1984: Language and Style

1984 has many of the stylistic virtues which Orwell developed in his non-fictional books and essays. The vocabulary is a plain one, with few unfamiliar words to get in the way of our understanding. When any new words have to be introduced, like “Minitrue” and “doublethink”, their meaning is explained immediately. Figurative language is restrained and generally takes the form of simple, even commonplace similes which add helpful emphasis and connotation to what they describe. Victory Gin is “like a dose of medicine” (1.1); that is to say, unpleasant but therapeutic. The Thought Police carry off Julia “like a sack” (2.10); she is reduced from an autonomous person to a mere object to be hauled away and emptied out. For moments when Winston’s emotions are particularly intense, there are also metaphors, made more powerful by their sparing use: “The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia’s life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal” (2.4).

Orwell’s writing voice – an apparently unassuming one, which prefers concrete to abstract nouns, a casual to a formal tone and short statements to long, and which seems to think through a topic step by step, sharing the process with the reader, sometimes breaking off to ask a question or describe something in a mocking way – is a highly effective one for leading us through an argument, but it is not necessarily well suited to the demands of fiction writing. The creation of a fictional world with credible characters requires more subtle language than is needed to put over a discussion, and it has been argued that this a source of weakness in Orwell’s early novels. However, because the central character of 1984 is himself a kind of journalist, preoccupied by the issues which interested Orwell, much of the book is able to incorporate the Orwell “voice” in a wholly appropriate way. The “voice” actually belongs to the narrator rather than Winston, but echoes Winston’s thoughts through the use of free indirect discourse.

Orwell varies the texture of the book by bringing in other language features to evoke the context in which Winston’s thoughts are formed. The adjectives used in the descriptions are often sordid, emphasising the poverty of his environment. The Saint Pancras district is “battered...filthy...narrow”, housing people who are “swollen waddling ... old bent ... ragged barefooted” (1.8). Many of the similes used refer to animals. This is a favourite device of Orwell’s, reflecting his down-to-earth view of life, but applied to people with a sinister outlook it acquires an additional satirical charge, as in the “gorilla-faced guards”(1.1) and the “small, swiftly-moving, beetle-like man”(2.1).

Other registers increase the diversity of the book further. Some work well, others less so, but overall they ensure that, despite the constant emphasis on Winston’s inner reflections, the language does not become monotonous. There are the state’s propaganda slogans, so striking that some have become known even to people who have not read the books, such as the ambiguous “Big Brother is watching you” (1.1), a threat which scarcely even pretends to offer reassurance, and the paradoxical “Freedom is slavery” (1.2). There is the cheerful camaraderie of Julia (“Just let me show you what I’ve brought”2.4), the mindless enthusiasm of Parsons (“Pretty smart for a nipper of seven, eh?”1.5) and the proles’ cockney (“I arst you civil enough, didn’t I?”1.8) The crude fumbling for meaning of Winston’s early diary entries (“theyll shoot me i don’t care”1.1) contrast with the fluent analyses of Goldstein (“In so far as the war has a direct economic purpose, it is a war for labour power”2.9), the simplistic formulations of the history textbook (“These rich men were called capitalists. They were fat, ugly men with wicked faces”1.7) and the aggressive sophistries of O’Brien (“we make the laws of nature”2.3). There are the two contrasting songs (the sentimental “It was only an ‘opeless fancy” and the sneering “Under the spreading chestnut tree”), the nostalgic descriptions of nature (“the ground was misty with bluebells”2.2) and the almost surreal nightmares which have an uncertain relation to the waking world (“Suddenly he floated out of his seat, dived into the eyes and was swallowed up”3.2.).

Above all, there is the most prominent and controversial aspect of the book’s language, Newspeak – the official language of Oceania, intended to replace Standard English or Oldspeak around the year 2050. Some critics have objected that Newspeak is impossible. Most of what we think does not take the form of words, they point out, and when we do use words to formulate our ideas, we are not controlled by them, but swap them around and substitute them until we are satisfied they make acceptable sense. Howe can a word be abolished? How can unofficial meanings be outlawed? How can natural language change and variation be prevented? Once again, however, Orwell is not making a prediction, but satirically exaggerating an important point. In “Politics and the English Language” (1946) he had warned that careless language use, particularly over-reliance on ready-made phrases, can lead to careless and insensitive thinking. If people use jargon terms like “elimination of unreliable elements” to describe murdering their opponents, then it is comparatively easy for them to avoid admitting the horror of their acts, even to themselves. The more such vague jargon there is in circulation, the easier it is to have sloppy thoughts. Newspeak makes us aware of the problem, but by developing it to the point of absurdity, it reminds us at the same time of the potential strength of Oldspeak, and how in the hands of great or even simply careful writers out existing language can be used to clarify our ideas and to extend and enrich our experience. If a translation of the Declaration of Independence consists simply of the word “crimethink”, we may wonder what the works of “Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Byron, Dickens and some others” (Appendix) will consist of when the likes of Ampleforth have finished with them.

In a world in which verbal language is being systematically corrupted, there is a counterbalancing emphasis in the book on body language, which often expresses feelings more openly, such as the “magnificent gesture by which a whole civilisation seemed to be annihilated” when Julia strips herself and flings away her uniform (2.2), the contorted motions of the Hate Week speaker who “clawed the air menacingly” (2.9) and, most important of all, the “enveloping, protective gesture” of Winston’s mother when she puts her arm around his sister (2.7) and the similar gesture “made again thirty years later by the Jewish woman he had seen on the news film, trying to shelter the small boy from the bullets, before the helicopters blew them both to pieces (2.7).