

- McCune, Timothy. "The Solidarity of Life: Max Scheler on Modernity and Harmony With Nature." *Ethics & The Environment* 19.1 (2014): 49-71. Print.
- Montuori, Alfonso. "Complex Thought: An Overview of Edgar Morin's Intellectual Journey." *Metaintegral Foundation*. Resource Paper. June 2013. Web.
- _____. "Edgar Morin: A Partial Introduction." *World Futures* 60 (2004): 349-355.
- Morin, Edgar. *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*. Trans. Sean M. Kelly and Roger LaPointe. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1999. Print.
- _____. *La Méthode 2. La Vie de la vie*. Paris: Seuil, 1980. Print.
- _____. "Realism and Utopia." *Diogenes* 209 (2006): 135-144. Print.
- Moser, Keith. *The Encyclopedic Philosophy of Michel Serres: Writing the Modern World and Anticipating the Future*. Augusta, GA: Anaphora Literary Press, 2016. Print.
- Ogden, Lesley. "Do Animals Have Personality?: The Importance of Individual Differences." *BioScience* 62.6 (2012): 533-537. Print.
- Pani, Prajna. "Reflections on the Existential Philosophy in T.S. Eliot's Poetry." *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 9.1 (2013): 310-316. Print.
- Porter, Roy. *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. Print.
- Rapin, Anne. "Entretien avec Edgar Morin: pour une politique de civilisation." *Label France* 28 (1997): n.p. Web.
- Sikorska-Piwowska, Zofia, Marta Zalewska, Jacek Tomczyk, Antoni Dawidowicz, and Hanna Mankowska-Pliszka. "Homimization Tendencies in the Evolution of Primates in Multidimensional Modeling." *Mathematica Applicanda* 43.1 (2015): 77-93. Print.
- Sivaramakrishnan, Murali. "Involution and Evolution: Some Conceptual Issues in the Contexts of Indian Discourses." *The Trumpeter* 25.2 (2009): 1-8. Web.
- Soni, Shruti. "Deep Ecology and Self-Realization: Two Sides of a Coin." *Daath Voyage: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English* 1.2 (2016): 69-81. Web.
- Spittler, Gerd. "Urban Exodus-Rural and Rural-Rural Migration in Gobir (Niger)." *Sociologia Ruralis* 17.1 (1977): 223-235. Print.
- Stamps, J. and T. Groothuis. "The Development of Animal Personality: Relevance, Concepts, and Perspectives." *Biological Reviews* 85 (2010): 301-325. Print.
- Strawson, Galen. *Locke on Personal Identity: Consciousness and Concernment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011. Print.
- Strumse, Einar. "The Ecological Self: A Psychological Perspective on Anthropogenic Environmental Change." *European Journal of Science and Theology* 3.2 (2007): 7-12. Print.
- Weibel, Peter. "The Seeing Tongue. New Aspects of Exo-Darwinism." Presentation. Akademie Schloss Solitude. *Design of the In/Human*. 2010. Web.
- Wheeler, Wendy. "Postscript on Biosemiotics: Reading Beyond Words-And Ecocriticism." *New Formations* 64 (2008): 137-154. Print.
- Whitman, Sarah. "Pain and Suffering as Viewed by the Hindu Religion". *The Journal of Pain* 8.8 (2007): 607-613. Print.

The Disappearance of 1984

Didier Maleuvre

I

Can a famous novel disappear in plain sight? The very possibility seems to hover over the present fate of George Orwell's *1984*. Officially, our culture still agrees that *1984* is "the definitive novel of the 20th century, a story that remains fresh and contemporary" (in the words of the *Guardian* Newspaper) in any of the 65 languages by which it is known to millions of readers. However, there is good cause to think that, if millions go on turning the pages of *1984*, it will not be on the recommendation of university instructors. This novel that is one of the most important witnesses of the twentieth century, a novel that has enriched our political vocabulary with such terms as "newspeak," "doublethink," "Big Brother," or indeed "Orwellian," has virtually disappeared from the university classroom. It is the destiny of most books that they must vanish in the fullness of time; it is the strange destiny of *1984* to vanish even as its fame stands undiminished, and to vanish indeed at the hands of people whose social function is to keep books alive.

How rare *1984* has become in college classrooms is not a matter of speculation. The Open Syllabus Project, a large-scale internet database, mines over one million college-level syllabi across 5 English-speaking countries, among which the United States, and is able to extract statistically accurate pictures of the most and the least frequently assigned books in universities. It should be of interest to the cultural historian that, by its rate of appearance on university syllabi, *1984* languishes at the risibly submerged end of the scale, very near the crevasse of oblivion. At number 716, it keeps company with Bede the Venerable's *Ecclesiastical History* and *Germania* by Tacitus. It is strange, to say the least, that a novel reckoned to be fundamental ("fresh and contemporary") to our times should compete for a slot in the same dark reaches of the syllabus universe as the evangelization of Northumbria and the state of Germanic tribes under the Roman Empire. The discrepancy

between its famed importance and its ranked obscurity is an oddity. *1984* is disappearing even as it remains in the public consciousness, and this must be the symptom of something.

To start understanding what this something is, it may help to look at the top of the ranking. Favor and disfavor tend to correlate. What a culture favors often explains why it disfavors other things. Among the top ten books with which *1984* might be understood to share a common interest, i.e., politics, we find Plato's *Republic* (#2), *The Communist Manifesto* (#3), *Leviathan* (#7), and *The Prince* (#8). Though historically diverse, these four treatises share a pronounced dislike of parliamentary government and prefer absolutism—whether aristocratic, oligarchic, monarchist, or collectivist. Far from us to suppose that instructors assign these book in a spirit of advocacy; still, the presence of *1984* among them would make for a clearer signal that the liberal denunciation of absolutism does inform the teaching of anti-democratic treatises.

