

Critique as Imitative Rivalry: George Orwell as Political Anthropologist

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Abstract

Drawing on the work of René Girard on imitation, I argue that George Orwell's *1984* should be read as a work of political anthropology of pressing contemporary relevance. The setting of *1984* is a totalitarian society, but Orwell's main focus is the rebellious subject and how imitative rivalry and disfiguring critique replicates and even extends the very power it seeks to oppose. This reading is supported intertextually by a shorter analysis of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, wherein the protagonist's opposition to money – disfigured as the “Money-God” – makes money or its lack omnipresent for him. From this political anthropology of the rebellious subject, I draw the conclusion that critique, social or political, is imitative and is less a revelation than a disfigurement.

Keywords: Orwell, Girard, Imitation, Critique, Subjectivity

Introduction

Instead of interpreting the great masterpieces in the light of modern theories, we must criticise modern theories in the light of these masterpieces, once their theoretical voice has been made explicit”

Girard, 1978: x

Literature is a key inspiration for many thinkers, and particularly so in the case of René Girard. Girard's theory of mimetic desire was initially derived from novels ranging from Cervantes *Don Quixote* to Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. What is striking about Girard's work is that it grants literary texts a “theoretical voice” equal to or greater than “theory,” whether anthropological or sociological. With due caution, I suggest that literary texts and other aesthetic productions can serve as a means of interpreting “modern theories.” In particular I wish to suggest that George Orwell's *1984* is a key text for political anthropology even today, fifty years after it was first published. Orwell narrates the political and social critique of representative protagonists in such a way as to render their imitative nature explicit. At stake here is not only an argument about the anthropological bases of political life, but also a reflexive argument about *critique*. Although it scarcely seems possible to be intellectually “uncritical” I argue that critique disfigures rather than reveals, and that critique constitutes the subject rather than being an inherent faculty of mind.

Before examining *1984* in depth, I will first discuss Girard's theories of imitation, desire and sacrifice. I shall then detail Orwell's political concerns and the question of critique, before moving to the delicate matter of making the “theoretical voice” of literature explicit. Also, I will give a brief reading of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (KAF in the following) as an intertextual lead in to *1984*.

Imitation: Transfiguring and Disfiguring

According to Girard (1965, 1978), imitation is based on mimetic desire; it does not arise spontaneously in the subject, nor is it intrinsic in the allure of the object. Rather, every subject imitates the desire of a mediator, one who already desires the object. Objects which become the focus of imitative desire are *transfigured*, so that they become extraordinarily appealing, though, once the subject possesses them, they quickly lose their lustre, and are displaced by further imitative desires; thus imitative desire is never fulfilled. Between the subject and the mediator there are two possible relationships: On the one hand, the mediator may be accepted by the subject as a worthy mentor who is in some way distant or different from the subject, being transfigured into something of a “master of ceremonies” (Turner, 1969). On the other hand the mediator may be taken as a rival, a contender for the object, whom the subject must oppose. I suggest that in this second type of opposition the subject *disfigures* the mediator, generating a dualistic good/evil distinction between the rivals yet, all the while making them more and more similar (see Boland 2007b).

Moving on to mythological and anthropological sources, Girard developed the idea of imitative desire into a theory of *scapegoating* as the origin of culture (Girard, 1977, 1987). In any human group unregulated by legal prohibitions, there is nothing to keep imitative desires in check: What one desires, all the others soon will. This contagious spread of desires leads to a proliferation of rivalries, a “war of all against all”, which may lead to the total annihilation of the group. However, as each human imitatively becomes increasingly like every other one, devoid of individual characteristics, ineradicable idiosyncracies will inevitably be noticed – blindness, beauty, whatever. All imitative violent impulses become suddenly polarised upon a person stigmatised with any extraordinary features. This person is singled out and murdered or expelled by the collective, thus ending the imitative crisis. Thereafter, this “sacrificial crisis” and the act of scapegoating lie at the heart of the community’s culture. Whatever object was the source of the original quarrel becomes “taboo”, being sacred and untouchable, as are certain forms of imitative actions. The scapegoat becomes, on the one hand, *disfigured* as the criminal who caused the outbreak of civil war and, on the other hand, *transfigured* as the saviour who ended the civil war. Although murdering the scapegoat is not recalled openly, but the collective guilt is a firm communal bond. Together the community mythologises the event so as to expiate collective guilt and prevent the return of imitative violence. Rituals re-stage the imitative crisis, by collective sacrifices designed to perform rivalry and violence in a safe and regulated way. As such, myths both reveal and conceal imitation. They also both *transfigure* and *disfigure*.¹

Clearly, there is coherence between these two hypotheses, one of desire the other of sacrifice, both focused on imitation. What must also concern us is how imitation is revealed. With regard to sacrifice, Girard insists that world-religions reveal sacrifice, and that novels reveal the imitation of desire. However, Girard’s novelistic sources are not linked together by genre or historical period. Girard (1965) distinguishes between “novels” which reveal imitation, and *romans* which conceal it, a semantic distinction of little purpose, especially considering that Shakespeare’s plays are one of Girard’s best sources. Nonetheless, Girard accounts for the origin of this revelation in an interesting way; the author must have undergone a transition in which they come to view their own desires as imitative: “For the writer himself, this passage necessarily means the shattering of a mimetic reflection that complacently mirrors itself as pure originality and spontaneity” (Girard, 1978: x). Such a passage is clearly reflected in both *KAF* and *1984* where Orwell’s growing awareness of his own shifts in political position could underlie such a subjective transformation.

