

ORWELL, MARCUSE AND THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS

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THIS paper is a discussion of the contribution of George Orwell and Herbert Marcuse to our understanding of how language can be corrupted and the dangers inherent in such corruption. Implicit in the paper, however, is the assumption that while both men shared a deep concern for language, in their own use of it two more disparate writers could hardly be imagined. Indeed if Orwell were alive today I believe that an example of Marcuse's writing would very probably have joined those pieces of Laski and others who were strongly criticized by Orwell in his essay *Politics and the English Language*.

In short, what Orwell and Marcuse shared in spirit they did not share in practice. In this essay I am mainly concerned with their shared spirit and how it manifested itself in criticisms of our use of language. The paper is divided into three parts: I—Orwell and Language; II—Marcuse and Language; and III—The Importance of 'Form'.

ORWELL AND LANGUAGE

Expressing concern over what he called 'the huge dump of worn-out' and 'incompatible metaphors' which we habitually use to describe and justify political and other events, George Orwell, in his essay *Politics and the English Language*, notes how the phrase 'the hammer and the anvil' is 'now always used with the implication that the anvil gets the worst of it' when 'in real life it is always the anvil that breaks the hammer.'¹

This remains a typically Orwellian kind of observation, one which reflects the deep concern he had for the use of language and is one of the reasons why Orwell, even in his earlier works which were not particularly well-received, somehow stood above his contemporaries who, like himself, voiced their opposition against what they believed were the injustices of their time. Another reason why Orwell stood out was an early decision to settle, not without some nagging reservations, that basic tension between subjective and so-called objective reporting which afflicts most writers. The conflict was largely resolved in favour of a strongly perceived social responsibility. Orwell's growing disdain for writers who did not share this broad, albeit ill-defined, sense of responsibility was expressed in the *New English Weekly* in 1936 where he wrote:

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 enquires. 'My dear aunt,' the youth replies crushingly, 'one doesn't write *about* anything, one just writes.'

Whether or not he was entirely correct in his analysis, Orwell goes on to say,

¹ G. Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Penguin Books, 1957), p. 146.

This was a perfectly justified criticism of current literary cant. At that time, even more now, art for art's sake was going strong . . . 'art has nothing to do with morality' was the favourite slogan . . . To admit that you liked or disliked a book because of its moral or religious tendency, even to admit noticing that it *had* a tendency, was too vulgar for words.¹

In *Why I Write* (1946) Orwell asserted that 'the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude'² and that '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 generally.'³ In view of other novelists' work, however, such as that of Dickens, Eliot and Hardy, the question remains: why is Orwell still regarded as not only probably the most important political writer (in terms of fiction) of his own time but as one of the 'finest prose writers of any English age'?⁴

The major reason for his success is that Orwell, largely through his vigorous rejection of jargon, his outstanding honesty in criticizing his own political beliefs as well as others', and perhaps above all by his meticulous choice of fresh metaphor, developed in his writing an extraordinary ability to reduce the big political problems of his day, and thus perhaps of most days, down to concrete events and to interpret them in terms of personal (often intensely personal) everyday experience and so could simplify complex issues without making them appear simplistic.

In these ways he has not only contributed significantly to the common currency of despair (e.g., 'Big Brother', 'Newspeak', 'Doublethink') but has enabled us to see politics as a man-to-man, rather than a conceptual, relationship so that we may diagnose, through the help of more vivid imagery, some of the more general problems of politics.

Furthermore, while unashamedly stating his bias yet being determined to retain an unbiased eye, he began (by acting out his belief that 'the more one is conscious of one's political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one's aesthetic and intellectual integrity')⁵ to make it acceptable, even respectable perhaps, to approach the study of politics with moral conviction rather than with amoral intellectuality. He said in effect that a man who studies politics can, among other things, be angry yet truthful and even useful in writing and putting things right or at least in making them better than they are. In short he generally debunked the notion of value-free prose in political reporting.

Much of Orwell's overall contribution to political writing (and here I include the writings of political science as well as political reporting) and to the language in general stems from the care he showed in selecting imagery which would most accurately reflect his conceptions of politics. In *Burmese Days*, for example, it is the constancy of the naturalistic metaphor which is important to my mind and not so much whether the individual reader agrees or disagrees with Orwell's interpretation of imperialism. And it is this constancy which, insofar as it reflects his refusal to mix metaphors, offers an alternative to the haphazard or unwitting kind of acceptance of current politically orientated metaphors which Martin Landau

¹ G. Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by S. Orwell and I. Angus (Penguin Books, 1968), Vol. I, pp. 288-9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴ G. Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit* (Penguin Books, 1967), preface.