In *1984*'s Ministry of Truth, facts and books and people vanish without a trace or explanation. Were we to live in the world of *1984*, we would have no memory of there having ever existed a novel titled *1984* by George Orwell. Happily, modern universities abide by a different set of rules arising from a public disputative scientific tradition that offers reasons for its pedagogic choices. Books that leave the university classroom are usually argued out of it. They disappear leaving a trail of reasons for their consignment to oblivion. This, in the case of *1984*, allows us to study the strategies that have by and by made it of no consequence to academia.

Before we look at the methods of disappearance, we should say a word about the reasons. *1984* has always been an inconvenient book among the intelligentsia. Back in 1956, Irving Howe was frank enough to concede the importance of the novel and also to admit that it would be just as well if he did not have to discuss it. "Openly in England, more cautiously in America, there has arisen a desire among intellectuals to belittle Orwell's achievement [...]. Nor can it be denied that all of us would feel more comfortable if the book could be cast out."¹ *1984* is a headache of a book. Written by a man of notoriously socialist sympathies, it yet insists that the gravest danger to democracy is not capitalist moguls in top hat but statist technocrats; not unprincipled men whose goal in life is profit, but puritanically principled ones who aim to install a utopian order ruled by an intellectocracy—or, as Orwell writes in *1984*, a "new aristocracy... of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade-union organizers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists, and professional politicians, [...] less avaricious, less tempted by luxury, hungrier for pure power, and, above all, more conscious ... and more intent on crushing opposition" rather than the ruling class of old.² For his misgiving about the intellectual zeal to apply top-down "solutions" to the tangled plural imperfections of social existence, Orwell was deemed an embarrassment and a turncoat. Orwell continued being no less inconvenient after the end of the Cold War. *1984* indicts, not just a political system, but its philosophic foundation, a foundation that happens to underpin the most influential school of thought of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first university, which is postmodernism. Postmodernism rests on a constructivist, subjectivist idea of truth that is the diabolical heart of *1984*: the idea that truth is power—that reality is a social construct. Reality is

what the greater "we" *says* is reality. For the postmodernist, there is really no distinction between the window and the landscape: the window is the landscape, and the window is the legitimate tool of whoever has been smart or ruthless or convincing enough to lead everyone to gaze through it. This anti-realist philosophy is one which, first theoretically then militantly, has for the last forty years held the humanities under its spell. This is why, after he antagonized socialists of the twentieth century, Orwell now displeases postmodernists of the twenty-first century. Orwell says that to accept that $2+2=4$ is merely a political belief (to accept that it is a "construct") robs the human mind of its dignity and invites would-be tyrants to legislate that $2+2=5$ or indeed any other construct that confirms our moral servitude under their intellectocracy.

That postmodernism is no friend of liberty, indeed that it is fundamentally not liberal, isn't a suggestion designed to charm the friends of literary theory. Nor is Orwell's case helped by his defense of clear, honest writing against learned obfuscation. Orwell wrote in the belief that complex thoughts require well-defined terms in translucent prose. The postmodern tends to prefer simple thoughts dressed in opaque jargon, all because there is supposedly no such thing as a clear statement, and meaning is impossible to pin down, and language is always manipulative. Given this philosophy of communication, Orwell's plea for clarity can be dismissed as either naïve or meretricious. The notion that Orwell writes too clearly for his, and our, own good gives ammunition to a final reason for the disappearance of *1984*, which is snobbery. *1984* has so far remained a fixture on high-school reading lists, and it may be thought that what is good for secondary education (naïvely honest prose) may be either superfluous or out-of-date in college. It is perhaps thought that *1984* belongs on the adolescent bookshelf between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, a stage of intellectual life one has critically and aesthetically outgrown. In fact, it wasn't long after its original publication, as the novel was already gathering a large public, that literary critics held it to be a negligible piece of literature. Irving Howe first sounded that note, opining that Orwell's "book is not really a novel: Smith and O'Brien and Julia are not credible human beings. Seldom are they characters involved in dramatic action."³ There is no arguing with anyone's sense of what a credible human being is, though a critic of Howe's sensibility may have considered that a lack of personality is just what happens to human beings in a totalitarian society. You cannot expect psychological adventurism or a lyrical sparkle in a regime that squashes individuality. If there is character flatness in *1984*, it may be evidence of Orwell doing an expert job of harmonizing form and content, prose and idea.

Yet Orwell's prose is a subject of aesthetic disdain.⁴ Next to the modernist brilliance of Joyce, Woolf, or Nabokov, Orwell's clear and forthright prose does seem, well, prosaic. He recommended that "one can write nothing readable unless one constantly strives to efface one's personality" and that "good prose is like a window pane" at a time when the great modern stylists dressed their windows in kaleidoscopic stained glass.⁵ This plain-spoken realism, which yet wasn't rugged enough to please the followers of Hemingway, told against him in the hall of mirrors of modernist prose. It was thought to take the obvious path of least resistance, which, of all the imputations made on Orwell's writing,

must be the most unmerited. In truth, Orwell's stylistic simplicity is a line of strenuous resistance against the invasion of inaccurate and prevaricating speech in the public sphere—baroquely erroneous language being one way despots adulterate our perception of reality. Orwell saw that, when bureaucrats wield the black magic of language, it is incumbent on real poets to be plain-spoken. Nor does plain speech come easy. Clearing prose of subjective affectation requires as much artistic discipline as the staging of verbal acrobatics.⁶ If this doesn't alter the opinion that *1984* is a passable novel, at least it may suggest that Orwell had very good reasons not to make it a brilliant one.

