

# Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: Escape from Doublethink

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This approach to the study of Orwell's text<sup>1</sup> draws both from Wayne Booth's concept of the unreliable narrator and from Bruce Morrisette's analytic techniques for the French New Wave novelist, Alain Robbe-Grillet.<sup>2</sup> The analysis does not challenge the political message of the book but focuses on the relation between the reader and the book to heighten our appreciation of the written text. I suggest that we as readers are implicated in the process of doublethink that Orwell describes, and that by piecing together bits and snatches of the book, taking note of repetitions and omissions, we can come away from the story less naive and more aware of the nature of doublethink. The reader who undergoes the experience of doublethink and learns to recognize it is "mithridatised," the small dose of poison arming him against a fatal one.<sup>3</sup>

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a network of patterns, images, numbers, and letters that at first enfolds the reader much as the two stems of loosestrife, magenta and red, that attract Winston at the quarry's edge, seem inextricably bound. I shall suggest a first view of Winston, then, to begin the process of disentanglement, identify a crucial moment and examine the new, more ambiguous world it implies. On the first reading, we tend to accept Winston's evaluation of his freedom. First, he seems to have a margin of freedom in his movements: "Party members were supposed not to go into ordinary shops ('dealing on the free market' it was called), but the rule was not strictly kept . . ." (p. 9). His love for Julia apparently contradicts the isolation imposed on the members of his society. Further, he seems to have some intellectual integrity. He says, "The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago" (p. 32). Finally, he seems able to reserve some private memories, and his recurrent dreams, nightmares, hallucinations, and daydreams suggest an active psychic life. In this reading Winston's freedom seems to be removed by degrees: his freedom of movement is halted by the invasion of his room; his freedom of mind succumbs to the electrical shocks; his fear of rats infects his love for Julia and he betrays her. My analysis, however, casts doubt on the idea of a freedom progressively lost, of a narrative, and, indeed, of narrative time in the novel.

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<sup>1</sup>George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: New American Library, 1961). Page numbers given are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 158-59; Bruce Morrisette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963).

<sup>3</sup>For a related approach to the text, see Murray Sperber, "'Gazing into the Glass Paperweight': The Structure and Psychology of Orwell's *1984*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 26 (1980), 213-26. For specific work relating Orwell to psychoanalytic theory, see Paul Roazen, "Orwell, Freud, and *1984*," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 54 (1978), 675-95, and Richard Smyer, *Primal Dream and Primal Crime: Orwell's Development as a Psychological Novelist* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979).

The Goldstein document, a text within the text, is a *mise en abyme* of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a miniature of the relation between Orwell's narrator and the reader. O'Brien's remarks concerning the composition of this text occur late in the novel. O'Brien says:

"You have read the book, Goldstein's book, or parts of it, at least. Did it tell you anything that you did not know already?"

"You have read it?" said Winston.

"I wrote it. That is to say, I collaborated in writing it. No book is produced individually, as you know." (p. 215)

Though this is one of the few times that a piece of falsification is acknowledged, Winston makes no attempt to work out the consequences of O'Brien's admission. Yet his statement makes it incumbent on the reader, as it should be on Winston, to rethink the drama, incorporating the information into parts I and II, for their meaning has changed.<sup>4</sup> O'Brien is, in fact, a master of verbal ambiguity. If O'Brien wrote the book, then when Winston reads the book aloud to Julia, though he believes he is reading freely, the words are O'Brien's. The famous book that deceived Winston also deceives us, as it is so long that we forget Winston is reading Goldstein and believe we ourselves are reading Orwell.

Having learned that O'Brien speaks with a "forked tongue," we must look again at his words. Winston recalls an early encounter with O'Brien: "Years ago—how long was it? Seven years it must be—he had dreamed that he was walking through a pitch-dark room. And someone sitting to one side of him had said as he passed: 'We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness'" (p. 24). Winston knows that the voice is O'Brien's and that it is speaking the truth but he does not know what the words mean. Winston will find "the place where there is no darkness" deep underground in the torture cells of the Ministry of Love. Again, when O'Brien offers a toast, "To our Leader: To Emmanuel Goldstein" (p. 141), we read it initially as a pledge of hope but now only as a mockery by O'Brien, who owes the strength of his Party to this authorized, internal enemy. O'Brien takes advantage, apparently consciously, of the fundamental ambiguity of language.

Julia is the other possible foil for Winston. Can we trust Winston's judgment of her? A woman of many appearances, from painted lady to Spy, to lover, Julia knows her way around. She puts in extra time for the Party in order to be able to cheat "in the important things," as she believes. A mechanic by trade, she carries her tool kit even to the secret room. She has a myriad of trysting places, for Party members only, around the countryside. She claims to have stolen the real coffee and real chocolate available only to members of the Inner Party. Is it possible she is a spy? Twice we find her listed between two other members of the Inner Party. Winston's search for the words of the nursery rhyme, "Oranges and lemons say the bells of St. Clement's," is satisfied in stages: Charrington teaches him the first two lines (p. 83), Julia adds a third (p. 121), and O'Brien completes the stanza just as Winston leaves his apartment (p. 147). Charrington turns out to be a member of the Thought Police, and O'Brien is a member of the Inner Party. The same grouping occurs late in the novel in Winston's memory of traveling down a long corridor: "With him were the guards, the other questioners, the men in white coats, O'Brien, Julia, Mr. Charrington, all rolling down the corridor together and shouting with laughter" (p. 201). The narrator fails to comment on Julia's dubious associates.

