

UNREALITY, TRUTH AND SUBJECTIVITY IN ORWELL'S *NINETEEN EIGHTY FOUR*

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David Dwan's impeccable article on 'Truth and Freedom in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*' begins by affirming that "The hero...defends a seemingly modest claim: 'there was truth and there was untruth'" (Dwan, 381). This claim of Winston's is evidently undermined by Ingsoc principles like "doublethink" and "reality control" throughout the novel. Yet despite the apparent simplicity of Winston's claim regarding the logically necessary distinction of truth and untruth, our protagonist makes an even more modest claim than the one Dwan suggests in his article: "Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimetres inside your skull" (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 32).¹ Winston has little to call his own in the totalitarian dystopia of London, Airstrip One of Oceania, 1984, yet until O'Brien has finally crushed him, he maintains the belief that amongst the unreal appearances and spectacular untruths which dominate and organise quotidian life there, there is still some part of him which he can call his own, an inviolable subjectivity which cannot be beaten, extracted or "doublethought" out of him. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between Ingsoc's distortion of reality, truth and the subjectivity which, even down to the last "few cubic centimetres", nightmarishly is seized and tortured out of Winston and Julia, the last Adam and Eve of dystopia. The true horror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s conclusion lies not in Winston's finding that objective, immutable and necessary truths like "two plus two is four" are malleable and relative in his 1984 dystopia, but rather that, in any case, he lacks the basic freedom to hold any belief to the contrary, even in the innermost depths of his private self (93). I argue that "Thoughtcrime" is synonymous with "subjectivity" in Winston's Oceania and seek to explore, in two respective sections, the ways in which Orwell represents the divide between objective and subjective truths, and in each section, to consider the collapse of those truths in to unreality and untruth. I argue in section one that the mass media dissemination of truths and facts, along with the principle of "doublethink" definitively isolates the individual and the individual's relation to reality and truths which exist objectively and necessarily. This isolation from reality and existential helplessness allows the totalitarian construction of a collective identity to flourish, and this, I argue in section two, must necessarily be at the cost of individual identity and the inward passion of authentic subjectivity. I will consider throughout my analysis the historical, philosophical and literary contexts and influences which crystallised dystopian visions like Orwell's during his writing in 1948.

"There was truth and then there was untruth" (*NEF*, 247) – Winston Smith's innate conviction is destroyed in both the objective and subjective senses of 'truth', the first of which is evidenced in the breakdown of objective truths, the dissolution of confidence in a reality which is ontologically secure and exists both outside of a subjective perceiver of appearances and outside

¹Hereafter NEF.

of the reach of the Party. In a considered reading of the novel's opening, we might judge Winston's faith in such an *a priori* reality, within the quotidian unrealities of life in 1984, to have been somewhat naïve. From the 'glass doors of Victory mansions' to the sensory bombardment of propagandist slogans and broadcasts, Airstrip One, London, appears to be the 'labyrinthine world' of surfaces and unreal, distorted appearances that Winston later proclaims it to be (*NEF*, 3 and 40 respectively).² Central to the distortion of truth employed by Ingsoc to maintain its state of order, and state of chaos where appropriate or useful, is the media, and the careful distribution of facts and fiction to the masses via the media. From the quotidian bombardments of Party members with unreal facts and revised truths, down to the very concept and convoluted logic of "doublethink" itself, one can evidence how objective truth has collapsed in Orwell's dystopia.