However, this does not suffice to specify the source of the revelation. Why should Orwell and some authors become aware and others not? What is particularly problematic in such a passage or transition to a new perspective is that imitation having been revealed does not necessarily lead to the open emulation of a genuinely worthy model. All too often, a sudden enlightenment may lead to a renewed sense of the self as autonomous, grounded in their own powers of reason or critique (Szakolczai, 2007b). For instance, Winston Smith seems to have moved beyond the imitative dupes and pawns which surround him in Oceania, Parsons or Catherine for example; but as we will demonstrate at length, he sacrifices one sort of imitation for another, which he cannot acknowledge until he accepts O'Brien as the "master of ceremonies" for his reconstruction as a "goodthinkful" Party member.

Indeed something like the "sacrificial crisis" may have occurred within any person who seems to have revealed imitation (see Boland, 2007b). Such a subjective crisis transforms the subject, and what they say about themselves and their society thereafter both reveals and conceals imitation, both transfigures and disfigures. To "reveal imitation" could also serve as a gloss for critique. As I argue elsewhere (2008) to see the world anew as a web of illusions in which *others* are imitative is a distinctly Romantic self-transformation, which returns us to the conceptualisation of desire or rivalry as spontaneous and intrinsic. So the intransigent question of how exactly imitation is revealed must be temporarily deferred.

Orwell: A Political Anthropology of Critique?

George Orwell is respected as a quasi-anthropologist "going native" in his own country, as a social and political reporter, a fearlessly honest journalist, a predecessor to Cultural Studies and as a literary critic (Rodden, 1990). Above all he is renowned for the widely read *Animal Farm* [1943] and *1984* [1949] (Rodden 1991). Both of these novels have had a controversial reception history, seeing Orwell co-opted cynically to the causes of the Cold War, liberalism and neo-conservatism (Goldstein, 2000). *1984* certainly continues to rile intellectuals of many hues, much as Orwell did in his own time (Thomas, 1985). Its fictive date having passed, why does *1984* continue to be relevant? Of course, no-one needs, or needed, *1984* to explain to them that totalitarianism is abhorrent, but there is more to the novel than that: Orwell remarked "I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences" (CEJL iv: 502). What are these totalitarian ideas?

Orwell's key concerns in the 1940s were the abuse of language and the malleability of human nature, both especially marked in a totalitarian regime, and individual and collective solipsism denying both objective reality and the givenness of the past. Such staggering attributes of Fascist, Stalinist and other belligerent political ideologies are surely deplorable. How do they relate to the individual intellectual? For Orwell, these tendencies were visible in innumerable different political contexts, as expressed in his copious journalism. A paradigmatic example is a parody of "anti-Fascism." In *Coming Up for Air* Orwell describes a meeting of the Left Book Club addressed by a speaker who is introduced as "the well known anti-fascist" (1983: 515). The speaker's hate-inducing speech is reduced by the narrator to a series of phrases ending up in the repetition of Fascism, Democracy, Fascism, Democracy *ad nauseum*, as if the speech was semi-automatic. Orwell warns against this replacement of thought with slogans in *1984* where a speaker switches his invective against Eurasia to Eastasia mid-sentence without stopping.²

Coming Up for Air is a more realist novel, locally familiar, set in the present tense and within the common experience of most readers. What Orwell is particularly con-

cerned with is the self-righteous cloak of language and the air of civilised outrage that cloaks barbarism and violence, not just abroad, but close to home; and Orwell gave and received lectures on a similar circuit. Orwell allows his narrator an insight into the “anti-fascist’s” mind:

“I saw the vision that he was seeing. And it wasn’t at all the kind of vision that can be talked about. What he’s *saying* is merely that Hitler’s after us and that we must all get together and have a good hate. Doesn’t go into details. Leaves it all respectable. But what he’s *seeing* is something quite different. It’s a picture of himself smashing people’s faces in with a spanner. Fascist faces of course” (1983: 518).

Behind the civilised critique of fascism, there is, ironically, a correspondent barbarism. Words and symbols like Fascism, Democracy, Fascism, Democracy, become interchangeable in order to facilitate wartime alliances. History bears Orwell out; the Soviet Union, once the enemy of Germany becomes its ally, once the enemy of Capitalist England becomes its ally. “Hitler’s black and Stalin’s white. But it might just as well be the other way round” (518). Anticipating the concept of “double-think” in *1984*, black can become white and vice versa. At the cusp of the Second World War, the most staggering suspension of order in Europe, words and symbols are in complete flux, have no concrete referents and can be twisted to any purpose by the politicised intellectual, most frequently the communist apologist for Stalin. Yet, for Orwell, the same applies to the victorious allies in 1946, as they begin trials for war crimes which they had earlier endorsed, for instance, Mussolini’s actions in Africa. (CEJL iii: 319-325), or the tendency of the English to vaunt themselves as democratic and therefore morally distinct from the Nazis whilst retaining a vast non-democratic overseas Empire (CEJL i: 394-398).