II

Thus for some conjectures as to why *1984* has disappeared from college classrooms. They are conjectures because they involve the reading of other people's motivations, and these are always a matter of guesswork, which on the whole is best left to sorcerers. What a critic can do, once it is observed that a novel of such importance did not drop out of sight without some pushing, without, as Howe put it, some casting out, is to observe the verbal strategies that manufactured the irrelevance of *1984*.⁷ Since this essay cannot contain an exhaustive survey, I have kept the documenting of each class of strategy to one or two examples, but the bibliographical notes refer the reader to ampler information.

The first of these strategies, in the scale from benign to injurious, is literate distraction—ways of attenuating the moral seriousness of *1984* by expounding on its outer dress. It may not be wrong, factually speaking, to observe that Orwell's novel reverberates with, for example, intriguing echoes of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, or Jack The Giant Killer.⁸ It is indeed the job of literary critics to insert books into literary traditions. But unless our knowing that Winston is Adam, and Julia Eve, informs our understanding of the suppression of liberty, such scholarship flirts with irrelevance—it is a bit like observing that the man being chased by a bear is wearing a nice pocket handkerchief. This may be true, but it has nothing to do with the emergency at hand. It is perhaps a weakness of literary criticism that it will often abstract from the matter at hand by substituting aesthetic rubrics for practical situations. An example is the habit of calling *1984* “a dystopian novel” or a “dystopian satire.”⁹ Given that “utopian” means unrealistically ideal, it is to be feared that “dystopian,” coupled with “satire,” means unrealistically and freakishly awful. It seems to imply that Orwell caricatured an overblown totalitarian threat, and that Stalin's Russia or Mao's China were not so bad as Big Brother's cartoonishly awful Oceania. This, of course, is an appalling implication. For the 30 million people whom Stalin starved to death, or for the 18 million who slaved and died in the Gulag, life was immeasurably worse than it was for Wilson in *1984*. Communist and fascist totalitarians enslaved, tortured, maimed, and killed *real* people whose fate Orwell was far from wanting to satirize, even in the style of Swift's “Modest Proposal.” There is a moral matter here which somehow the term “dystopian satire” does not weigh. Survivors of the Gulag or of the Cultural Revolution may well attest that fiction falls well short of what they endured.

Still under the rubric of polite understatement must we include the sort of language which, for example, speaks of Orwell's “ambivalence towards the social project.”¹⁰ A very

pale word for a novel-length screed against social engineering, “ambivalence” is perhaps there to mark that Orwell never openly rejected socialist aims. In a letter to a trade-union is the declared *1984* to be, not an anti-socialist novel, but a criticism of “the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already partly been realized in Communism and Fascism.”¹¹ It is perfectly understandable that Orwell did not want his novel to bolster American conservatives and English Tories (whose hero, Winston Churchill, nevertheless gives Orwell's lead character his first name). Still, his apologetic response speaks of evasion. “Centralized economy” is the textbook description of socialism, to the effect that if *1984* attacks the perversions of a centralized economy, then it necessarily attacks socialism whose first syllable is embedded in Ingsoc, the English socialism that terrorizes the world of *1984*.¹² If we read ambivalence about statist socialism in Orwell's novel, then we may as well feel ambivalent about a triangle having three corners. But for its lack of ambivalence on socialism it is hard to see why its first publisher fretted that the novel would antagonize the intelligentsia; or why Orwell has been so repeatedly faulted for betraying the left by his “deliberate and sadistic attack on socialism,” “his harsh criticism of totalitarian communism,” and for being “an ideological weapon” of cold-war hawks, “a liberal moralist” (in the European sense) and a “neo-conservative.”¹³ Should we believe that the Soviet Union had no good reason to ban the novel well into Perestroika? It would be amazing if it turned out that critics over the last seventy years have simply hallucinated the anti-socialist tenor of *1984*.¹⁴

When understatement fails to dilute the novel's message, overstatement comes to the rescue. Then Orwell is no longer ambivalent about socialism, but hysterically alarmist, a transcendent doomsayer—a dying embittered man sunk in “quasi-mystical pessimism” who penned an apocalyptic novel that borders on sadism.¹⁵ This diversion does get something right: *1984* is bleak beyond endurance, but one is again called to wonder whether it is any bleaker than actual life in a corrective labor camp. Moreover, the pessimism with which it is charged is not resigned and penitential, but cautionary and preemptive. It has not brought gnostic despair upon our political outlook, but a toolkit of warning signals against the totalitarian mindset (newspeak, thought crime, Big Brother, etc.).