⁵ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. I, p. 28.

discusses in his recent work, *Political Theory and Political Science*. Warning us of the temptation to mix metaphors and our willingness to transport images from one discipline into another without properly examining their applicability Landau notes how a decisive if gradual change from the Newtonian, or 'mechanistic', image of the universe to the more 'organic' or naturalistic image of the Darwinian concept of nature resulted in the infusion of new biologically-based metaphors into the language of political science and how this infusion gave way to new models which, because 'a change in image is a change in method . . . profoundly affect the "received axioms" of the past'.¹

In support of his view Landau cites Wilson's 'ringing protest' that 'government' for example

is not a machine, it is a living thing. It falls not under the theory of the universe, but under the theory of organic life. It is accountable to Darwin, not to Newton. It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life.²

Landau also argues how together with the misapplication of the mechanistic metaphor and Newton's methods of reasoning in the nineteenth century the study of politics was largely 'mechanistic in form, and moral in character' wherein the arguments of experience were considered subordinate to the arguments of logic. But he says, 'The Darwinian metaphor overthrew all of this', and under its influence there emerged a 'new empirical temper' together with a pragmatic and evolutionary approach. Even so, Landau, in reviewing how scientific models are hijacked into the language of political science, writes that 'it is difficult to fathom Dahl's statement that "the impact of the scientific outlook has been to stimulate caution rather than boldness in searching for broad, explanatory theories."' ³ On the contrary Landau argues that 'We [meaning political scientists] possess such a vast number of theories, models, paradigms, concepts, schemes, frames of reference . . . as to make one dizzy'.⁴ After writing, 'Where the interests of science require a movement from natural languages to technical languages, from metaphors to models, we tend to reverse the process' and in what seems an echo of Orwell he goes on to say that 'We frequently take a model which is clear in its literal domain and strip it of all clarity as we transfer it into politics. We take a mechanical, or biological, or communication model and render relatively clear concepts as ambiguous as marble-cake'.⁵

In any event it is important to note that Orwell was one of the first to warn not only the political scientist as Landau does but political writers at large that 'once you have the *habit*' (italics mine) of using phrases invented by someone else (such as 'white man's burden') without examining the appropriateness of the image then 'if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought' because 'a bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better'.⁶ And

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.⁷

¹ M. Landau, *Political Theory and Political Science: Studies in the Methodology of Political Inquiry* (New York, 1972), p. 92.

² *Ibid.*, p. 93. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 219. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 220. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁶ Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, p. 154. ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

In passing, however, one must acknowledge that in constantly reflecting, for example, the Hobsonian belief that economic imperialism was synonymous with imperialism in his novel *Burmese Days*, Orwell no doubt succumbed in part at least to that 'habit' which he warned us about, one which, as Bronowski says, 'makes us think the likeness obvious'.¹ And it is true that the likeness in this instance between economic imperialism and imperialism tended to exclude the possibility of sincerity amongst those who did espouse what was claimed to be the moral obligation of the 'white man's burden'.

Nevertheless, despite the excessive scorn which the 'white man's burden' now receives, the fact that the phrase can no longer be used to camouflage the profit motive, however small or large a part it played, is due in part to those like Orwell who were prepared to attack what they saw as the habitual invocation of the metaphor.

With this in mind one could argue that Orwell's contribution to English prose in general took the form of an unrelenting attack on the *phrases of pretence*, particularly in the sphere of politics where he believed such phrases were used largely in the 'defence of the indefensible' which for him included the 'continuance of British rule in India, the Stalinist purges and deportations and the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan'. Orwell argued that such actions could 'be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face . . . thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness',² a vagueness which together with 'sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing'.³ By way of example, he noted in 1946 how 'defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification',⁴ a word which was especially worth our scrutiny because of its daily use in the Vietnam War. Noting his eagerness to make the point about mixing metaphors one can be excused for thinking that Orwell's essay on *Politics and the English Language* is somewhat tendentious, yet when one sees, for example, in Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure* (despite the otherwise lucid prose) how the hitherto impersonal image of the 'machine' has been so corrupted that the author can confidently write, 'In our prevailing impersonal society, the machine [political machine] through its local agents, fulfills the important social *function of humanizing and personalizing all manner of assistance* to those in need',⁵ one realizes that Orwell's concern bears repeating. This example, however, is not so much a criticism of any one individual as a commentary upon what seems to be the general willingness or tendency of social scientists, among others, to condone the continued use and acceptance of inappropriate metaphors.

Having said this it is important to understand that while Orwell in his novels as elsewhere underscored his attack on gibberish (particularly in *Politics and the English Language*) by writing straightforward English his attack should not be taken as one upon what is commonly referred to as the 'jargon' of the social sciences. In truth, of course, the meaning of jargon is 'gibberish or meaningless words and phrases' but it is precisely through the habit of using the word 'jargon' so often when we mean 'terminology' that it is possible to misconstrue Orwell's

¹ Landau, op. cit., p. 81.

² Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, p. 153.

³ Ibid., p. 145. ⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

⁵ R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, First revised edition (Glencoe, Ill., 1963), p. 74.

attack as one against 'terminology'. The lesson he teaches us is simply that the use of terminology should always be a highly conscious act, particularly when, as Landau points out, so much terminology is imported wholesale from one discipline to another. Thus hopefully habit will not result in a blurring of precision in analogy allowing what Landau refers to as the "'as if" proposition' becoming an "'it is" statement of supposed fact'.¹ The previous reference to the hammer and anvil is a case in point where, through sheer habit, the analogy has not only been blurred but quite simply turned on its head. In his earlier novels Orwell, well aware of the dangers of living with the lies of unconscious propaganda, warned of a time to come when 'all the gramophones would be playing the same tune.'² This warning of course became the central thrust of his later and better known works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where he continually raises fears that through our surrender to words and to inverted and distorted analogy we may learn to tolerate the most flagrant and illegitimate imposition of power.