For Orwell, at home in England, supposedly far removed from the totalitarian evils in continental Europe, totalitarian tendencies were visible amongst the intellectuals; he set *1984* in London to underline that the English were by no means immune. Political euphemisms thinly disguise violent impulses. The intellectual anti-Fascist is imaginatively, inwardly, perhaps “theoretically” in every sense of the word, just as aggressive and ruthless as the Fascist. I will argue that Gordon Comstock, enemy of the “money-God” is a monomaniac of money; Winston Smith, doomed opponent of the authoritarian manufacture of truth is an author searching to manufacture his own truth. As Girard’s (1965) theories indicate, rivalry is based on imitation, while opposition is the guarantor of sameness not difference. Orwell’s political anthropology narrates how a subject engages in an imitative rivalry with the power they oppose. By their opposition the subject is *transfigured*, while the rival is *disfigured*; so power becomes “power” in the sense of “oppression”, “domination” and “evil”. Of course, fascism is evil, but “anti-fascist” violence is also evil no matter how it is transfigured in the mind of the “anti-fascist”. Imitative rivalry ensures the insidious return of the power the subject seeks to oppose.

What warrant is there for calling this imitative rivalry “critique”? Surely critique – with its correlates of “unmasking”, “debunking”, “degrounding”, and “deconstructing” – comes close to revealing imitation? The problem of course, is that critique only reveals the imitation of the other, never of the self. It is self-delusion to decry the other as imitative but not apply the same to oneself. If one admits that all are imitative, then there is no basis for unmasking, debunking and the like. Only by figuring the other as imitative and the self as autonomous can critique operate, and this figuring involves transfiguring and disfiguring, the hallmarks of imitation. To the problematic question of how imitation can be revealed, critique supplies only half an answer, just like the sacrificial myths, it

both reveals and conceals imitation. Critique is just what Orwell's protagonists engage in, as I will illustrate. Judith Butler (2004), an ardent proponent of critique, argues that critique is only constituted by an opposition to power. Yet, despite claims to detachment and autonomy critique is most evidently imitative. Political critiques which unmask the "ideology" of their opponents, disfigure those opponents, and transfigure themselves, prompting the return of critique in an imitative cycle quite close to Girard's description of the vendetta (1977). It is little wonder that the contemporary interchange of critique is known now as "the Culture Wars." Critique can apply equally to everything, is limitless and contagious, even though its proliferation across the polity means that it undermines itself and cancels itself out (Kompridis, 2000). This extraordinary currency prevails amongst left *and* right, pro-modern *and* anti-modern; in short, on every side of every contemporary debate, making it increasingly pointless: if everyone is critical, then no-one is.

What value critique has within the political sphere is debatable, especially considering that the "great age" of critique has gone on for several centuries. However, my particular concern with critique here is at the level of the subject, more precisely with how subjectivity is transformed by becoming critical. Critique is not the operation of an independent faculty of mind. Nor is it the mere judgement of social phenomena by existing cultural standards. Rather, critique is a turn against part of self-experience, where an aspect of culture or personal history becomes problematic, disfigured as "conformity" or "ideology" or the like (Boland, 2007b). One underlying dimension of all modern critiques is that they identify something as imitative and take that mimesis as inherently problematic. Of course, this is precisely what is pointed out about critique here, except that critique is not considered problematic because it is imitative. Rather, it is problematic because it disfigures social phenomena quite indiscriminately. The imitative character of the crisis in which critique occurs transforms the subject. This transformation renders the subject as somehow detached from once held beliefs and once meaningful experiences which are now disfigured. Furthermore, the prior attachment is neatly forgotten or made "inessential" so that the new, critical identity attains a mythical status. It is no coincidence that this critical process bears considerable resemblance to the act of "doublethink."

Are these sorts of critique unsophisticated, trivial and banal, not to be compared with the more theoretical versions of critique practiced by academics? Let us quickly restate a few of the more widely accepted socially-oriented critiques; words do not neutrally reflect reality, human nature is not a given stable entity, reality is a social construct, history is a narrative open to revision. Compare these with Orwell's characteristics of the totalitarian intellectual as referred to above:

the abuse of language, where the relationship of words to reality is manipulated for political purposes, the malleability of human nature, that is, the eclipse of the individual in the totalitarian regime, and individual and collective solipsism as manifested in the denial of both objective reality and the unalterability of the past (1983: 518)

The idea of continuity between totalitarianism and our basic intellectual assumptions is certainly unsettling. The concept that visions, ways of seeing, perspectives and paradigms directly filter "reality" and are therefore decisive for existence is a central underpinning of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and a host of other disciplines, and cannot be jettisoned. Of course, Orwell himself was aware of and acceded to some of the aforementioned, particularly that "human nature" is historically variable. However, what Orwell was most acutely aware of was how critique operated at the level of the subject. The totalitarian re-shaping of language, human nature, reality and the past can only proceed

where intellectuals and subjects generally carry out that re-shaping internally. Critique is not just a deployment of discourse, it is also a “technique of self” (Boland, 2007a). Critique re-shapes subjectivity in accordance with the exigencies of the moment, ensuring that the subject feels autonomous rather than imitative in one respect or another. What we will observe in *1984* is not just the critical opposition of Winston Smith to the Party, but also how even the rebel against totalitarianism replicates totalitarian practices at the level of the subject. It is concerned less with the characteristics of a totalitarian society, but rather with the modalities of how totalitarianism takes root in the mind of the intellectual.