Another distractive strategy akin to questioning Orwell's mental health is to question his intelligence. It wields the time-honored tactic known as the Argument from Authority. Here it is argued that Orwell was not a philosopher, and had not received enough schooling in high Marxist criticism to write anything of intelligence on a subject so complex as socialist society.¹⁶ There is usually no need to refute the Argument from Authority because it falls by its own ineptness (to say that an argument disagrees with the authorities is not to disprove it). But the matter of Orwell's alleged lack of philosophical sophistication touches upon a crucial aspect of, indeed, his thinking, which was, not non-theoretical, but anti-theoretical. His interest was with the concrete practical effects of political ideas on the lives of real human beings, not how they form a doctrinal mesh. Indeed, Orwell worried about the suppressive uses of philosophical theory, how it vaporizes reality in a cloud of generalities that conceals real power relations. If Orwell refused to enter into socialist theory, it is because he had fundamental reasons not to do so. So undeterred, however, is

the critical berating of Orwell's philosophical competence that it sometimes reveals too much of what it has in store. Thus the critic who scolds amateurish Orwell for sending the reader on a chase after "metaphysical pretensions"—pretensions such as reality, truth, freedom, and the dignity of the individual which, in the spreadsheet of at least one political ideology, are mere wills o' the wisp.¹⁷ In the end, we are meant to know that Winston fails against the state because his philosophy is, like Orwell's, amateurish.¹⁸ If only he had not insisted that reality exists, and that the political is not supreme, then the philosopher-kings of Ingsoc would not have had to disabuse him of his errors; then his well-adjusted life would have been suffered to go on.

III

The strategies of manufacturing the irrelevance of *1984* seen above are for the most part rhetorical: they consist of dampening what the novel is in every way so clear about. But there is another strategy that consists of ignoring the message of *1984* by looking beyond it. This, in debating circles, is known as "whataboutery," or the *tu quoque* fallacy. It consists of burying a denunciation under a counter-denunciation, and the tactic typifies an astonishing large segment of the literature on *1984*. To be fair, it is not for the most part intentional. Intellectuals who have the good fortune of being able to write about *1984* also have the related good fortune of not living under totalitarian rule. To we who have only known the free market of goods and ideas, totalitarianism is a distant nightmare, and it seems more relevant to look for signs of Orwellian unfreedom in the one society we know well, which is the open society. This is the line of criticism notably taken by Erich Fromm's afterword of 1961 and Thomas Pynchon's preface of 2004. Fromm warns readers against "smugly interpret[ing] *1984* as another description of Stalinist barbarism" without seeing that the novel "means us, too."¹⁹ "Us" or, in the instance, "managerial industrialism," companies that sell appetizing products, rig markets, hook the populace on material pursuits. To which Pynchon adds concern about the amnesia-making power of "our nominally free news media" which rewrites history, spins memory, and confutes clear thinking.²⁰

The literature of whataboutery has kept criticism of 1984 producing a seemingly inexhaustible store of aspiring big brothers for the last forty years: corporations, banks, news channels, free-trade apologists, the WTO, the "free market and the Internet," the war against ISIS, fitness culture, hierarchical structures, even individualism.²¹ This finally climaxes in the claim that the novel "as a critique of state power has been largely a misreading of *1984*."²² The book, we are told, isn't "a warning against the 'big State' and centralization of government," but an attack on the totalitarianism that is hidden in all things, especially those given to us by the free market.²³ There is of course a truth in these approaches, which is that *1984* can serve as a warning regarding another creeping form of authoritarianism, and a half-truth, such as the fact that gigantic internet monopolies like Google, Facebook, or Amazon are beginning to exercise a power over the public square with which no private company should be entrusted. Yet it is too much of a leap to say that the novel *is* therefore about non-state despotism. There is a confusion here that turns on the meaning of "totalitarian": only states have the ability to be totalitarian. To be sure, Google and Facebook can be intrusive, monopolistic, censorious, watchful, etc. They

enjoy the unregulated power to "unperson" individuals in the agora where we conduct most of our civic debate, that is, online. Yet they will be totalitarian only if and when they take over the legislative and executive power of the state.²⁴ Then it will be warranted to say that Google is watching you in the same way Orwell meant Big Brother.

The determination to make *1984* into a denunciation of free-market society (of "Americanism," as Orwell might have said) sometimes leads to strange topsy-turvy interpretations. It has been a concern of some intellectuals that the world was now post-ideological, to mean that (especially after the fall of the Soviet Union and China's turn toward business-driven economics and African countries' emergence from post-colonial socialist kleptocracies), a broad international consensus agreed that the best way to raise global standards of living is, not state planning, but free commercial exchange. This consensus is post-ideological age because it has outlasted competing ideologies, and this to some thinkers, is a bad thing. For "as long as ideology exists, struggle prevails and hope continues," says one.²⁵ In short, the post-ideological global village blankets the historical outlook, and is in this (very poetic) sense totalitarian—totalitarian, say, like the society of *1984* where "there is not even any political ideology left to oppose so that resistance becomes nonsensical."²⁶ In Ingsoc or as in Francis Fukuyama's Washington Consensus, we live "a totalitarianism without a significant ideology."²⁷ Apparently, we are totalitarian because after a century of disastrous social experiments, we have settled on the evidence that free-market economics raise human prospects (health, longevity, education, opportunities, civil liberties, etc.) much better than planned economies.

The aim, it seems, is to convince us that Orwell meant Ingsoc to be a reflection of economic liberalism. This assimilation leads to critic to boldly absurd assertions—assertions such as the fact that, as in our post-totalitarian society (i.e., post-totalitarian because we don't see that it is totalitarian), under Ingsoc "canine-like contentment is omnipresent," "economic dissatisfaction is absent," and "characters truly seem to bask in their existence."²⁸ *1984* goes into the Ministry of Forced Interpretation and comes out sounding like *Brave New World*. It is lucky we still have the *1984* Orwell actually wrote to ascertain that everybody in it feels the fist and the boot of the state all the time. Everyone aches and suffers and fears and rages and despairs. "Orwell's fear lies less in the propositions of a particular ideology than in the absence of ideology," says the critic.²⁹ But in the *1984* Orwell wrote, the Party props up phantom enemies to keep the fires of ideological warfare burning, and ideology is everywhere, down to the dreams one is allowed to have.