Winston's interior monologues, thoughts and musings in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are regularly interrupted by the barking of the telescreen's news updates. At regular intervals, the Party members are subjected to the latest statistics or facts of Oceania's latest battles, whether those are "battles of production", material expedition, or battles with foreign enemies (*NEF*, 67). The *telos*, or design of these broadcasts is to, through careful and continued repetition, to conquest the minds of Party members with the evidence that Ingsoc is a realized earthly utopia, or at least a society well on the way to that ultimate utopian ideal. Winston acknowledges the devastating repercussions of the media's saturation of the individual with unreal facts and statistics, through which "everything faded away into a shadow world in which, finally, even the date of the year had become uncertain" (*NEF*, 48). His own job in the Ministry of Truth involves the revising of history and facts, in order to manipulate the fluctuations of Miniplenty's meaningless figures, to discreetly change the Party's enemies of war from Eurasia to Eastasia, or to replace or implant correct future predictions in Big Brother's speeches, painting him further with the god-like trait of omniscience (67, 209, 45). Dwan argues that "Orwell's most alarming – and contentious – claim was that political leaders could control the rules of an epistemic space", and we find in the Party principle of "reality control" this mastery of the epistemic space of 1984 London (383, 40). In Ingsoc's Oceania, all that is knowable and to be known by Party members is filtered through media; anything that is even suggestive of something beyond this epistemic space is suppressed, or more usefully, paraded as heresy and grounds upon which Party members can be annihilated from existence.

Destruction and production play an equally pivotal role in Ingsoc's media: it is used to maintain what Hannah Arendt highlights in totalitarian regimes as a state of "total terror", but in the media's destruction of truths, facts and historical evidence, there is also unreality: a thorough destruction of truth must inherently entail that the lie appears as truth itself, the fiction must become indistinguishable from the facts (Arendt, 311). Real facts (or if not actual facts, previous revisions of 'facts') are disposed of through "memory holes", a name, like so many names chosen by Ingsoc, which inherently is contradictory and untruthful (44). Language, and the connection between the signifier and now insecure and unstable signified, is frequently

²Orwell's detailing of the 'glassy' buildings correspond with, and very arguably offer an homage to, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, which was indubitably the key literary influence on *Nineteen Eighty Four*. The significance of the glassy exteriors of the fictionalised London and OneState's buildings may be found in the irony of transparency: it appears that all is there to be seen, (almost) nothing is hidden from public view and thus all enters the public realm for all to see and judge truthfully. Behind such an ideology lies the totalitarian claim of truth-seeking and the motive for the goals of such regimes, to be achieved at any and all costs, and further enables unreality to thrive under the guise of transparency.

undermined by Ingsoc, the cruel irony of which is adopted by the central ministries of Oceania and exalted in their infamous slogan:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH (*NEF*, 6)

The media's manipulation of truth undermines, at any and all costs, objective truths or any potential threats to "the sacred principles of Ingsoc[:] Newspeak, doublethink, the mutability of the past" (*NEF*, 31). These factors give rise to the key phenomenon in the distortion of objective truth – "doublethink". Doublethink is the Party's means of ingraining the potential for untruth and unreal convictions firmly within its subjects, rupturing the individual's relation to basic reality. It entails the ability to hold two contradictory opinions simultaneously, uprooting logic and reality at its most fundamental premise. Orwell had considered such ideas prior to writing the novel in 1948, most notably from *Animal Farm* in 1945. The fundamental core of basic syllogistic logic is ruptured in the infamous assertion: "ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS", and it seems that the idea of political authority's adulterating of the rudimentary rules of reality is one that endured in Orwell's thought (*Animal Farm*, 97). From Winston's description of doublethink we find this continuity, and interest in the collapse of logic in particular:

the labyrinthine world of doublethink. To know and not know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it. (*NEF*, 41)

What fascinates Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems to be the relationship between the movement and flux of the totalitarian ideology and truth, or untruth, and this becomes nowhere more apparent than in the instance of logic and its demise in Orwellian dystopia, as Posner remarks: "The political significance of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*... is to depict with riveting clarity the *logic* of totalitarianism – not its practice or its prospects, but the carrying of its inner logic to extremes that are almost comic, though darkly so" (201). As Stalin, perhaps the most prominent inspiration for Orwell's Big Brother, once said, the true power of idea or ideology lies in the "irresistible force of [its] logic"; we find in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s exploration of the logic of totalitarian ideology an exegesis of the inherent unreality of such ideologies (Arendt, 319). While Posner is correct that Orwell spins this dissolution of logic's integrity to extremes, Orwell's elucidation of the effect of uprooting all meaningful facets of human understanding with the inherent untruths of such ideologies, and the subsequent defeat of authentic individual existence that follows, is necessarily intense.