As a dystopian satire, *1984* follows the pattern set down by Moore’s *Utopia*. We encounter a strange society, and eventually its internal coherence is explained to us by an expert. This pattern is born out in Orwell’s more immediate predecessors, Huxley and Zamyatin; however, Orwell adds something more. Of course, Goldstein’s book and O’Brien explain much of the workings of Oceania and the Party, but the fate of Winston Smith also indicates better again how this society came into being. Violence, oppression and propaganda are not sufficient in themselves to create the world of *1984*, its foundation actually lies in the subject. Winston’s trajectory, from hating to loving Big Brother, from opposing his society to being its perfect imitation, describes in miniature what has occurred in each good party member. Such antagonism fuelled the first revolt, and maintains the party thereafter. O’Brien confirms this: “The heretic, the enemy of society, will always be there so that he can be defeated and humiliated over again” (1983: 898). Revolts, such as Winston’s, imitative attempts to grasp power from a rival, even in the unlikely event of their success, only guarantee the perpetuation of the same desires, the same power.

The “Theoretical Voice” of Literature

Like many a masterpiece, *1984* has been adopted and adapted to the needs of its interpreters. We must be careful that our interpretation does not superimpose its own concerns upon the material, making literature the mere puppet of theory. Why go to the trouble of making the “theoretical voice” explicit, when more explicit statements are available, and in Orwell’s case are legion? For instance, “freedom of the press, if it means anything at all, means the freedom to criticize and oppose” (CEJL, iv: 60). Yet the opposition of the pigs to the farmer in *Animal Farm* is far from positive, Gordon Comstock’s critique of the “Money-god” in *KAF* is far from laudable, and as we shall see, the combination of opposition and critique in Winston Smith serves to re-make him as a totalitarian subject. Literature tells us, implicitly, what we can scarcely make explicit; it both reveals and conceals imitation. This follows Girard, but only tentatively, as his work would have novel after novel confirm and illustrate his triangular mimetics of desire. No doubt many novels do, but surely they say more than that alone. Beyond Girard’s mimetics of desire literature may depict specific aspects of society that are otherwise opaque.

Put simply, any analysis of contemporary society which ignores literature, music, or art would be as incomplete as an anthropology which ignores myth. The use of literature, art, music or the like for the purposes of “theory” is still rare, even if it has frequently been recommended (de la Fuente, 2007). This is most likely because the idea of subjecting literature, as a mere object, to the gaze of “Theory” is untenable, particularly where this involves a critical reduction of art, or other aesthetic forms, to their social predicates (Inglis, 2005). On the other hand, literature cannot be simply equated to theory, even if historically they might belong to the same “order of discourse” (McHoul, 1988). As Negrin argues (2005), literature and theory should be partners, not rivals. Indeed, lite-

rature and other aesthetic forms can pre-constitute and shape the intellectual position that theory latterly comes to occupy.³

What I intend here is to perform a “staged encounter” between theory and literature, as extolled by Edmundson (1995) as a means of exploring how literature reads theory, that is, how writers negotiate with theory, repeat it, express it, depict it, perhaps ironise or parody it. Most importantly, this approach emphasises that theory exists as *part* of society and human experience in specific cultural forms, interconnected with politics, and entailing social consequences. Literature can narrate theory, describing how it is performed, the consequent change in vision, and the re-constitution of the theorist as a subject, which are social processes elided by the presentation of theory as taken out of context, abstract, general, and transcendent. Of course, some sorts of literature abound with ideas that can be compared to theoretical concepts (Edmundson, 1995). However, in Orwell’s work we encounter concepts in play, in the very act of being deployed by individuals. Orwell’s work does not propound these concepts as a means of understanding society; on the contrary, he narrates the processes of conceptualising and the consequences of a rebel who critiques their society. To make the theoretical voice of literature explicit, we must see how it contains “theory” implicitly. Theory is part and parcel of culture, an interrelated rather than detached form of social life. *1984* makes critique something to be studied.

The Critical Subject

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* the main protagonist Gordon Comstock repeatedly attempts to find different avenues of escape from money, stylised by him as the “Money-God”: through poetry, a trip to the countryside, sexuality/love and a descent into the “lower-classes”. In each case he seems to find the “Money-God already waiting for him. I say “seems” here, because it is only to Gordon that these avenues appear already corrupted by the tint of money. Gordon hates the “money-code” symbolised by the hated Aspidistra, yet applies it more assiduously than any character; civility, friendship, generosity, creativity, carefreeness, all these are impossible to him without money. Money can neither be earned in sufficient quantities to be forgotten, nor abstained from; “you do not escape money by being moneyless” (1983: 607). When his girlfriend, Rosemary, refuses to have sex with him without contraception, he replies “You would if I had money”, yet what really stands in his way is that he has simply neglected to purchase condoms. When his poem is accepted for publication by an American magazine earning him \$50, he celebrates in the most expensive of restaurants, with the most expensive wine, leading to a debauch and jail. Later Gordon rues that had he really “had money” he would not have behaved so extravagantly with his modest success.