It is important to note that Orwell's concern with clarity and conciseness should not be cause for thinking that he wanted to strip the language (as Syme does in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*). Rather, he was advocating a retreat from the habitual repetition of words, a repetition which in time would rob them of their emotional meaning and subtlety. With this in mind it is interesting that while what has been called 'Nixonese' is so plainly impoverishing the language its trademark is complexity and rather than reducing the vocabulary which the reading public must unconsciously store, some White House officials involved in the Watergate scandal seem committed to the proliferation of phrases as a camouflage of their real intent. And while Newspeak is 'the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year'³ so as to affect our range of meaning by being designed to 'diminish the range of thought' and 'cutting the choice of words down to a minimum',⁴ Nixonese seems designed to diminish the range of thought by increasing, and perhaps more importantly by *rapidly* increasing, the number of words. It is analogous to taking a child into a store which has only one candy available and then taking him into another where there are so many candies on display that he is wracked by indecision. In the first case there is no choice and in the latter, too much. The first is designed to eliminate confusion, the second to perpetuate and magnify it. The common result of the two superficially different methods is the passivity that comes from not being sure what certain words and phrases such as 'protective reaction strike' mean and being persuaded of the legitimacy of a completely different or opposite meaning so that 'plumbers' means 'burglars' and freedom can be thought of as slavery. And democracy can become what Bernard Crick calls 'perhaps the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs',⁵ largely because (as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) the word has at times been 'established for the sovereign purposes of war at the cost of stripping it of any real political meaning'.⁶ (This

¹ Landau, *op. cit.*, p. 228. A more recent example of how word meanings can suffer over time appears in the January 1972 issue of *Comparative Politics* where, in their article 'Political Clientelism and Development: A Preliminary Analysis', Lemarchand and Legg, noting an obvious contradiction in terms, write, 'Indeed, if one is to subscribe to the argument advanced by Fallers and Lombard, feudal relationships can only obtain among equals (i.e., among nobles).'

² Orwell, *Burmese Days* (Penguin Books, 1967), p. 40.

³ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Penguin Books, 1954), p. 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵ B. Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Penguin Books, revised edition, 1964), p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

does not mean, however, that the prescriptive and descriptive meanings of a word cannot, or indeed should not, co-exist but simply that the two meanings should not be confused.)

Finally the confusion wrought by such Nixonese is evident upon discovering that a word once invested with emotive appeal has become so worn through repetition that it now seems devoid of any emotion at all. Consequently Winston Smith and Julia, the lovers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are condemned to search in vain for words to express whatever they are still able or rather allowed to feel.

It is worth noting that insofar as much of Orwell's importance rests on his work as an essayist and journalist rather than a novelist he nearly always took care to define his terms if there was any possibility of confusion in the reader's mind. In March of 1944 he wrote that the word 'Fascism' as used then was 'almost entirely meaningless', noting that he had heard the word applied to 'farmers, shopkeepers, Social-Credit, corporal punishment, fox-hunting, bull-fighting, the 1922 Committee, the 1941 Committee, Kipling, Gandhi, Chiang Kai-Shek, homosexuality, Priestley's broadcasts, Youth Hostels, astrology, women'¹ and 'dogs'. Orwell's observation is still timely, for the word 'Fascist' in particular is surely one of the vaguest and most pejorative terms (as opposed to the laudatory word, 'democratic') used in North America today—used loosely not only by the general public but by political scientists who should know better.

Orwell goes on to say that by 'Fascism' people 'mean, roughly speaking, something cruel, unscrupulous, arrogant, obscurantist, anti-liberal and anti-working-class'² thus making Fascism more of an emotional word than one which accurately or even approximately describes a political structure, party or policy. His concluding advice is also relevant these days, namely that 'All one can do for the moment is to use the word with a certain amount of circumspection and not, as is usually done, degrade it to the level of a swear word.'³

In an essay, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell showed how policy, in this case the British Labour Party's foreign policy, could so easily be influenced, if not revealed as being barren of any intent, by the unconscious and uncritical use of well-worn words. He writes that

while the standard of living of the trade-union workers, whom the Labour Party represented, depended indirectly on the sweating of Indian coolies . . . at the same time the Labour Party was a Socialist Party using Socialist phraseology, thinking in terms of an old-fashioned anti-imperialism and more or less pledged to make retribution to the coloured races.⁴

In short, he was attacking an internationalist sounding language which was in fact sabotaged and made nonsense of by national realities.

While Orwell hoped that the decay and corruption of language might be rescued by some fellow conscientious journalists he recognized with dismay that many of them were the arch enemies of a fresh and revitalized language. After recalling in *Homage to Catalonia* how the *New Statesman* in its enthusiastic reporting of the Spanish Civil War wrote how Fascist barricades were 'made of the bodies of living children' he observes wryly that living children are 'a most unhandy thing to make barricades with'.⁵

¹ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. III, p. 138.

² *Ibid.*, p. 138. ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵ Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin Books, 1962), p. 65.