Doublethink represents this absolute victory over the individual, who, with no objective standard or point of reference – "you could prove nothing... there was never any evidence" – can no longer form any verifiable convictions about reality (42). Hannah Arendt elaborates how the Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes of the inter-war and World War Two periods sought to sever the individual from an assured relationship with objective reality, and how this tactic was used to, as Orwell imagines in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, allow the full force of the regime's ideology to utterly consume its subjects (Arendt, 321). An example of such a destruction of objective standards for ideological purposes can be found in the lawlessness of Orwell's dystopian vision. Winston informs us that "nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any

laws” (9), which again correlates to Arendt’s analysis of the novel features of twentieth century totalitarian regimes: “its defiance of positive laws claims to be a higher form of legitimacy which, since it is inspired by the sources themselves, can do away with petty legality” (307). This “higher form of legitimacy” of which Arendt speaks of are historical and natural laws, and totalitarian regimes seek to eliminate the “middle-man” of positive laws in order to directly execute what they interpret as the laws of history or nature (for examples, dialectical materialism and its premise of a law of history, and racism and its premise of a law of nature). When objective standards of truth and fact can no longer be held by individuals to consolidate any dissidence to such regimes, it means that, like when O’ Brien chillingly professes to Winston “we make the laws of nature”, the political authority becomes the omnipotent creator of reality and truth (304).

The seriousness of Orwell’s conceptions of a dystopia where laws and reality are shrugged aside are no mere future vision or imagining, they are founded explicitly in the post-war context, when the truth about the preceding decade’s events was only beginning to unfurl and rear its ugly head. With this profound realization that objective and foundational cornerstones of society and reality, like the basic promulgation of legislation, could have been so easily undermined and distorted, came, particularly in visions of post-war dystopian fiction, subsequent doubts about how far political regimes in a technological age could distort all that was known to have been true and essential for society and culture. Orwell takes these fears to perhaps their furthest point in the aforementioned discussions between O’Brien and Winston, to an almost Cartesian questioning of the nature of reality and truth, and how both appear to the mind. Earlier in the novel Winston affirms, despite the apparent unreality of the times and the untruths which pervaded every aspect of quotidian life in Oceania, that “the solid world exists, its laws do not change” (93). Cruelly, O’Brien takes away this truth from Winston by rooting such convictions with doubt during the torture sections of the novel, and by distorting conceptually and phenomenologically, through torture and conditioning, the idea that objective fact and immutable laws of reality exist. We might dismiss the actual truth of O’Brien’s claims that “external reality, as you would call it – is not important...already our control over matter is absolute” (303), however what is truly significant about this section is that “external reality”, and the individual’s relation to it, can be ruptured by the careful addling of body and mind, that nothing, however private and innate, is beyond the vice-like grip of Big Brother. For Winston, the individual thinker and perceiver, it can be said thus that truth and reality have been broken down by the unreality and untruth. Doublethink is the Party’s means of ingraining the potential for untruth and unreal convictions within its subjects, rupturing the subject’s relation to basic reality, and through this eventual collapsing of Winston’s “few cubic centimetres” inside his skull, all subjective truths are also seized and distorted by the all-powerful guardians of Orwell’s dystopia.

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Soren Kierkegaard famously posits that “truth is subjectivity” (171), an aphorism which came from his disdain of the purely rational enquiry of Hegelianism in to truth about the absolute (*Geist*), which for Kierkegaard, held no meaning or reality for the individual. Winston similarly marks what he believes to be “a profound wisdom” in the thesis that “sanity is not statistical” (248) – subjectivity and inwardness (to use Kierkegaardian terms) are not subject to objective “truths” like statistics, which in Oceania we have seen to be fundamentally unreal and meaningless. Throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Winston’s doubts concerning objective truth and reality, his subjective truths (i.e. Winston’s confidence in indubitable principles of the world and his