Gordon Comstock sees every relationship, every experience and every event in terms of money.⁴ “All human relationships must be purchased with money” (1983: 584). In part, this is an insight into class, capitalism, and consumerism, but it is also, at the same time, the reiteration of the dominant trope of these powers. In a way, this is a humorous recounting of the irony of Marxism; to oppose Capitalism by an ever more assiduous focus on money. Orwell, through Comstock, performs a thorough critique of the “Money-God,” but there is more than a quasi-socialist critique of the money-society at foot here. Comstock, whilst a sympathetic, engaging and amusing character, through his war against the “Money-God” repeatedly hurts those who care for him, especially Rosemary. In an attitude of utter nihilism he denigrates everything: “At this moment it seemed to him that in a street like this, in a town like this, every life that is lived must be meaningless and intolerable” (1983: 586). Here Orwell uses “seemed,” and that qualification is significant, though the third-person narration and Gordon’s voice are conti-

nuously intermingled, this book is not an elaboration of its protagonist's position; instead it is a sympathetic but ironic narration of a subject who sets himself against his own society but who cannot persist in his supposed autonomy, which is, after all, only imitative.

Comstock is contrasted against Rosemary:⁵ She is sensible and fiscally prudent, but unworried by money-relations "she had absorbed into her very bones the code of fair play and live-and-let-live. She was profoundly magnanimous, quite incapable of spiritual bullying" (1983: 647). All these attitudes are quite the opposite of Gordon's nihilistic tendencies. Gordon's money, or lack thereof, is never an issue for her, but she generally refuses to yield to his demands where they are unreasonable, that is, motivated by his imitative rivalry against the "Money-God." Even when she eventually becomes pregnant, she does not demand he return to the "upper-lower-middle-class" pursuit of "making good." All his incessant invective against money she bears with good humour and generosity. His endless speech about money neatly reflects that Gordon has no other values than those he repudiates. Rosemary by contrast, speaks little of money and values social relationships in and of themselves, howsoever they might be measured in money terms. When they meet he accuses her of measuring him and his suitability as a husband in terms of money, projecting his obsession onto her, which she resists, and in the course of the novel, disproves.

This projection is anticipated by his description of her to his publisher and friend, Ravelston:

he began to invent an imaginary character for Rosemary. He built up a picture of her as a callous creature who was amused by him and yet half despised him, who played with him and kept him at arm's length, and who would nevertheless fall into his arms if he only had a little more money (1983: 636).

All this is entirely unconnected to Rosemary's character, and rather reflects Gordon's own tendency to see human relationships in terms of money. "Don't you see that a man's whole personality is bound up with his income? His personality *is* his income" (ibid: 636). While Gordon's "philosophy" here has something right about it, that is, a horror of a society which measures everything in terms of money, it is directly undermined by his own tendency to continuously reassert and emphasise that measurement, and to extend it to where it was not otherwise present. Gordon and Ravelston offer forms of economic reductionism, the former from experience, the latter from Marxism: *KAF* shows a life lived according to this reductionism in its limitations and excesses. The imitative rivalry between Gordon Comstock and the moneyed culture which is indifferent to him has peculiar consequences: it transforms the protagonist and makes his life increasingly meaningless. Only by giving up his rivalry does his life gain meaning. Yet that life is meaningful, despite the encroachment of money.

1984: From Hating to Loving Big Brother

Although its fictive date has passed, the literary and political controversy around *1984* looks set to run interminably. *1984* narrates the rebellion of Winston Smith against the totalitarian power of "Ingsoc", and his eventual abjection, coming to love the very thing he first hated, Big Brother. As his inquisitor, O'Brien, states: "We will make you hollow, then we will fill you with ourselves" (1983: 895). However, what I seek to argue is that Winston Smith's attempt to defeat power at its own game involves the imitation of the power of the Party. He partakes in his own hollowing out. Winston is "a pretentious theorist" (Goldstein, 2000: 46); his rebellion never leads him outside the practices of

producing truths he acquires from “the party”. Indeed, his rebellion extends the power of the party, just as rivals always become more and more alike. No-one needs Orwell to tell them that totalitarianism is abhorrent, but this is not all *1984* does; it shows us more subtly that our ardent opposition may take its form from what we oppose.

The “first act” of Winston’s rebellion is the procurement of paper for a diary, which is written in the smallest of interstices, the longer wall unseen by the Telescreen in his flat. By beginning with paper, with writing, with reading, Orwell draws the reader into Winston’s rebellion, so that his rebellion is imaginatively shared. In his diary Winston attempts to make some kind of a record that witnesses the truth, for the future, in opposition to the party’s obliteration of objective truth and falsification of all records. Winston clings to the ephemeral memory of a scrap of paper concerning Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford, which proved that the party had falsified its own records. Of course, there is little need to prove that the party does this, since Winston alters records daily, and besides, the ideal of “double-think” necessitates intellectual dishonesty. Such an action sets himself up against “the might of the party”, it opposes the party, but this does not make the rebel and power so different, rather it ensures that they are contesting the same ground. Winston’s rebellion is to set down a record, to produce truth, and to be the guarantor of that truth: this is just what the party carries out in the Ministry of Truth. The sheer hopelessness of Winston’s effort is rendered clear by Orwell throughout the novel. Even in his own mind he sees no hope for success, so his motivations are clearly imitative, the only difference between him and the party dupes being that the mediator is disfigured as a rival rather than transfigured as a mentor.