Where this argument about post-ideology goes wrong is to think that a monopolistic ideology means the absence of ideology. A single thought-system is a thought-system nonetheless. In truth, Orwell describes a society entirely devoured by ideology: everything in it is political, every thought, every emotion, every action, every twitch is either ideologically conformant or recusant, orthodox or heretical. *1984* depicts ideology triumphant: all life abides by the Party's dictum that reality is an idea, that it has no substance of its own apart from the Party's mind. "The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears." "The very existence of external reality was tacitly denied by their philosophy."³⁰ What the state says exists, is what exists: that is the natural drift, perhaps

the political aim, of ideology. It absorbs all aspects of reality until nothing remains that isn't stamped by the subjectivity of a technocracy—literally, a rule of knowledge-makers. This technocracy is the world of *1984* and ideocracy is the philosophy of its rulers. It is not the end of ideology, nor a post-ideological world, but ideology triumphant.

Ideology triumphant is most glaring and diabolical in what Orwell called “doublethink:” the ability to maintain true contradictory propositions at once. The mind of every citizen is made to entertain a thought that is factually sound but ideologically prohibited, or factually unsound but ideologically orthodox. Every mind is made to see the truth enough to trample it; every mind is made to be both the heretic and its own inquisition tribunal. Every mind is thus made to assist the triumph of ideology over reality. $2+2=5$ even though everyone knows that $2+2=4$. Belief terrorizing reason is ideology in the purest form. And ideology in its purest form is never post-ideological since it demands the vigilant sadistic assertion of belief over reason. It demands that the mind violates itself at every moment. That hyper-ideological terror is the subject of Orwell's novel.

IV

That *1984* is, not about the post-ideological but the hyper-ideological leads us back to the topic of its disappearance from the college classroom. The fact that it has fallen into disfavor is surely not foreign to the humanities having cultivated a version of the doctrine of ideology triumphant known as Postmodernism over the last half century. Common to all postmodernists (whether of the sub-strains of Post-structuralism, Deconstruction, Critical Theory, Social Constructivism, or American Pragmatism) is the conviction that truth is never the point of contact between mind and fact, but a tale, a narrative, a coagulate of political power. Reality is but what the people in power say (in the conspiratorial world of Michel Foucault, for example) or what “we” say (on the sunnier planet of pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty). But in any case, truth is a construct, a useful fiction (useful to the powerful, according to Foucault; useful to the general consensus, according to Rorty). The problem, so far as the fortune of *1984* is concerned, is that this social solipsism is basically the doctrine of Ingsoc, and that Ingsoc is anything but benign.

Its villain-in-chief O'Brien openly professes a subjectivist social-constructivist philosophy according to which language trumps reality, and the ideological logos is first and last. This puts Postmodernism in a difficult position. What we have seen so far as critical strategies of deflection, of treading through *1984* without stirring the elephant in the room, which is that the novel takes a principle stand for commonsense empiricism against postmodern subjectivism. Nevertheless there is one major postmodernist thinker who, to his credit, did take up the challenge of disturbing the elephant, and that is the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty who thought the matter important enough to dedicate an entire essay to it. Since the essay acknowledges that O'Brien's philosophical system is essentially Rorty's, we can imagine the stakes to be extremely high. Rorty has to demonstrate that postmodern social subjectivism erects safeguards against intellectual fiends like O'Brien. If he cannot, he has to admit that perhaps his philosophy has been tempting the Furies.

Rorty's essay reaffirms the fundamentals of the postmodernist worldview: we postmodernists (to borrow a cadence dear to Rorty) do not believe that there is a state of things, a discourse-independent reality out there from which moral and social life can take its bearings. Truth, Rorty says, is a “red herring:”³¹ nothing is definitely true, and every “truth” is merely apt temporarily and locally. Truth is opportune and conventional. Rorty takes no exception with these principles of Ingsoc that “nothing exists except through human consciousness,” that society “must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of nature” and that there are no “external standards... to check its [the collective brain's] judgment.”³² “There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them,” echoes Rorty in words that could come straight from the mouth of O'Brien.³³ Again, it is to Rorty's credit that he confronted this inconvenient kinship. Yet confronting it does not lead him in any to revise his fundamentals: he is adamant that the Logos is all there is, that the Text is all-pervasive, and there is no human reality, no core of non-social existence in Winston's flesh that screams against the abuse of politics. Rorty thinks that creating a decent society in which human beings are fairly content instead of universally miserable doesn't require taking plain biological or psychological facts into account; it does not require stripping layers of superstition and fantasy. Instead, it involves laying down what he calls an “alternative description,” a new social fantasy.

One could of course ask what makes a new social description enviable but Rorty evades point. Still, we can imagine him having to say that “a popular alternative description” is better, and therefore popular, because it works better, which means, it creates less suffering.³⁴ But less suffering how and to whom? For actual human beings who by nature suffer when humiliated and debased and lied to. But Rorty would have to say that it is not a *fact* that human beings suffer under tyranny, but merely a description, a tale that we have been telling ourselves. If there are no facts and only description about human happiness, then Ingsoc is not wrong to declare that human beings bask in being oppressed (“Freedom is Slavery”). And this, in fact, is what Rorty must, and does, concede. Human happiness is a description susceptible to unlimited variations which are a matter for imaginative writers to dream up.