Orwell's pessimistic vision of the modern tendencies of life and language of course culminated in the often stark horror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The ultimate corruption of political and indeed all language here is found in Big Brother's aim of making it possible, through the technique called 'doublethink', for the public to hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously.¹ The public aside, this technique, being a conscious act, also allows the administrators, such as those in the White House perhaps, 'to tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient'.² In short, 'doublethink' would conceivably allow the administrator to tell a lie (an 'inoperative statement') without 'a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt'.³ And then, as Spegele suggests in his article *Fiction and Political Theory*, when there is no 'thought' as we understand it, no awareness of intent, the term 'freedom' insofar as it implies choice of alternative action will have no meaning.⁴

While it is convenient, and at least fashionable at the moment, to focus upon the Nixon administration's corruption of language it should be remembered that we are all, no matter what our training (indeed often because of it), in part at least perpetrators as well as victims of the euphonic phrase which leads us into the easy comfort of vague sentences wherein words such as democracy and liberty, and less frequently used words, reside unattended by any kind of responsible qualification.

Orwell in an unusual display of optimism believed that the decay of our language is reversible, noting how several 'silly words and expressions were killed by the jeers of a few journalists'.⁵ This optimism belies or at least is at odds with his pessimistic view of the modernizing world where modernity was too often equated with virtue and where the ever-growing tendencies towards increased centralization and technological specialization would make the writer seem as if 'he is sitting on a melting iceberg . . . an anachronism . . . as surely doomed as the hippopotamus'.⁶

Orwell's vision of a gradual slide towards totalitarianism appears less exaggerated when one notes how the modernization of information services in our present society has reached such a high stage of speedy sophistication that any time-consuming attempt to sort out so-called facts from the avalanche of words and data is constantly thwarted by a race against ever creeping deadlines and by wire services which impose their own kind of Newspeak on their employees. Indeed Butler in *The Final Triumph of Nixonese* notes how 'It's obviously cheaper for our [Canadian] newspapers to reprint U.S. wire copy than to employ their own correspondents or re-write editors'.⁷ Incidentally this may very well account for the unexpected success of several underground papers in North America which, while offering an alternative to the monopoly of wire services, are unfortunately busy inventing their own brand of gibberish wherein a phrase such as 'Rip-off' can mean anything from premeditated robbery to unintentional inflation.

As with the stereotypes of imperialism in *Burmese Days* and the subservient animals in *Animal Farm*, Orwell attributed the longevity of Big Brother and Newspeak to the mass of 'gramophone' minds whose sense of security is guaranteed by

¹ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 171.

² Ibid., p. 171. ³ Ibid., p. 174.

⁴ R. D. Spegele, 'Fiction and Political Theory', *Social Research*, Spring 1971, p. 137.

⁵ Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, p. 155.

⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

⁷ R. Butler, 'Watergate: the Final Triumph of Nixonese?' *Canadian Forum*, August 1973, pp. 12-13.

the growth (and form) of monolithic order and modernization. These are the people who allow the ruling elite of *Burmese Days*, for example, to maintain 'its solidarity not by physical power but solely by the strength of an amazingly inflexible public opinion.'¹

It is particularly the gramophone mind listening to the same tune and ready made phrases which anaesthetize the brain² which Orwell warned us to guard against lest our familiarity with the tune's rhythm and lyrics lull us into the dumb acceptance of our own brand of Newspeak, like those who, during the Korean War, actually started to believe as a result of the sheer repetition of Western broadcasts that North Koreans and South Koreans were different races, or like those who still believe that the phrase 'the free world' does not include governments whose repressive measures against individuals tend toward a barbaric kind of totalitarianism.

In showing us how corrupt language could become the most perverse and pervasive form of social tyranny, Orwell demonstrated quite clearly how the choice of one's vocabulary may well be the most basic freedom we possess, not the freedom of speech so much as the freedom and indeed the obligation to say what we mean, for in our choice of words we construct our own constraints and limitations not only of thought but ultimately of action.

The choice of alternative action too can only occur if such action is conceivable and this is only possible if different behaviour can be remembered. Thus Orwell warned in *The Prevention of Literature* that 'from the totalitarian point of view history is something to be created rather than learned'³ (or remembered) so that 'he who controls the past controls the future.'⁴

To this end the mark of the totalitarian state, of course, is its rigid control of the 'form' of language, particularly the control of metaphor which, as an expression of conscious comparison, requires detailed knowledge of the past. And if we do not understand metaphors from the past, as children are often perplexed by old nursery rhymes, natural curiosity nevertheless demands that they be explained. The totalitarian state, like a tired parent, can of course reply that it does not know what this or that 'old' metaphor means, but to do so would be an admission of fallibility and as Orwell notes, 'A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible.'⁵ If it cannot achieve such infallibility by altering the past and presenting it in a desensitizing language like Newspeak then it can fall back on the process of doublethink.

While such control of metaphor, and language in general, does worry the Solzhenitsyns of a totalitarian state many scientists, as Orwell charged in 1946, do not appear overly concerned (superficial protestations notwithstanding) and 'do not see that any attack on intellectual liberty, and on the concept of objective truth, threatens in the long run every department of thought'.⁶ Of course not all scientists fail to see the danger, perhaps sharing Robert J. Oppenheimer's belief that

the use of analogy [largely through metaphor]—adapting a familiar mode of description to a new situation, finding the points of difference, and ultimately determining whether anything remains to the analogy—seems essential to the progress of understanding.

¹ Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit*, p. 76.

² Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 167.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴ 'Solzhenitsyn: an Artist Becomes an Exile', *Time*, 25 February 1974, p. 32.