certainty of the integrity of his own “few cubic centimetres”) remain relatively intact until his visit to Room 101. When Winston and Julia meet following their torture in Room 101, they are hollow, barren and devoid of the inward passions which united them previously (335-337). All traces of subjectivity have been hammered relentlessly and ultimately extracted, not in dissimilar fashion to Zamyatin’s protagonist of *We*, D-503, whose subjectivity, his malady of a “soul” has literally been extracted via a lobotomy-esque procedure (*We*, 224-225). Winston’s soul, as Gorman Beauchamp remarks, is the object of O’Brien’s desire, and through advanced psychological, physical and emotional torture, he gets it (Beauchamp, 295). The gruesome, boot-stamping wrath of the Party’s destruction, and probable “vaporization”, is imperative for O’Brien and for Ingsoc, precisely because the construction of the collective identity of the Party’s “we” comes at the full cost of the “I”, and any semblance of the individual’s identity or interiority (22). Perhaps this is the true cost of utopia for Orwell.

Central to the Party’s destruction of the “I” in order to cultivate the ideological “we” is the isolation of the individual, which it aspires to having Party members finding human comfort and passion only in the furore of the herd mentality and collective identity. Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes, through establishing and maintaining a state of “total terror”, sought to ruin relationships between individuals, creating an isolation and vulnerability which the regime’s ideology can subsequently exploit (312). Indeed Winston Smith, in the midst of the unrealities of the external world, seems to be an ideal example of this remote individual: ‘a sense of complete helplessness had descended upon him...to begin with he did not know with any certainty that this was 1984’ (9). Orwell consistently seeks to elucidate Winston’s abject seclusion, his “locked loneliness” (21): he is a “lonely ghost uttering a truth that nobody would ever hear” and realises that “he was alone, the past was dead, the future was unimaginable...what certainty had he that a single human creature now living was on his side?” (32). His relationship with Julia, while perhaps primarily a political act and a subversive endeavour at exercising his freedom, also provides Winston with an intimacy previously unknown in his tentative and confused inner life. He previously seeks intimacy in O’Brien, who mistakenly perceives an “unmistakeable message” (20) from O’Brien’s gaze, and explores the possibility of having one person in the world who he could relate to. A startling insight about the isolating of individuals from reality and other human beings arises from Winston’s inner confusion and doubt: ‘it was curious that he seemed not merely to have lost the power of expressing himself, but even to have forgotten what it was that he had originally intended to say’ (10). Newspeak, doublethink and “reality control” have not only doctored reality, but also have induced crippling doubt and confusion, where individuals have had all means of self-expression taken away. Similarly, Winston’s ill-founded hope that the proles may have the potential to overthrow the regime draws attention to this subjective inability to think or act authentically: “until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious” (81). Winston’s faith lies in the individual’s potential for subjective consciousness and inward becoming, yet in this circular impasse, his faith ultimately crumbles with this air of resignation. Bhabha remarks that doublethink “destroys the event of memory and the verifiability of history by arresting language and consciousness in an endless, frozen present” (32). In Winston’s inarticulacy and the proles absence of a real subjectivity or raised consciousness, Bhabha’s argument finds solid root in the text, and highlights succinctly the arrested language, logic and frozen temporal experience which are all characteristic of the doublethink and its unreality.

In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard famously remarks that “the crowd is untruth”: “a crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible”(114). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Party members are ‘impenitent’ in their zealous desire for the all-consuming ideological fervour of collective hate sessions aimed at enemies and veneration of Big Brother and Ingsoc, a collective feeling which even Winston easily gets caught up in (18). Due to the importance of the “herd” mentality to the regime, the inauthentic expression of collective character, the argument can be made that “thoughtcrime”, like “ownlife”, is synonymous with “subjectivity” in the novel. Through media bombardment, a herd mentality and the decline of subjectivity, individuals like Parsons are “stirred to vague enthusiasm by the bombardment of figures”, they can only stir within themselves “vague enthusiasm”, certainly not the inward passion necessary to hold firm inner convictions, consummate sexual desire or love, or start a revolution (69). These inward passions, even as thoughts that have not been actualised by the thinker, are the very essence of “thoughtcrime”: they constitute the seeds of a subjectivity which can lead to political acts, which while not always inherently dangerous in themselves (like the sexual act) are quintessentially revolutionary and must be quashed at all costs.