What it lacks in plausibility, this theory more than makes up in flattery. It imagines humanity to be a weather wane spinning in the windy breath of strongly creative intellectuals, men like Rorty and O'Brien who rule reality with their pens. Though this is very well for Rorty to believe (everyone is entitled to their fantasy), he goes a step too far in claiming that this is also what Orwell believed. Orwell, Rorty will have us know, is not a realist at all but a Rortian postmodernist who professes that Interpretation is Truth. Supposedly, Orwell “has no *answer* to O'Brien, and is not interested in giving one,” and denies “that there is such a thing as the autonomous individual.”³⁵ This claim simply scoops out the moral core of *1984*. For if *1984* is not Orwell's answer to the likes of O'Brien, if it is not his view that immense suffering befalls individuals when subjectivist philosophers take over the state, then *1984* does not say what it says, and therefore is a sad joke, a fatalistic passion play that admits the right of sadistic fantasists to terrorize over us.

This, in fact, is close to what Rorty thinks Orwell was up to: “He [Orwell] does not view O’Brien as crazy, misguided, seduced by a mistaken theory, or blind to the moral facts. He simply views him as *dangerous* and *possible*.”³⁶ Now, it is true that Rorty does not think O’Brien mistaken. But the entire novel is Orwell’s cry that O’Brien is dangerous precisely because he practices on real people a theory that is horrifically scornful of moral facts (moral fact like ‘it is nasty and wrong to force people to say that $2+2=5$ to crush and strip them of self-respect’). In any case, it is hard to see why Rorty thinks O’Brien is *dangerous* (as he italicizes the word) if he, O’Brien, is not mistaken. How could he ever be dangerous unless he violates an inherent human condition which has it that we are better off being not beaten, bullied, and broken? If Rorty is right, then O’Brien is not dangerous: he is not breaking Winston down but inducting him into an “alternative description” of the life well lived. If happiness indeed is a matter of description, and if O’Brien or Rorty can wave his pen and re-describe everyone in Oceania as being fundamentally satisfied (remember that one critic does just that, see note 31) then O’Brien’s philosophy is benign. But of course, as Rorty himself lets slip, no description can make O’Brien’s philosophy not dangerous, and dangerous it is because it violates basic facts about human happiness that cannot just be talked in and out of existence.

Just the same, let us try and understand why, within his relativistic framework, Rorty should think O’Brien dangerous. Rorty maintains “that it does not matter whether ‘two plus two is four’ is true.”³⁷ What matters, he continues, is that we live in a society where people are free to say “two plus two is four” and “two plus two is fifty-seven” and “two plus two is incalculable,” etc. To quote Rorty: “All that matters is that if you do believe it, you can say it without getting hurt. In other words, what matters is your ability to talk to other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true.”³⁸ The point is: “if we are ironic enough” (Rorty’s words) about what we say, society will be shorn of its asperities and run smoothly on a benign post-truth track. Now, there are several things to unpack here, starting with the notion that “two plus two is four” is according to Rorty a matter of belief—a belief, one supposes, on a par with the Holy Trinity or the fact that Big Brother is always right. The good society, according to Rorty, is one where a person can tell other people about his or her fanciful beliefs without repercussions. I tell you I believe I am a unicorn; you tell me you believe you are Elvis Presley, she tells us she believes she was born on Saturn. No harm is done because, as Rorty writes, you then express “what *seems* to you true” (italics added). Everything is well, then, so long as you are not really committed to what you believe: I believe I am a unicorn, but then again I may be something else, who knows? Leaving aside whether this complete uncertainty as to what I am is psychologically endurable in the long run, there is the problem that some beliefs are not merely personal, and that they will clash with other beliefs.

Say a man comes along and says that what seems true to him is that we are all God’s children. Someone may feel bound to disagree and thereby disturb his “truth”, which will cause trouble. To which the same man can respond by saying that, since we are God’s children, we must all acknowledge this paternity by wearing a religious symbol. Now, someone is bound to decline wearing this symbol, given that it is not their truth that we

are God’s children. The religious man will finally counter that what seems true to him is that truth is not a matter of seeming, and that he is right, and that we must wear the religious symbol or else. It is easy to see how a conversation between solipsists can soon degenerate into the tyranny of one solipsist who says that his truth is *the* truth—a person whose belief is that only his belief should prevail, and that the world will be happier if everyone lives in his fantasy. This, incidentally, is the belief of collectivists like O’Brien.

In sum, Rorty does not allow for the fact that some people’s beliefs involve what beliefs can be held by other people. He dreams of a society in which truth is customized to the private individual, and ignores the basic anthropological fact that society is made of *shared* beliefs. This is why people cannot be careless and indifferent about what other people believe: because other people’s beliefs affect our lives. It affects my life that the O’Briens of the world think I should live in their belief systems. In fact, they are perfectly correct to think that their truth is expansive, because society is but the sum of how belief systems expand into one another.

But this expansiveness is not what makes O’Brien dangerous. O’Brien’s system is dangerous because it is *wrong*: wrong not because it is unitary (as Rorty might say), but because it forces me to say “two plus two is five” which I know to be wrong. O’Brien is dangerous because he wants me to knowingly violate the truth. O’Brien also knows that “ $2+2=4$ ” or else there would be no point in forcing Wilson to say that “ $2+2=5$.” What O’Brien wants is that we violate our own reason; that we become Rortian ironists who say one thing without meaning it. This may be well for people who like Rorty are comfortable doubting everything they say, and mean anything only conditionally. But what of people who like Winston don’t like the idea of creative or alternative facts? Well, Ingsoc has a solution for them, which is to torture and psychologically lobotomize them into being ironists of “ $2+2=5$ ” non-conviction. And Rorty should take more seriously the fact that there is no principle of fact or truth or logic or reason which can stop O’Brien from applying the thumbscrews to press his worldview. For if truth is the “interpretation” of a strongly creative individual, then it is part of that individual’s strongly creative will to graft itself on others. As O’Brien tells us, truth is power. It is what Big Brother says is the truth today. But since power is the ability to create people who do and say what you want, then truth, which is power, must be felt powerfully and the ideology that truth is power must grow ever more powerful to spread its truth. This is why there is no built-in reason why Postmodernism cannot slide into Ingsoc. It is only a matter of temperament that a follower of Rorty does not turn into O’Brien.