In addition to his attempt to record present truths, Winston also seeks to investigate the past, both by interviewing an aged proletarian, and by picking through remnants of the past in Mr. Charrington’s junk shop. In the first case he dismisses the recollections of the old man as partial, remembering only dimly some scattered personal experiences which do not amount to the meaningful history that Winston craves. Again here, his criterion matches that of the party, he is not interested in “history from the bottom up” but a kind of history that will directly contradict that of the party. Winston remembers that there were planes before the revolution, though the credit for their invention is ascribed to Big Brother. Winston would like to falsify the party’s “facts” here, but, as always, takes the parameters of his rebellion from the party itself. He searches for a sweeping and categorical statement as to whether life has improved or become worse since the revolution. Ironically, Winston does miss the fact that the old man’s testimony does falsify party history as he recalls hiring a “top-hat” which was supposedly the legally exclusive preserve of the mythologised capitalists.

From Charrington, in fact a member of the thought-police, Winston buys his writing paper, and acquires a coral rock which predates the party and all their ludicrous claims. Onto these mute objects Winston grafts his own narrative, much as the party stamps its own truths on all the objects under its power. His perspective is an inversion; the party insists that life was worse before the revolution, Winston remembers nothing but deprivation, but “knows” somehow that life must have been better. Having no means of proving or even investigating the matter, Winston has the coral paperweight symbolise the past and reads a utopia into it.

Orwell makes imitation more explicit in two encounters; with O’Brien in the Ministry of Truth and with “Goldstein’s book”. Winston reads it gladly thinking: “The best books... are those that tell you what you know already” (1983: 859). As it turns out, the book was written by the inner party, partly by O’Brien, and is therefore utterly unreliable as a record of history or present conditions. Yet, this book reiterates over and over again beliefs and knowledge that Winston has already articulated. O’Brien repeats much that Winston has already told us, but more sharply and with inverted values. For instance,

O'Brien takes "double-think" not as a perversion of reality but a creation of "reality". These three reiterations, similar to the point of being synoptic, should alert us to the imitative relationship between rebellion and power. Attitudes towards the "proles," to the party, to relationships, towards the question of historical fact and the malleability of records and human minds, to pain, fear and human emotion, to the existence of objective reality are articulated by each source, and as part of the same problematic; all Winston does is invert the Party's attitudes in a form of rivalry that approaches pure symmetry. For instance, Winston's hope in the Proles is dashed in the very same terms as he earlier reckoned their revolt impossible: "Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious" (784) Here, Winston reiterates the elite vanguard assumption of the Party, even as he does so he realises that his epigram could have come out of a Party textbook. Similarly O'Brien dismisses the proles; "They are helpless, like the animals. Humanity is the Party. The others are outside – irrelevant" (899).

One striking repetition is the description of "doublethink". Compare Winston's following reflections:

To know and not to 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, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy; to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself. That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word "doublethink" involved the use of doublethink (1983: 763).

Against the passage from "Goldstein's" book":

Doublethink lies at the very heart of Ingsoc, since the essential act of the Party is to use conscious deception while retaining the firmness of purpose that goes with complete honesty. To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word *doublethink* it is necessary to exercise *doublethink*. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of *doublethink* one erases this knowledge: and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth (1983: 865).

Although the language is more sophisticated in the latter, and the more distant "one" replaces the informal "you", these are a synoptic views of "doublethink". Winston gives more concrete examples and slightly distorts the matter by describing it as "hypnosis."

Nevertheless, these accounts are as similar as their summary sentences: “Even to understand the word *doublethink* involved the use of *doublethink*” and “Even in using the word *doublethink* it is necessary to exercise *doublethink*”. Such a direct reiteration, which carefully avoids any verbatim citation, can hardly be unintentional. While the entire novel narrates the rebellion of Winston against the Party, Orwell constantly undermines the distinction between the two. The rebel thinks the same thoughts as power.

One glib expression of this is Winston’s inability to maintain a moral distinction between himself and the party, his avowal when being initiated into the “Brotherhood” of willingness to murder, sabotage, throw acid in a child’s face is replayed to him by O’Brien in the Ministry of Truth. The imitative relationship of the subject and power is focalised through Winston’s relationship to O’Brien. Frequently, Winston avers to a sort of relationship, despite opposition and torture, of mentorship: it seems to Winston that “[O’Brien’s] mind *contained* Winston’s mind” (1983: 891). In the Ministry of Love, mimetic rivalry gives way to discipleship, as Winston becomes disciplined in an exercise of Foucauldian productive power (1977). This is not the taming of unruly impulses, unknowable and inscrutable to the party, rather it is the reversal of all that Winston has inverted. Sometimes O’Brien’s inquisition of Winston seems quasi-telepathic, he often says “You are thinking, Winston, that...” although it is possible that he anticipates Winston’s thoughts because those thoughts are so utterly mimetic. Winston’s subjective epistemology is an exact double of the Party’s “collective solipsism.” “When you delude yourself into thinking that you see something you assume that everyone else sees the same as you” (1983: 886). Of course, O’Brien and the Party are abhorrent totalitarian producers of discourse, but Winston has no rebellion other than reversing their claims. Many commentators have supported one or another of Winston’s claims against O’Brien, for instance; that Ingsoc cannot have any vitality (Patai, 1982), or that totalitarianism is impossible (Goldstein, 2000), or that language cannot control reality (Clark, 1992). Yet all these positions are themselves reversals of Party dictums.

Within the novel the one site of resistance that O’Brien cannot overcome by questioning alone is Winston’s attachment to Julia. This is eliminated by the rats in Room 101, a somewhat gothic and grotesque fictional device. However, what makes the elimination of this attachment possible is that Winston makes Julia and Big Brother opposites; his love for Julia is staked on his hatred for Big Brother. Inevitably the positions are eventually reversed. Of course, Orwell is not describing an average human being in a real historical setting, but an embodiment of the central intellectual malaise of his time, in the sort of world that intellectual malaise might well create.