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<sup>4</sup>See Morrisette, cited above, and his treatment of the "absence" at the heart of Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommies*.

What can we make of the love affair she had “when she was sixteen, with a Party member of sixty who later committed suicide to avoid arrest” (p. 109)? Though she seems to speak frankly and in no way implies her involvement in his plight, the extreme difference in ages makes us wonder if the Party has used her. Julia observes Winston’s violent reaction to the appearance of a rat under the wainscoting of the bedroom (p. 120). This is information that would be useful to report to the Thought Police if they wanted to know what the worst thing in the world was for a particular person. Can Julia have “ratted” on him? But “no,” you say, “there was a telescreen in the room.” Julia may have contributed to the truth of this statement. We watch as Julia bursts into the room, “carrying a tool bag of coarse brown canvas . . . she disengaged herself rather hurriedly, partly because she was still holding the tool bag. She fell on her knees, threw open the bag, and tumbled out some spanners and a screwdriver that filled the top part of it” (p. 116). We assume that the tools conceal what is hidden underneath, but perhaps they are not as innocent as they seem; the engraving is, after all, screwed to the wall and it would be easy to install the screen behind it. When Julia says shortly, “I bet that picture’s got bugs behind it. I’ll take it down and give it a good cleaning some day” (p. 122), it puts us on our guard.

Some of the story elements enhance our suspicions of Julia. We may find in her name an echo of “Judas,” with the major events of her affair with Winston—accompanying him to O’Brien’s, identifying him to the Thought Police, and betraying him—duplicating Peter’s triple betrayal of Christ before the crowing of the cock. Does that explain the “crocuses” on the ground at their final encounter? This meeting occurred in March, the third month and the time prophesied for the betrayal of Caesar. We can not be sure about Julia; she is a perfect example of ambiguity.<sup>5</sup> With her series of masks, she stands as an example of the insubstantiality of every individual within the totalitarian state, while Winston, deceived in the only intermediate contact between himself and the State, becomes even more alone.<sup>6</sup>

How does Winston cope with the verbal and physical ambiguity around him? His resemblance to his associates is more marked than his differences from them. Winston’s ambiguity lies on the moral and intellectual plane, however, and is apparent in his professional and social life and in his experience of space and of time. Winston works professionally at the Ministry of Truth as an expert in falsification. Here is how he deals with it, even after he meets Julia: “In so far as he had time to remember it, he was not troubled by the fact that every word he murmured into the speakwrite, every stroke of his ink pencil, was a deliberate lie” (p. 151). The similarity to O’Brien, who wrote the Goldstein book, is striking.

The heart of the book contains references to four of Winston’s personal relationships, each colored by violence. They follow a sequence of increasing intimacy, from lover, to wife, to mother, and finally, to O’Brien. The first occurs when, because Winston does not want to lie to Julia, he introduces himself to her by saying, “I hated the sight of you. I wanted to rape you and then murder you afterwards.” Second is Winston’s conversation with Julia about an incident of ten years earlier, when he had had an impulse to kill his wife one sunny afternoon. Julia says:

“Why didn’t you give her a good shove? I would have.”

“Yes, dear, you would have. I would have if I’d been the same person then as I am now. Or perhaps I would . . . I’m not certain.”

“Are you sorry you didn’t?”

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<sup>5</sup>This is not the conventional understanding of Julia. Sperber, for instance, says: “. . . the lovers are from traditional romance, and Julia is little more than a stereotypical sex object” (p. 216).

<sup>6</sup>For the political use of “atomization,” see William S. Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of One German Town, 1930-1935* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965).

"Yes. On the whole I'm sorry I didn't." (p. 112)

The third incident refers to a childhood memory Winston connects with his mother. The narrator promises much when he says of Winston, "In the dream he had remembered his last glimpse of his mother, and within a few moments of waking, the cluster of small events surrounding it had all come back. It was a memory that he must have deliberately pushed out of his consciousness over many years" (p. 135). But in the following pages there is nothing that would make Winston "wake up with tears in his eyes" as he did. According to the narrator, Winston remembers running away with his sister's share of the chocolate in his hand: "He stopped, but he did not come back. His mother's anxious eyes were fixed on his face. Even now she was thinking about the thing, he did not know what it was, that was on the point of happening." The near-recall is tantalizing. Winston seems to believe he betrayed his mother or he may actually have reported her to the Thought Police.<sup>7</sup> In either case, he suffers from guilt over his mother's disappearance. Moreover, as the narrator frequently describes characters who exhibit moral callousness as having tears in their eyes or wearing spectacles, Winston's tears here suggest a blurring of his moral vision.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, when Winston and Julia want to join the Brotherhood, O'Brien asks whether they will give their lives, commit murder and acts of sabotage, and betray their country. Without hesitation, they agree. Finally, O'Brien asks:

"You are prepared to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases—to do anything which is likely to cause demoralization and weaken the Party?"