Rorty will acknowledge as much: “O’Brien the theorist” is a creature like himself: “well-informed, well-placed, well-adjusted, intelligent, sensitive, educated.”³⁹ He concedes that “O’Brien is a curious, perceptive intellectual—much like us,” that is, a relativist-subjectivist philosopher.⁴⁰ But this acknowledgment is really a run-up to Rorty’s vehement disclaimer: “our sort of people don’t do that sort of thing”—i.e., torture, terrorize, brainwash, dehumanize, enslave, and murder. Well may he protest. Looking at things historically and sociologically, we must say that it is precisely the type of people Rorty has just described, i.e., intellectuals, who do that sort of things. O’Brien is a composite of the

well-mannered, conversational, philosophical-minded Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot of the world. If large-scale horror has been unleashed on humankind in the twentieth century it is precisely by idea-merchants that are our sort of people. In short, history does not provide reassurance that a particular social type (our sort of people) stands in the way of the abuse of power. And why indeed would abuse of power be resisted when, as Rorty insists, no moral philosophy can deter or slow down totalitarianism? He is resolute that “a firmer resolve, or more transparent prose, or better philosophical accounts of man, truth, or history” can avert past and future totalitarian nightmares.⁴¹ To be clear: Rorty thinks that the moral discipline of saying what you mean is no safeguard against newspeak and doublethink; he thinks that a philosophy of the autonomy and inviolability of truth ($2+2=4$) does not immunize against a regime where 2 plus 2 make whatever the Supreme Leader feels like today; and he does not think that a better philosophical account of man would not make it harder for philosopher-kings like O’Brien to say that “men are infinitely malleable” and “the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it.”⁴² None of this, according to Rorty, would make one bit of difference.

It would not make one bit of difference because Rorty is mostly focused on exculpating his philosophy: he wants us to know that bending truth to power, i.e. postmodern subjectivism, is harmless and does not lead to O’Brien and Ingsoc and Stalin and Hitler. Of course, this insistence takes him into a bizarre self-invalidating philosophical stance: it is that ideas do not have consequences. Notwithstanding the built-in contradiction (why articulate a philosophy that has no purchase on reality?), this position puts history and society back into the hands of astrologers and diviners. How do O’Brien and Ingsoc and Stalin come about? Rorty’s wispy answer is, just luck. Ingsoc is “just the way things happen to have fallen out.”⁴³ It is not that sometimes people entertain false and therefore dangerous ideas; no, horrible societies just happen, like the weather. In other words, the tenets of Postmodernism are responsible for nothing. Sometimes, for no reason, they produce a liberal democracy where solipsists agreeably talk past one another; sometimes they produce a totalitarian hell. But there is no correlation between ideology and practice. It is all historical quantum randomness.

That is Rorty’s argument, and we would not begrudge him the pleasure of making it, were it not that he also insists it is Orwell’s too. The message of *1984*, Rorty would have us believe, is that men like O’Brien just happen, and that what they think does not cause better or worse social outcomes.⁴⁴ Against all evidence to the contrary, he insists that Orwell was a critic of “liberal individualism” and that he was a subjectivist who thought language to have no point of contact with reality.⁴⁵ Orwell, following Rorty’s re-description, has no fundamental problem with the Ingsoc speaker who proclaims one minute that Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, and the next that it has never been at war with Eastasia. It is just how things are, human beings and truths are malleable, and Orwell thought that we just have to put up with it and hope that everything comes out alright in the end. Ingsoc is not wrong. Ingsoc does not rise out of the immense potential for evil that consists of saying that truth is will power. This, according to Rorty, is what Orwell wanted to say. Orwell is, and has always been, a Rortian postmodernist.

Or as the ghost of Orwell might say, War is Peace, Ignorance is Strength, and Slavery is Freedom.

V

Hence, again, the disappearance of *1984*—a disappearance that is hardly a surprise given the weight of such counterfactual readings sampled above. Why indeed should we turn to *1984* for cautionary advice when it supposedly has nothing to say about the intellectual roots of tyranny? The novel is a story of what just sometimes happens, not of what is bound to happen sooner or later when we turn our backs on certain principles like truth, the dignity of the person, reality, decency, and honesty.

Of course, truth still has a knack of peeping through from under the interpretive redacting. If things were as Rorty says they are, and if Orwell were a postmodernist thinker who has nothing to counter O’Brien, then the novel would presumably enjoy greater popularity in the postmodern humanities. Orwell would be up the syllabus list alongside books which, like Plato’s *Republic* and Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, posit the desirability or inevitability of tyranny. That *1984* is absent from the classroom shows that revisionist performances such as Rorty’s fail to convince even those it is meant to reassure. Orwell languishes because he is still an adversary of postmodern subjectivism. He languishes because he is, in spite of all, relevant.

University of California, Santa Barbara

Notes

¹ Irving Howe, “1984: History as Nightmare,” *The American Scholar*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Spring, 1956), p. 194.

² George Orwell, *1984* [1949] (New York: Plume, 1983), p.182.

³ Irving Howe, “Utopia Reversed,” *The New Internationalist*, Vol. XVI, no. 6 November-December 1950, p. 364.