Outside of repetitive mimesis there are other elements which defy the intrusion of the Party’s power into every single facet of human existence. Similarly to what we have seen in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Winston disparages his lover Julia as “a rebel from the waist downwards” (836), but in many ways her rebellion shows us by contrast that Winston’s rebellion is a sort of inverted orthodoxy. Winston is at pains to convince Julia that the enemy of Oceania has changed four years ago from Eastasia to Eurasia, and that this alteration of objective history has been erased from collective memory and all records by double-think. Julia, by contrast, is not convinced that there is any war *per se*, and thinks that any rockets fired into London are probably fired by the Party. Unlike Winston, Julia is not concerned to dispute with the party about a “truth” which is produced by the party, and as such, not even a lie, that is, incapable of being true or false, and similarly she does not care if Winston is correct in his account. Winston’s inverted orthodoxy spells the end of Julia’s rebellion; by making their relationship into a quasi-marriage, a shadow of the fidelity demanded by Ingsoc, her purely sexual encounters become impossible, even though these did, occasionally, undermine the “sex-as-procreation” dictates of

Ingsoc. As events turn out, it is Julia's relationship to Winston that ensures her being captured by the thought-police.

What is most problematic about their relationship is not that it is fragile, vulnerable, incapable of overthrowing power or even more than temporarily escaping surveillance; rather it is that Winston relates everything they do to his rebellion. He uses his only meaningful relationship as a weapon against the party, thereby staying within the orbit of imitation. He makes love as an act of defiance, even though Julia declares that love-making as a pleasure in itself might at least temporarily exhaust the power-fervour that the party wishes to inculcate in all its subjects. When Julia removes her sash in a dream it was a gesture that "With its grace and carelessness it seemed to annihilate a whole culture, a whole system of thought, as though Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police could all be swept into nothingness by a single splendid movement of the arm" (1983: 760). Yet, grace is not Winston's revolt, and his relationship with Julia is not enough in itself for him, but must be a weapon against the Party.⁶

Despite her lack of real interest, Winston brings Julia into the revolutionary "brotherhood", which eventually turns out to be a sham. They are sworn in by O'Brien, in an initiation ritual. Only Julia automatically resists O'Brien's request that they be willing to separate from each other for the cause. For Winston "the cause" is an abstract: the entire population, history, truth; for Julia it is a concrete social attachment. Even before they are physically captured, power has a presence in their relationship. What is most tragic in their relationship is not that they eventually betray each other under extreme and sustained torture, it is that in their last moments together they do not cling uselessly yet meaningfully together, but stand apart as dictated by the Telescreen. Julia at least is sufficiently human as to say goodbye, whereas Winston is merely awaiting the continuation of his revolt in the Ministry of Truth. The contagious spread of imitation is clearly marked by Orwell; in their second meeting, Julia refuses to repeat Winston's slogan "We are the dead". Just before being captured we read; "We are the dead" echoed Julia dutifully" (1983: 869).

Winston also observes, at certain times, his own self-transformation; one particularly interesting example is where he tells Julia of his former marriage to Catherine. He recalls a time when he was already utterly repulsed by her orthodoxy, encapsulated by her referring to making love as "our duty to the party." Once on a hike in the countryside they both somehow fell behind. Catherine looks over a precipice and Winston considers pushing her, as there would be no witness to the scene. Julia can scarcely understand why he did not, and Winston ruefully reflects that now; "I would, if I'd been the same person then as I am now. Or perhaps I would – I'm not certain" (1983: 823). Winston's advance into rebellion, freedom and enlightenment makes him equivocate between his own personal satisfaction and the life of another. Certainly, Catherine is a mere cipher of Party propaganda, but Julia's disregard for her life is still wrong. What is more disquieting, however, is Winston's evaluation of the value of her life only in terms of his rebellion against the party.

A further figure outside the imitative rivalry in the novel is Winston's mother, dimly remembered in recurrent dreams. When as a youth he robs his sister of her fair share of chocolate, his mother puts her arm around her, a gift of presence and love, even if it is materially insignificant: "It would not have occurred to her that an action which is ineffectual thereby becomes meaningless. If you loved someone, you loved him, and when you had nothing left to give you still gave him love" (1983: 841). His mother acts in regard to human values rather than in a struggle against power or even for power. Winston reflects that this dignity bestows a certain tragedy and meaning on her death which is no longer possible, in his view, because all death and life is lived with regard to its significance in the struggle with power. Just as O'Brien disregards his own morality in favour

of the collective, Winston in his rebellion lives only for the hope of the future triumph; one's own life in the present is therefore meaningless. Earlier Winston awakes from a symbolic dream in which he recalls that his mother and sister are sacrificed in order that he might live. Implicitly, his sister, an infant slowly dying from hunger is protected by his mother from Winston's greatest fear, rats. This fragile humanity is discarded by Winston for a rebellion against power, which may invert power but pursues it to the eclipse of all else. Of course, meaningful relationships are fragile, but power for power's sake is meaningless as well.