⁵ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 86.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Along the same lines, mathematician C. A. Coulson has remarked that the classical view of scientific method as one of fact gathering, hypothesis, and experimental verification, is 'at best a half-truth, and at worst a travesty of the way scientists themselves work', while physicist P. B. Lindsay notes that 'The intuitive power of the mind in dreaming dreams is the essential basis for the advance of science.'¹

Without metaphor (the chief vehicle of analogy), the dream, political, scientific or whatever (as Freud has so ably shown) is as vacant as a chemist's vague notion of a pure gas. With the freedom not only to choose, but to choose from a wide range of analogies, the notion takes form, becomes a concept, and the idea of a particular metamorphosis is capable of being shared. The threat of tightly controlled language, then, not only affects free speech of political actors (and ultimately their mobility) but in its gradual withdrawal of various metaphors it restricts, through the formation of officially sanctioned paradigms, future scientific investigation. Only those metaphors which reflect 'correct' political views are allowed so that under Hitler, racial theory was perverted; under Stalin, Lysenko's genetic views were afforded pre-eminence; while Lenin's 'Materialism and Empirio-Criticism' became the mandatory basis for any aspiring psychologist's enquiry in the Soviet Union.

Orwell, however, was careful to remind us that

to be corrupted by totalitarianism one does not have to live in a totalitarian country. The mere prevalence of certain ideas can spread a kind of poison that makes one subject after another impossible for literary [and ultimately other] purposes.²

MARCUSE AND LANGUAGE

In contemporary American society Marcuse (whose prose would almost certainly have appalled Orwell) notes much the same phenomenon where, for whatever reasons, the prevalence and pervasiveness of one metaphor, that of the machine, affects all facets of life, creating a one-dimensional man in whose state 'the people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.'³ In this sense at least we approach the dulled spirit of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where the mechanistic-organic antithesis is dead, leaving the machine the victor, and where the only way in which the metaphor of growth (of culture), once the 'oldest' and 'most powerful' in the Western tradition,⁴ can be tolerated is to serve as a description of how bigger machines 'grow' from smaller ones. (But like a god Big Brother does not grow—he remains the same.)

As in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the debilitating effect upon the individual of this one-dimensional society which 'seems to be apprehensive of the subversive contents of memory . . . which breaks, for short moments, the omnipresent power of the given facts' is that, through what Marcuse calls its 'functional . . . anti-historical language',⁵ it does not even allow the possibility of an alternative way of life to occur in thought. And, although there are choices to be made, they are limited to choices of consumer products. Marcuse's 'hypnotic formula'⁶ and Orwell's phrase which 'anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain'⁷ alike blur the distinction between

¹ See J. F. Davidson, 'Political Science and Political Fiction', *Journal of the American Political Science Association*, December 1961, p. 854.

² Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 90.

³ H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964), p. 9.

⁴ R. A. Nisbet, *Social Change and History* (New York, 1969), p. 7.

⁵ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 167.

wants and needs, between 'ought' and 'is', so that thoughts and things are considered nothing more than products of a consumer society.¹ And for Marcuse 'the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully co-exist [doublethink] in indifference.'² In what he sees as the '*suppression of history*'³ 'in a societal universe of operational rationality' Marcuse notes that 'A universe of discourse in which the categories of freedom have become interchangeable and even identical with their opposites is not only practising Orwellian or Aesopian language but is repulsing and forgetting the historical reality—the horror of fascism; the idea of socialism; the preconditions of democracy; the content of freedom.'⁴

Marcuse's heroes in the *Essay on Liberation* are those who reject the 'Establishment's' language, particularly its form, which they implicitly recognize as an instrument enforcing intellectual servitude so that 'the old historical concepts [like "democracy"] are invalidated by up-to-date operational redefinitions.'⁵ For Marcuse this is the 'language of total administration'.⁶ For Orwell it is the language of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Total administration for both is primarily enforced by the use of a language which, because it corrupts thought so completely, is used not only to eliminate the tension between ideas but to create above all a sense of order. Of course it is not only a totalitarian society which is imbued with a drive towards symmetry, and Orwell talks about all who write when he discusses such 'tricks' as 'verbal false limbs which in such phrases as "render inoperative" . . . "prove unacceptable" . . . "exhibit a tendency to"' are deliberately used to give a sentence the 'appearance of symmetry'.⁷ (Symmetry of language is of course a particular form of the general order.) In this regard Orwell writes that 'the key note is the elimination of simple verbs',⁸ verbs which *alone* would disclose plainly what the speaker or writer had in mind.

His observation that 'the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active' to soften the blow of hard, uncluttered prose is amply demonstrated by the recent case of alleged corruption in Italy when in answer to the charge that 'the oil companies were supporting all the major political parties in Italy' the head of Esso Italiana replied that it would be nearer the truth to say that 'all the major political parties in Italy were being supported by the oil companies.'⁹ Orwell's added comment that 'wherever possible the noun constructions are used instead of gerunds ("by examination of" instead of "by examining")'¹⁰ is reflected in Marcuse's statement that nowadays 'The noun governs the sentence in an authoritarian and totalitarian fashion, so that the sentence becomes a declaration to be accepted—it repels demonstration, qualification, negation of its codified and declared meaning.'¹¹ (My italics.) The culmination of such a process is an acceptance of the slogans 'Freedom is Slavery', 'War is Peace', and 'Ignorance is strength'.¹²

Orwell's examples of phrases used to 'anaesthetize the brain' or Marcuse's

¹ It is interesting how even highly creative movies these days are 'marketed' as this or that particular studio's 'product'.

² Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 61.

³ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 97–8.

⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, pp. 159–60.

⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

⁹ CBC radio report, March 1974. Unfortunately the name of the program cannot be traced.

¹⁰ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 160.

¹¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 87.

¹² Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 25.

'hypnotic formula' may well serve as the cushions of transition until such stark Nineteen Eighty-Fourish sentences are possible or when, in Marcuse's words, there is a 'syntax in which the structure of the sentence is abridged and condensed in such a way that no tension, no "space" is left between the parts of the sentence'.¹

Marcuse believes that because of such language

the fact that the prevailing mode of freedom is servitude, and that the prevailing mode of equality is superimposed inequality is barred from expression by the closed definition of these concepts in terms of the powers which shape the respective universe of discourse.²

If this is true then how can you talk to politicians of servitude if, in their own frame of reference (as 'thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought'),³ servitude is synonymous with freedom? Marcuse adds that 'the result is the familiar Orwellian language ("peace is war" and "war is peace", etc.).'⁴ Reflecting Orwell's belief that one need not be in a totalitarian state to be corrupted by a totalitarian mentality, Marcuse observes that such Orwellian language

is by no means that of terroristic totalitarianism only. Nor is it any less Orwellian if the contradiction is not made explicit in the sentence but is enclosed in the noun. That a political party which works for the defense and growth of capitalism is called 'Socialist,' and a despotic government 'democratic,' and a rigged election 'free' are familiar linguistic—and political—features which long predate Orwell.⁵

Marcuse is right of course in that Orwell had no special claim to the discovery of corruption in language, but his importance lies in his recording of his insights into the ways in which we *unconsciously* as well as consciously corrupt it. But if Marcuse has echoed some of Orwell's warnings he has also added to Orwell's contribution. In particular he charges that 'the syntax of abridgement proclaims the reconciliation of opposites by welding them together in a firm and familiar structure' so that it became quite acceptable to talk of a 'clean bomb' and a 'Luxury Fall-Out Shelter',⁶ and to 'advertize that peace is really the brink of war'.⁷ Along the same lines if, as Marcuse notes, Edward Teller can be called 'father of the H-bomb'⁸ perhaps the introduction of Big Brother could be managed without the highly conscious machinations of a future Oceania elite.

Marcuse's concern about the dominance of a highly functionalized language in creating 'the authoritarian identification of person and function' is evident in his remarks about the use of the 'inflectional genitive' (e.g., Virginia's Byrd, Defense's MacNamara) through which individuals are made to appear as no more than appendages of their organizations, like the levers of a machine.⁹

On the matter of abridgement Orwell writes that while 'Comintern is a word that can be uttered almost without taking thought . . . *Communist International* is a phrase over which one is obliged to linger at least momentarily.'¹⁰ Marcuse also notes that abridgement (AFL-CIO, NATO, SEATO, NORAD) also conveniently excludes larger numbers of people, an exclusion which, if it became generally

¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 86.

² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 167.

⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-9.

⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 248, Appendix.

known, might raise serious criticism of the organizations. I do not mean to suggest (as Marcuse does)¹ that such devices may be deliberately designed to deceive the public, but rather suggest that the existence of such abbreviations, etc. does encourage if not deceit, then at least an unconscious shift away from commitments to concreteness. If we combine the inflectional genitive, abridgement and hyphenation which together reinforce the appearance of likeness (e.g., 'military-scientific') often between two quite different terms, we could very easily end up with something like 'Spain's Franco, the father of the garotting-pacification program'. If such phrases are repeated enough they could soon evade our consciousness and sink into unconscious acceptance, particularly if the process is aided by both the avalanche of information we are faced with today and the eagerness of those like Syme in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who declares, 'Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives' (the shades of meaning) and who chides Winston Smith by informing him that he does not 'grasp the beauty of the destruction of words'.² It is Syme who also proclaims that 'Orthodoxy means not thinking . . . Orthodoxy is unconsciousness' and, presaging Marcuse's 'hypnotic formulas', we read of the 'slow rhythmical chant of B-B! . . . B-B! . . . B-B!—over and over again . . . an act of self hypnosis, a deliberate drowning of consciousness.'³

For Marcuse, his heroes, in rejecting the 'Establishment's' totalitarian language of a one-dimensional society, demonstrate the power of negative thinking, of always posing the contradiction, a power which manifests itself through the 'methodical reversal' of the meanings of words.⁴ Consequently such words as 'soul' signify the presence of appetite rather than 'the immaterial part of man'.⁵ For Marcuse this rebellion against 'Establishment' meanings signals the consciousness of a people's servitude, a servitude which, just as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is made possible by the creation, through the language, of a climate of permanent crisis. The latter for Marcuse is symbolized by the creation of a permanent enemy 'within' the system as well as without.⁶ For the mass of victims in Orwell's Big Brother world, Goldstein is the enemy who is kept alive by Newspeak and is held responsible by the established order for keeping Oceania in a constant state of mobilization. The psychic mobilization, as much as the material mobilization inherent in such a situation, seems ripe for a military-based alliance between big business and government whose total administration is made possible by the inability of the mass of people to even suspect that the 'Enemy' might be non-existent. In these circumstances a Goldstein becomes the only possible metaphor for 'ungood'.