Winston and Julia’s secretive meetings and love-making become for both a means of expressing their innate freedom, and as a vehicle through which to strike a blow to the oppressive collectivism of a regime seeking to destroy subjectivity. One of Dwan’s key points in his aforementioned article is that “all attempts to demonstrate what truth is in the novel fail; yet truth remains the ground and even the goal of freedom nonetheless” (381). One could proceed to argue that in the case of truth *as subjectivity*, Winston and Julia’s realisation of their freedom comes in the form of love and the sexual act, the ultimate act of inward passion by two wilful individuals. Behind such passion lies the potential for the destruction of the mindless collectivism of Ingsoc’s dystopia, and along this line of thought we can begin to gain a sense of the true significance of the seeming absurdity of O’Brien’s desire to pervade and crush every aspect of Winston’s selfhood. This selfhood, as I sought to argue earlier in this paper, has been isolated and violated by the unreality and untruths which infiltrate every aspect of life in Oceania, and thus the psychological motives which led to both Winston and Julia’s desire to transcend such unreality and inauthenticity become apparent. Helpful here is an argument from Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, which Beauchamp draws attention to (Beauchamp, 288): “two people coming together for the purpose of sexual satisfaction, in so far as they seek solitude, are making a demonstration against the herd instinct, the group feeling” (Freud, 140-41). In the solitude of their countryside venue, their (apparently) private room above Mr. Charrington’s shop, Winston and Julia seek to usurp “the group feeling” and construct microcosms of a private world, worlds of interiority and seclusion where they can freely muse, love and hold some freedom, however fleeting. Following from Dwan’s formulation then, but proceeding from the Kierkegaardian position of truth as subjectivity, truth certainly is in the novel, as Dwan claims, the ground and goal of freedom. Subversive acts of freedom like constructing a private world or having a love affair prove to be the utmost expression of truth (as subjectivity), and while “all attempts to demonstrate what [objective] truth is in the novel fail” (Dwan, 381), the same cannot be said for subjective truth, and in this respect we may interpret Orwell’s novel in a much more affirmative respect with regard to truth and the human condition. Sunstein argues that “sexual freedom embodies freedom and individualism, and it is the deepest enemy of the totalitarian state” (241), and while the former clause of her argument

stands firm, the “deepest enemy of totalitarianism” is in fact “ownlife”, “thoughtcrime” and all of the forms of inward subjective thought and passion (as opposed to thoughtless submission to a collective herd-mentality) which are the foundation of all wilful individual action, sexual freedom being but one instance of this more comprehensive enemy of totalitarianism.

Winston stands, with Julia in rebellion, as the ‘last man’, they are the last human beings capable of stirring the inward passion and subjectivity necessary to commit a transgressive political act, a revolutionary blow (309). This is the ultimate horror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s conclusion, and indicates that Orwell saw “truth” and “untruth” in more complex ways than is often given attention to. From the outset London, Airstrip One of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is steeped in unreality, propaganda and a mind control that begins from youth. As evidenced, objective truths like logic, historical fact and necessary mathematical truths are all undermined by the relativism made possible by the omnipotence of Ingsoc, who can doctor reality for any given purpose which consolidates the movement of the ideology. Winston believes that “if the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, *it never happened* – that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death” (40). Cruelly, this proves to be untrue for Winston, and his fear of torture by the terrors that lay inside Room 101 outweighed his horror at the realisation that objective truths or events are malleable, revisable, and susceptible to the most fundamental doubt. I have suggested that Orwell’s exploration of truth and subjectivity is not quite so bleak; Winston and Julia, despite the inevitability of their fate, still possess the inward passion and determination to choose to exercise their freedom through transgressive political thought and action. If only for fleeting moments, they experience an authenticity which no other party member consumed by the mindless collectivism of ideology ever could. However Winston and Julia’s beliefs, subjective truths and convictions, their “few centimetres” of interiority are inevitably seized and defeated by an omnipotent “inner party” regime who have conquered, in Winston Smith, “the last man”. The prophetic warning of Orwell’s dystopian vision is clear: the cost of yielding to the ideologies of political tyranny, or to their propagandist distortions of truth is the freedom of individuals to speak, think and consciously make choices, and that these freedoms are the ones most worth defending at all costs.

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