"Yes."

"If, for example, it would somehow serve our interests to throw sulphuric acid in a child's face—are you prepared to do that?"

"Yes." (p. 142)

Though the resemblance between the so-called revolutionary Brotherhood and the world of Big Brother extends past the similarity of their names to the innermost core of morality, Winston shows no sign of revulsion, believing his liaison with Julia is more the measure of his humanity than is political action, however extreme. If he is silent about his sense of guilt and indifferent about his impulses to violence, Winston is acutely sensitive to his physical environment. The church bells of the nursery rhyme seem to call him to confession. Every sound echoes with accusation: Winston hears it in the crackle of twigs and in the "bluebells" of the countryside, and the song of the thrush makes him imagine that a microphone is concealed nearby. We may best understand this with reference to the Golden Country. In Part I, Winston says, "The landscape that he was looking at recurred so often in his dreams that he was never fully certain whether or not he had seen it in the real world. In his waking thoughts he called it the Golden Country" (p. 29). In Part II it appears as real terrain (p. 103) and in Part III as an hallucination (p. 230). The

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<sup>7</sup>That denunciation is commonplace in Winston's society appears in Winston's thoughts about the Parsons, his neighbors. Winston expects Mrs. Parsons to be the victim (p. 53) though in the event it is Mr. Parsons (p. 193). For an alternate scenario of the "crime," in which Winston's mother is linked with the rats by a complex chain of associations, see Marcus Smith, "The Wall of Blackness: A Psychological Approach to 1984," *Modern Fiction Studies* 14 (1968), 423-33.

<sup>8</sup>Besides suggesting lack of moral vision, the glasses offer, in their outline, a pair of zeroes, and thus belong to the "O" sequence, discussed below. A similar instance of glasses belonging to both a view of morality and a numerical sequence occurs in Morrisette's analysis of Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, p. 96.

difference between Winston's psychic life and his perceived reality has been obliterated.

The blurring of the difference between inner space and outer space is echoed by a blurring of past and present.<sup>9</sup> We find this, for example, in the date of the first entry in his diary: April 4, 1984. Written in the Newspeak mode, this gives 4.4.84, the date of Winston's birth and the date of the writing. Again, though the furniture in the bedroom over the antique store belongs to the past, it has been coopted by the present. The engraving of St. Clement's Dane conceals a telescreen and thus contributes to Winston's betrayal. Further, if we look closely, we can read the message on its face: "Winston came across to examine the picture. It was a steel engraving of an oval building [a zero] with rectangular windows, and a small tower in front [a 1]. There was a railing running round the building and at the rear end there was what appeared to be a statue [another 1]" (p. 82). Winston reads the "101" even in past time. Winston's lack of self-knowledge, seen in the fragmentation and violence of his personal relationships, traps him in a closed system where repetition replaces progress.

The voice of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that of an unreliable narrator, much as the Goldstein text was composed by a master of the ambiguous word; both the Orwell-narrator and O'Brien offer fictitious worlds. In the case of the book, complicity between the narrator and Winston initially exercises its hold on us. But Orwell's narrator, in spite of his unreliability, tells us indirectly how to read the text when he describes "doublethink": "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies . . . to repudiate morality while laying claim to it . . . to forget, whenever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed . . ." (p. 32). Further, he gives to numbers in the novel a role which we can now better decipher. If Winston cannot stand apart from himself in order to judge his actions or think critically about his motives, he is a moral zero. The narrator conveys this in the initial O that links Ogilvy, Winston's imaginary hero, with O'Brien, Oceania, and even the Orwell-narrator. What remains is the consciousness "1," which names everything in the environment: the city is Airstrip One; the encyclopaedia under constant revision is the 11th edition; the Two Minutes Hate begins at 1100 hours; when Winston goes to sleep at 2300 hours, it is 11 o'clock in the old system; Winston is tortured in room 101. The textual elements of one and zero, alternating mechanically, echo the rigidity of the German goose-step. The narrator invites us to this conclusion from the outset: "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." A transposition of thirteen hours gives 1 o'clock.

Orwell's narrator has carefully constructed a situation in which we, by sympathizing with Winston and trusting the narrator, undergo an experience of doublethink. The text of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "rings true" but is essentially ambiguous, like the bells, whose chime suggests confession, accusation, embrace, and torture, but never freedom. In the process of disentangling himself from Winston and the narrator, the reader comes to a better understanding of the nature of doublethink and restores, even strengthens, his humanity.

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<sup>9</sup>For temporal blurring in *Les Gommés* and *Le Voyeur*, see Morrissette, pp. 51-53 and 89-93.