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'FORM'

Unfortunately Marcuse's heroes do not negate the corruption of language by further corrupting the corruption. They create the kind of drift away from the concreteness of language which Orwell warns us about in *Politics and the English Language* and create a verbal padding all their own. However, because of what Marcuse calls 'the absence of a class basis' for rebellion against the 'Establishment',⁷

¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 94. Note how the lack of periods in such expressions as NATO encourages an unawareness of the fact that N.A.T.O. is really an abbreviation.

² Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 45.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston, 1969), p. 35.

⁵ H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, eds., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford, 1964), p. 1223.

⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 51.

⁷ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 79.

the 'linguistic pattern' or form of this 'anti-establishment' language in its reaction against 'reports of heavy fighting in the "demilitarized zone" or of persons being injured in a "non-violent demonstration"'¹ at once affords a strong sense of identification and membership to those who are busy fighting what they perceive to be society's general corruption.

This is not to claim that 'linguistic pattern' or 'form' is unimportant to the adherents of linguistic (and general) rebellion. On the contrary I would argue, for example, that the meaning of the word 'soul' which Marcuse says has 'been lily-white ever since Plato'² is as assiduously peddled by radicals as certain so-called 'Establishment' words. An unfamiliarity with form may single one out as quickly in a meeting of the New Left as it would at the local church bazaar or in a faculty club. Indeed for Marcuse the 'new sensibility' which (in its allegiance to the organic metaphor rather than to the mechanistic) 'expresses the ascent of the life instincts over aggressiveness and guilt'³ would be as concerned with the 'form' of what it would produce as with the content.⁴ And, just as Marcuse recalls how

It has been said that the degree to which a revolution is developing *qualitatively* different social conditions and relationships may perhaps be indicated by the development of a different language: the rupture with the continuum of domination must also be a rupture with the vocabulary of domination,⁵

it may well be that the change in the 'form' of language is as often a prelude to, as a result of, a change in other forms (e.g., art and manufacturing). It is puzzling, for example, to those more attuned to traditional literary forms to comprehend the layout of 'Earth Catalogues' which are so unlike the traditional reference books in their organization.

In the revolution of language at present it is interesting, and perhaps no accident, how often the 'Establishment' generally tends to favour the passive tense while the revolutionary favours the active tense. The latter, together with hyperbole, is presumably calculated more to shock the mass from its complacency, and through sheer repetition to create a shared sense of grievance and solidarity amongst the alienated. In this way a new 'form' is a new cultural cement expressing the solidarity and 'the joy of rebellious victims, defining their own humanity against the definitions of the masters', against the 'beautiful in this culture, against its all too sublimated segregationist, orderly, harmonizing forms'.⁶ The importance of 'form' in maintaining or creating tradition cannot be stressed too strongly, for while the sense of familiarity which it affords an individual may desensitize him and keep him locked in an old sensibility which learned to accept concentration camps and taught people to write neat, businesslike letters about the best ovens for burning other people, it also affords the individual security. 'Form' also affords the bureaucrat a guide to action and a government a continuity of policy so that one bureaucrat can become as good or bad as another. Adherence to form is also the mark of the propagandist for in a modern sea of words, particularly during times of crisis, it is often 'form' alone which enables party supporters to quickly, if unthinkingly, identify with the actions of their party. On the one hand, then, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we have the severe inhibitions cemented by Newspeak in its single dimension of blind obedience

¹ Ibid., p. 74.

² Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 36.

³ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 23.

⁴ Ibid., p. 24. ⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶ Ibid., p. 46. Note that 'this culture' means the 'Establishment'.

and on the other, the solace afforded by the familiarity of hymns in *A Clergyman's Daughter*.

One could argue, I think, that amidst rapid technological change the current craze for nostalgia is but the latest retreat into the sanctuary of known forms. Even movie fans seeking the sheer escapism of a supposedly highly imaginative art form ask, 'What's left?' (i.e., to imagine) when they are faced with the almost total lack of restraint which either properly or improperly characterized older forms. It is this lack of restraint which gives us the freedom to become first totally satisfied and then totally bored. This is perhaps not too disturbing unless, through ignoring older forms in our desire to throw off our repressions, we feel, in time, insecure. If we then assume that such insecurity stems from the absence of restraint we may well seek security (in accordance with Erich Fromm's thesis) by surrendering to *external* restraint, such as the repression exercised by Big Brother. This would mean a surrender to Syme's orthodoxy of unconsciousness being constantly reinforced by Newspeak. One-dimensional man then becomes one-form man, even though the form may vary from country to country. And when the word *transformation* is applied to a political state wherein the solid base of the body politic is changed, having evaporated through the heat of discontent, then, just as a solid turns to gas, the fundamental nature of the body politic, and not just its appearance, will have been changed when its form changes.

