A Way with Words: Thomas Merton's Orwellian Thoughts on Language

John Gillespie

Introduction

In his journals, wedged between his thoughts on the monastery's groundskeeping and a yet another sleepless night, Thomas Merton made an intriguing comment about the famous English writer George Orwell: 'Today I read Orwell's fine essay *Politics and the English Language*. How much the same trouble is found in my "message"!'[1] And that's all we have. Nowhere else in Merton's published works do we find another mention of Orwell or his writings. This stray remark is both exciting and frustrating for scholars. Just what exactly was the 'same trouble' to which Merton referred? How might Orwell help us to understand Merton's own writings on language and politics?[2]

Orwell's views on language are well known, particularly from 'Politics and the English Language', mentioned above, as well as his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But what might the straight-talking and sober English writer have in common with the modernist American poet, monk, and mystic? More to the point, what might the agnostic have to say to the believer? Well, despite their differences, both Orwell and Merton shared an understanding of how language—especially political language—can be misused, distorted, and manipulated for destructive ends. At the same time, they both saw the importance of language as a medium for guiding human values and actions toward a higher, if not eternal, meaning.

'Packages of Meaning'

Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* (1946) has become a staple of English Composition courses in the United States. I make sure my students read it carefully before they commit pen to paper. The essay is both informative and diagnostic: It helps students recognise the common,

and yet often overlooked, flaws in their own essays—dying metaphors, pretentious language, and vague or meaningless idioms. But the problem runs deeper than in bad grades in Composition 101. Orwell points out that thoughtlessly deployed and hackneyed phrases often masquerade as thinking. We use them, believing we have said something thoughtful, when in fact we have caricatured thought. How often have we advised someone to 'get their ducks in a row,' or not to 'put all our eggs in one basket,' or, to pull from contemporary speech, encouraged one to 'think outside the box?' To continually recycle these formulaic cliches, in speech or in print, not only erodes their clarity with each usage, but also harms the user by diminishing their ability to think clearly and, in turn, to communicate effectively. As Orwell writes:

> [The English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts... if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.[3]

This is precisely the 'trouble' to which Merton referred. Whether in business, school, or the monastery, Merton saw how daily tasks and directives were obfuscated by what he variously calls 'lingo, jargon, officialese, glossolalia, journalese, doubletalk, unthink.'[4] Reflecting on his own experience at Gethsemani, he noted that even the monastic environment was inundated with ambiguous words like 'must,' 'ought,' and 'should.' However, instead of acting with clear purpose, his fellow monks were 'running all around with packages of meaning'— reciting predigested phrases or metaphors that seem to give a conversation momentum, but actually communicate very little.[5]

As an essayist and poet, Merton had no quarrel with metaphors or figurative language. However, he was suspicious of what Robert Jay Lifton aptly described as 'thought-terminating clichés.' Lifton was referring to self-referential propositions used by totalitarian societies—airtight tautologies that defied both analysis and criticism. They circumvent real conversation and reduce the 'most far-reaching and complex of human problems ... into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. These become the start and finish of any ideological analysis.'[6] Merton said much of the same. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he expressed disapproval for the use of 'old worn-out words, clichés, slogans, rationalizations' that too often replace thoughtful discussion. Such language, he argued, results in

sound, but not speech. He also noted that the modern world is so overwhelmed by 'empty words and machine noises' that an intelligent person will despair over making sense of it all. Each individual 'does not talk, he produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés.'[7]

The Relative Equality of all Animals

Aristotle described human beings as 'political animals' in the first sections of the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics. One wonders if Orwell had this quote in mind while writing *Animal Farm* (1945), especially given Aristotle's cynicism about democratic government. While Aristotle appreciated democracy's inclusion of diverse perspectives (two heads are better than one), he also feared that impulsive voters could be too easily swayed by passion, leading them to vote for bad policies and elect bad leaders.

Although scholars often read *Animal Farm* as an allegory of the Soviet Union, it can also be seen as a warning against the dangers of direct democracy. Through his farm animals-turned-revolutionaries, Orwell illustrates how hallmark democratic ideals, such as the belief in equality, can be manipulated by those who hold power—often through the manipulation of language. The pigs in Orwell's tale initially promote the absolute equality of animals, but as they become more authoritarian, they subvert their own principles, adding to their maxim, 'some animals are more equal than others.' By perpetuating ambiguity, unscrupulous leaders can impress on their hearers 'their own private definition,' as Orwell explained in 'Politics and the English Language.'[8] In short, they can dupe people into interpreting a political message in accordance with their own predispositions. This explains the phenomenon of sustained party loyalty, even when the party abruptly reverses polices.