Throughout Orwell's intellectual trajectory, this is the central problem: human decency. He advocates only "Socialism compatible with common decency" (1986: 214). On his return from Burma he generalised his disgust for Imperialism "carried my hatred of oppression to extraordinary lengths. At that time failure seemed to me to be the only virtue" (1968: 138). This sort of guilt and subsequent nihilism is diffuse in modernity, and can lead towards the rejection of the world, the critique of culture as power. This imitative rivalry produces disfiguring critiques of all and any aspect of society and culture, and these critiques cannot be prevailed against simply by turning critique upon them.

Conclusion – Beyond Disfiguring Critique

It takes a stretch of imagination to compare the world of *1984* and England in the 1930s, but Gordon and Winston are similar characters, whose rebellions are doomed to failure because they simply invert and re-iterate the power they oppose. In Gordon's case, he turns from hating the Aspidistra, symbol of the "money-code," to loving it. He gives up his rebellion in relief, becomes "mixed up" in the very civilisation that he detests, writes the "sordid" advertisements that are its synecdoche (1983: 726-30). Power and rebellion, in the end, matter less than life itself. Winston comes from hating Big Brother to loving him; "This reversal is clearly a logical result of Winston's acceptance of the Party's value system, which, as we saw, underlay even his rebellion" (Patai, 1982: 865). Power extended through rebellion, thereby, comes to supplant life. Implicitly, Winston Smith's intellectual rebellion recapitulates the rebellion of "the party" against Western civilisation: Gordon's rebellion was a heightened version of an intellectual tendency in the 1930s, Winston's occurs in the context of a society constituted by rebellion. All that remains in *1984* are imitative hatred, fear and base adulation. Gordon, luckily, discovers that human relationships and love are binding, and that bind should not be disfigured as a restriction but as the constitution of human relations. Only by critique is belief disfigured as ideology, social bonds as social control; such things exist in certain cases, but the problem is that the proliferation of critique means that they are "discovered" everywhere.

Orwell's political position is imprecise and subject to shifts, say, from pacifism to denouncing pacifism as "objectively pro-fascist", from supporting "Basic English" and language engineering to parodying it in "newspeak," from "Tory anarchism" to a Socialism compatible with human decency. Compounding this, he was always out-of-step with the prevailing intellectual current (Rodden, 1991). Orwell reflects that these critical political shifts entail self-transformation: "I have got to alter myself so completely that at the end I should hardly be recognisable as the same person" (1986: 150). Gradually, over a number of political re-orientations, Orwell must have come to realise that the critical self-transformations entailed were not autonomous, but imitative. He repeatedly stated the paradoxical "All art is propaganda," his own transparent language is lampooned by "newspeak", his critique of modernism is carried out by modernist elements of *1984* (Rae, 1992). The triumph of Oceania in some fictive battle which closes the novel and prompts Winston's love of Big Brother is a perturbing parody of any "happy ending" which satisfies a reader (1983: 916). Sometimes art, theory, or critique are self-validating: this does

not mean that it truly describes reality, but that it has formed and validated the self. The critical turn against “power” which itself re-describes society as “power” may generate a self-validating selfhood. From these subjective experiences as much as from the Fascist and Communist propagation of organised lying. The horrors of totalitarianism stem in part from subjective tendencies; revolt is not the sufficient cause of totalitarianism but it is a necessary cause. The political and social problems of modernity are not structural or historical forces distinct from the life of the individual, rather, they stem from intellectual and subjective tendencies towards imitative rivalry and disfiguring critique.

Orwell still has contemporary relevance: the intellectual who insists on the ubiquity of power may guarantee its existence. If contemporary critique purports to “discover” the workings of power relations in the most unexpected of places, it may not be so much a discovery as a fiction. Where critics, intellectuals and even so-called lay-people oppose power, whether it be obvious or audaciously revealed, their opposition may take on and redeploy the very terms they oppose. Yet the oppositional relations of power and critique are not the only perspective; society and culture should not be conflated with power, or we repeat O’Brien’s mantra: “The object of power is power” (1983: 895). Critique of culture, the revolt of individual against society, must find its limit, or it becomes contagious, all-encompassing, totalising, and also increasingly ineffectual.

Notes

¹ Similarities between this “disfiguring” and Gnostic dualism should be noted here. Eisenstadt (1999) has argued that major political forces in modernity, from Revolutionary Jacobinism to twentieth century Socialism and Fascism, demonstrate Gnostic characteristics. Among these are the millennial anticipation of a complete political transformation; the polarisation of political and social tensions into dualisms of good and evil; and the suspension of all and any “traditional” values.

² It is exactly at this moment that the covertly rebellious Winston Smith receives a quasi-Marxist book supposedly by the Trotsky-figure Goldstein and switches his own loyalties. Perhaps Orwell is indicating the similarity in changing from Eastasia to Eurasia, and from Big Brother to Goldstein.

³ For the case of critique see my exploratory genealogy of critique (Boland 2008).

⁴ Comstock attains a personification of the measurement and equivalising of everything through money as described in Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money*.

⁵ Patai (1982) rightly points out the “androcentric” focus of Orwell’s oeuvre, but my reading, especially of Rosemary, whom Patai neglects, shows that Orwell does present strong female characters who contrastingly highlight the shortcomings of the male protagonists.

⁶ Szokolczai (2007) thematises grace as an indestructible source of renewal for humanity; it fares better than the rebel in *1984*. Grace might even eventually move the “proles”, who sing just for the sake of singing, still living beyond the realms of power. “The proles had stayed human. They had not hardened inside” (1983: 842).

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