup> Quite what motivated Hitchens to direct his fire at this target at this time is something about which we can only speculate: maybe he feels the need to cash in some of his socialist currency, maybe he feels stalked by the spectre of 'Islamic fascism' – who knows. But what does stand clear is the inadequacy of the world-view that the books defend.

Both Hitchens' and Dawkins' essential case, at least superficially, is that religion is irrational, non-scientific, manifestly absurd, and hence destructive, backward-looking and violent; and, as Terry Eagleton notes, beneath the surface argument lies this sub-text:

The implication from [amongst others] [...] Hitchens and Richard Dawkins is that civilisation and atheist rationalism go together, and I think that is a very dangerous argument to make. The debate over God – Muslim or Christian – is for them increasingly becoming code for a debate on civilisation versus barbarism.<sup>171</sup>

But 'civilisation' and 'barbarism' are themselves codes; earlier, I had cause to emphasise the especially slippery nature of the concept of 'totalitarianism': for the liberal rationalist-empiricist totalitarianism is as totalitarianism does, and its identification is often a matter for the mind of the beholder. Thus, for Hitchens, insofar as religion bases itself on blind faith, in which both private and public life in their entirety bend to a higher authority, it *is* 'totalitarianism', an identification which becomes explicit when he considers non-religious, even anti-religious, 'totalitarianisms'. 'Totalitarian systems, whatever outward form they may take, are fundamentalist and, as we would now say, "faith-based"'.<sup>172</sup> And the non-totalitarian religious? No matter either: in the case of Martin Luther King, '[i]n no real as opposed to nominal sense [...] then, was he a Christian';<sup>173</sup> while Gandhi, who *was* religious, was also therefore totalitarian.<sup>174</sup>

But this is just an indicative symptom. As we have seen, for the rationalist the irrational is just that, irrational, beyond understanding; and short of pointing out the fact, and throwing one's hands up at the capriciousness of human behaviour, there is little more to be done about it. And this is all that empiricist rationalists, Orwell included, can do: if reality, including its textual representation, is indeed transparently and unproblematically knowable, all that one can do is state the obvious loudly and clearly enough until everyone who is going to be convinced is so and leave the begrudgers be. Naturally, this misses the point: if religion *is* 'irrational', the point is *why* is it irrational, and *why* is it that it can have a hold on people to the point that they devote their lives, fight and die, torture and maim, for their beliefs? Deutscher's dilemma once again poses itself: either the rationalist

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<sup>170</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: The Case against Religion* (London, 2007); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London, 2006). Dawkins is, to his credit, otherwise not associated with the Hitchens *et al* current.

<sup>171</sup> Tim Adams, 'The Armchair Revolutionary', *The Observer* (16 December, 2007), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/dec/16/martinamis>> [retrieved 1 September, 2008].

<sup>172</sup> *God Is Not Great*, pp. 249-50.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181-184. A view which echoes strongly with Orwell's view of Gandhi as a 'superhuman führer' ('Letter to H J Willmet' [1944], *CEJL* III, p. 177); even if, by 1949, he had moderated his attitude a little: 'Gandhi [...] did not understand the nature of totalitarianism and saw everything in terms of his own struggle against the British government. [...] It is difficult to see how Gandhi's methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard of again. [...] Is there a Gandhi in Russia at this moment? And if there is, what is he accomplishing?' ('Reflections on Gandhi' [1949], *CEJL* IV, p. 529)

clings to her rationalism, and reality eludes her; or she pursues reality, and parts with her rationalism.<sup>175</sup>

Thus the *Weltanschauungen* of Orwell's present-day champions, and that of Orwell himself, are, in essential features, the same, and, in the same way, are equally flawed. Nevertheless, it cannot be the case that what manifests itself in Orwell manifests itself elsewhere through mere mimicry alone. As Fredric Jameson once remarked: 'Croce's great dictum that "all history is contemporary history" does not mean that all history is *our* contemporary history';<sup>176</sup> and perhaps the case is not that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it, but that those who fail to learn its lessons are doomed *to believe* themselves to be reliving a past that never existed in the first place. Chomsky once put the matter succinctly. 'Orwell's problem', he suggested, is 'why we know and understand so little, even though the evidence to us is so rich':

Like many other 20th-century intellectuals, Orwell was impressed with the ability of totalitarian systems to instil beliefs that are firmly held and widely accepted although they are completely without foundation and often plainly at variance with obvious facts about the world around us. The problem is far broader, as the history of religious dogma suffices to show. To solve Orwell's problem we must discover the [...] factors that block insight and understanding in crucial area of our lives and ask why they are effective.<sup>177</sup>

The point here, *pace* Garton Ash, Hitchens, Geras, Aaronovitch (*et al*), is that the *solution* to 'Orwell's problem' is *not to be found in Orwell*. For those who do indeed want to pull 'the imaginary flowers from the chain', so as to be able to 'throw off the chain and pluck the living flower', the tools to do this will need to be fashioned *against* Orwell, and the rationalist-empiricist outlook he represents, and this not by ignoring him, but by decisively engaging with and rejecting both him and those who still speak in his name and with his voice.

León

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<sup>175</sup> By way of contrast, here is a rather different reflection on the problem of religion: 'Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the *world of man*, state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against *that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is religion. [...]

'The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is *to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in *embryo*, the *criticism of that vale of tears* of which religion is the *hale*.

'Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.' (Karl Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction', in Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth and London, 1992), p. 244) As Perry Anderson points out, 'It never occurred to Marx to combat religion in the 1840s: he took it for granted that the only remaining duty was to explain it.' (Perry Anderson, 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', *New Left Review* I/35 (January-February 1966), p. 20)

<sup>176</sup> *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Abingdon, 2006), p. 2.

<sup>177</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origins, and Use* (New York and London, 1986), p. xxvii