⁴ For the extrusion of Orwell from the canon of great English literature, see John Rodden, *Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of “St George” Orwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵ George Orwell, “Why I Write” [1946], <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/why-i-write/>

⁶ For the artful craft of Orwell’s realism, see Michael Clune, “Orwell and the Obvious,” *Representations*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (Summer 2009), pp. 30-55.

⁷ On the consistent campaign of denigration of Orwell and 1984, see Rodden (1989) draws a complete panorama of the political fortunes of Orwell's legacy. See also Ian Williams, "In Defense of Comrade P Smith: The Orwellian Treatment of Orwell" in Thomas Cushman and John Rodden, eds., *George Orwell into the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 35-58; and Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁸ Patrick Reilly, *Nineteen-eighty-four: Past, Present, and Future* (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishing, 1989).

⁹ Philip Goldstein, "Orwell as a (Neo)-Conservative: The Reception of 1984," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Winter, 2000), p. 45. Bernard Crick, "Reading 1984 as Satire," in Robert Mulvihill, ed., *Reflections on America, 1984: An Orwell Symposium* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1986) 15-45. Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Three Modern Satirists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); Carl Freedman, "Antinomies of Nineteen Eighty-Four," in Bernard Oldsey and Joseph Brown, eds., *Critical Essays on George Orwell* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), pp. 90-109. Satire is also the word favoured by Isaac Deutscher, "1984—The Mysticism or Cruelty" in Samuel Hynes, ed., *Twentieth-Century Interpretation of "1984"* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971). In fact, the occurrences of "satire" in the literature on 1984 are too many to survey.

¹⁰ Carl Freedman, *George Orwell: A Study in Ideology and Literary Form* (Dissertations G), p. 167.

¹¹ In Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (New York: Little Brown & Co, 1981), p. 502.

¹² See Arthur M. Eckstein, "George Orwell's Second Thoughts on Capitalism," in Jonathan Rose, ed., *The Revised Orwell* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992), pp. 191-205.

¹³ Crick quoting an internal memo of the original publisher of 1984, p. 503; Goldstein, p. 44; Deutscher, p. 41. Also Robert Paul Resch, "Utopia, Dystopia, and the Middle Class in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" *boundary 2* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), p. 155; for copious examples of criticism of Orwell's defection, see Jeffrey Meyers, ed., *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975); and especially Scott Lucas, *Orwell* (London: Haus Publishers Ltd, 2005), the biography of an unforgiven Orwell. See nearly all essays in Christopher Norris, ed. *Inside the Myth: Orwell-Views from the Left* (London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 1984).

¹⁴ See E.P. Thompson, "Inside *Which* Whale," in Raymond Williams, ed., *George Orwell: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp. 80-88.

¹⁵ Deutscher, p. 50. Orwell's neurotic pessimism, together with his second-rate talent, is also the object of Alok Rai, *Orwell and the Politics of Despair: A Critical Study of the Writings of George Orwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Many of the essays in Norris (1984) rest on one version or another of the Argument from Authority, not least among which Norris's own "Language, Truth, and Ideology: Orwell and the Post-War Left," pp. 242-62.

¹⁷ Goldstein, p. 47.

¹⁸ Anthony Easthope, "Fact and Fiction in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*," in Norris, pp. 263-85.

¹⁹ Erich Fromm, "Afterword" in Orwell, 1984, p. 292

²⁰ Thomas Pynchon, "Foreword," 1984 (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. xiii.

²¹ See Mark Crispin Miller, "The Fate of 1984," in *1984 Revisited: Totalitarianism in our Century*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) all the way to the very recent *1984 and Philosophy: Is Resistance Futile?*, ed. Ezio di Nucci and Stefan Storrie (Chicago: Carus Publishing,

2018) in which a third of the essays makes it its business to identify these contemporary masks of totalitarianism.

²² Erin Nash, "Non-State Enemies of Freedom," in di Nucci and Storrie, p. 39; p.37.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁴ Easthope (1984) is of the general opinion that, because "corporate capitalism" is undemocratic, it is as nefarious as Ingsoc. Note to Easthope: running a business, say a bakery or an academic career, does not mandate democratic decision-making procedures.

²⁵ Decker, p. 153.

²⁶ Tosco Fyvel, "1984 as a Satire on the Relations between Rulers and Ruled," in *And He Loved Big Brother: Man, State, and Society in Question*, ed. Schlomo Giora Shham and Francis Rosentiel (Strasburg: Council of Europe, 1984), p. 77.

²⁷ Sheldon Wolin, "Counter-Enlightenment: Orwell's 1984," in Mulvihill, p. 103.

²⁸ James M. Decker, *Ideology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.150; p. 154.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁰ Orwell, 1984, p. 71.

³¹ Richard Rorty, "The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: The University Press of Cambridge, 1989), p. 182.

³² Orwell, 1984, p.236; p. 247.

³³ Rorty, p. 177.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 176; p. 185.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176-7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴¹ Rorty, p. 182

⁴² Orwell, 1984, p. 240; p. 190.

⁴³ Rorty, p. 182.

⁴⁴ See especially pp. 184-5.

⁴⁵ See, p. 177: "I take Orwell's claim that there is no such thing as *inner* freedom, no such an 'autonomous individual' to be one made by historicist, including Marxist, critics of 'liberal individualism.' This is that there is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature, no built-in human solidarity, to use as a moral reference point. There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them—their ability to use language." And thus every pernicious idea that Orwell denounces in 1984, Rorty has him profess in his essay. O'Brien couldn't do it better.