Plato's recognition of this is apparent in what at first sight might appear to be his rather tendentious and detailed treatment of the *modes of music* in *The Republic*. It is no whim that the 'harmony' of Plato's city-state is to depend so much on the correct allocation of Lydian, Phrygian, and Dorian modes to different activities¹ in the recognition that 'the methods of music cannot be stirred up without great upheavals of social custom and law.'² And Plato sees quite clearly that while censorship of the substance of existing public myths is a means of achieving what Hacker calls 'social cohesion and political obedience',³ it will not prevent the proliferation of unofficial myths whose creators would feel within the law, provided they did not violate 'content' rules. Unless the form of such myths, indeed all myths, is strictly modulated (as was the eight-legged essay of Confucian China, for example)⁴ they might not contribute to the creation of a *tradition of form*, one of the bulwarks of future stability. Indeed Socrates agrees with Glaucon that while the present generation 'will never believe' the myth of the metals, for example, the myth will be good anyway for not only will it make the men 'more inclined to care for the city and each other' but it will allow some chance for tradition to give a lead in the matter.⁵

The establishment of tradition through censorship based on form as well as content may seem to augur as well for the conservative as for the totalitarian who values stability more highly than individual liberty which, as Isaiah Berlin notes,

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse. (New York, 1956), pp. 195-200.

² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³ A. Hacker, *Political Theory* (New York, 1961), p. 47.

⁴ E. O. Reischauer and J. K. Fairbank, *East Asia—The Great Tradition* (Boston, 1958), pp. 305-6. The authors write, 'In accord with the Ming passion for formal organization, there was adopted finally in 1487 a set form for writing examination papers under eight headings, with not over seven hundred characters in all and with much use of balance and antithesis. This was the famous "eight-legged essay" style (*pa-ku wen-chang*) later denounced in the Ch'ing period as imposing a tyranny of literary structure over thought.'

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, p. 215.

is a comparatively modern notion.¹ For while conservatives and totalitarians may vehemently disagree on other matters (such as religious toleration), the conservative is well served by the continuity of form which helps in preserving old values while the totalitarian is ironically just as well served by a continuity of form which allows him to present new policy (e.g., China's foreign policy) in familiar doctrinal dress.² In this way Soviet and Chinese leaders, for example, can make new policies appear as if they do not contradict supposedly infallible Marxist precepts when in fact they do. Thus when real change comes it tends to be recognized by outsiders more as a change in form rather than a substantive change. Indeed the presence of a harsh Soviet censorship, the violation of which directly involves the severe curtailment of a Soviet citizen's political freedom, has bred in the West a brand of scholarship which, under the name of Sovietology, attempts to detect real change in the Soviet Union by concentrating largely (although not exclusively) upon minute change in form.

In this regard it is relevant, I think, to note how under the dreaded eye of censorship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the only hope that the 'proles', the lowest working class, have if they are to survive the obsessively formalized world of Big Brother is that, through some oversight, the authors of Newspeak allow the proles to sing such apparently silly rhymes as

It was only an 'opeless fancy
It passed like an Ipril dye,
But a look an' a word an' the dreams they stirred!
They 'ave stolen my 'eart awye!³

In short, what the administration is doing is allowing the form of the nursery rhymes, which is not at all like the form of the official language, to prompt the recall of older rhymes such as

Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement's
You owe me three farthings, say the bells of St. Martin's . . .⁴

These older rhymes, because they belong to another tradition, make an alternative way of life at least 'thinkable' and in time might constitute a threat to the stability of Big Brother's regime. I suspect that this is also the reason why, in totalitarian societies, even the poet is sometimes considered as much a threat to the system as is the prose writer,⁵ for even if the content of his work is considered politically harmless the poet's political freedom is nevertheless in jeopardy because his style may be considered dangerous if it defies the officially decreed form. Indeed bureaucrats who are unable to grasp the subtlety of the poetic nuance, and are embarrassed to admit it, may even be more inclined to suspect the poet's style insofar as form is more easily recognizable than the imagery of content.⁶

¹ Berlin, op. cit., p. 129.

² Here I am talking about more or less totalitarian governments which may have violently upset older traditions but are intent upon creating their own, often inculcating albeit reinterpreting their history.

³ Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 113.

⁴ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵ Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Vol. IV, p. 90.

⁶ Rigorously imposed censorship has of course often encouraged the development of certain art forms which may otherwise have lain dormant. One can think of the art of mime, for example, which in Czechoslovakia has received acclaim in The Black Theatre of Prague. And, as T. J. Emerson notes in *Toward a General Theory of the First Amendment* (New York, 1963, p. 20), censorship has given birth to the 'allegory and historical allusion' as a way of eluding the 'mechanical formulae of censorship'.

Finally, if in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or in a world of *Repressive Tolerance* the control of language, through its corruption, is the tie which binds education to political leadership then it is quite possible to view such control, or censorship (quite apart from its avowed function of protecting the young), as an act which not only perpetuates tradition and stability (or one group of leaders) but is unapologetically hostile to change,¹ such change including any reduction in political constraints upon the individual. To combat such control of language, whether it takes the form of a conscious or unconscious corruption of language, Orwell and Marcuse seek different remedies which, while they may not always face up to what some political actors see as the unavoidable necessity of mitigating pluralistic interests by softening (or lying about) harsh political facts, do make us aware how easily we can become the victims of a corruption initially designed, either consciously or unconsciously, to deceive others.

¹ See K. R. Popper, "Plato as Enemy of the Open Society." in *Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat*, ed. Thomas Landon Thorson (New Jersey, 1963), p. 46.