Merton shared Orwell's cautious view of democracy. In fact, he described the average American voter much as Orwell portrayed his slogan-chanting sheep in *Animal Farm*. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), Merton observed that in the United States, government seems to operate on its own energy, detached from the will of the expressed will of the people. This is because the typical voter, he argued, is quick to absorb and repeat an 'inhuman void of words, formulas, slogans, declarations, echoes—ideologies!'[9] And the loudest voices often attract the largest audiences. Armed with these empty phrases, the voter, like Orwell's sheep, believes he is genuinely thinking, agreeing, and giving

his consent to this or that proposition as a responsible citizen, but he is really just repeating slogans, and recycling propaganda. The real trouble, as Merton explains, is that

> democracy assumes that the citizen knows what is going on, understands the difficulties of the situation, and has worked out for himself an answer that can help him to contribute, intelligently and constructively, to the common work (or 'liturgy') of running his society.[10]

Only a monk would use the word 'liturgy' to describe the democratic process. While today the term typically refers to a 'church service' or 'worship,' the ancient Greek word from which it derives, *leitourgia*, originally meant 'the public work of the people', and was used to describe any civic duty. The early Church adopted it to describe public worship, thus elevating its connotation. Merton's use of 'liturgy', therefore, suggests that, for him, the work of governing has a spiritual dimension and should not be undertaken thoughtlessly. Because, like worship, democracy is 'founded on a kind of faith,' one must take the time to safeguard against either complacency or extremism. Each citizen must take the time to educate him or herself, be tolerant of minority voices, protect individual conscience from what he calls 'occult encroachment'.[11] It is interesting to note that Orwell also likens vapid political 'phraseology' to 'unconscious ... responses in church!'[12]

'Honor, Duty, Obedience' and other Unspeakable Crimes

When Orwell wrote 'Politics and the English Language,' the world was just emerging from the devastation of World War II. Between 70 and 85 million people—about three percent of the global population—had perished, many in truly unspeakable ways. Surveying the devastation, many people struggled to find the words to describe the horrors they had witnessed. This collective speechlessness is understandable, given that the perpetrators had invented vague euphemisms to conceal their crimes. Orwell noted that this practice was not limited to the Nazis. In fact, all sides employed a new lexicon of sinister euphemisms to conceal their actions. Killing civilians was now 'pacification'. Bombing entire civilian populations, once considered unthinkable, became 'strategic bombing' or 'morale bombings'. The forced relocation of entire populations became the 'transfer of population' or 'rectification of frontiers.' Show trials and the mass execution of political dissidents were labeled the 'elimination of

unreliable elements'.[13]

In 1966, Merton published a challenging essay called 'A Devout Meditation on Adolf Eichmann,' named for the Nazi bureaucrat who arranged for the transport and execution of millions of European Jews during the Holocaust. Merton was disturbed to find that after being assessed by a team of psychologists, Eichmann was judged to be *'perfectly sane'*.[14] He appeared to suffer from no psychosomatic trauma. In fact, he seemed quite well-adjusted. How can we explain this? Merton writes that Eichmann was so well supplied with manufactured euphemisms and official justifications that he could have easily gone home and slept soundly. He was dutiful and obedient, after all. He was equipped with the vocabulary to talk about his duties without ever directly talking about murder. Here is just a small sampling: *Abrechnung mit den Juden* was to 'settle one's account with the Jews'. It covered any number of actions but most often referred to their removal and financial plunder. *Sonderbehandlung,* or 'special treatment', doubled for execution. *Aktion,* or simply 'action', was used to refer to any large-scale operation resulting in mass murder. And, of course, *Endlösung der Judenfrage,* was the 'final solution of the Jewish question'—a phrase so notorious today that it can no longer be used euphemistically.

Merton feared that, much like the Nazis had used language to justify the unjustifiable, a similar trend was underway in the United States:

> Even Christians can shake off their sentimental prejudices about charity, and become sane like Eichmann. They can even cling to a certain set of Christian formulas, and fit them into a Totalist Ideology. Let them talk about justice, charity, love, and the rest. These words have not stopped some sane men from acting very sanely and cleverly in the past. . . .[15]

In his essay 'Target Equals City', (1962) Merton observes that during World War II, the distinction between civilian and combatant had collapsed into the ambiguous word 'target.' This meant that so-called 'phantom industries' in which civilians worked in arms industries were fair game for destruction. While one might argue that the emergence of the so-called 'military industrial complex' has effectively erased the civilian-combatant divide, Merton was primarily concerned that cloaking the strategy in such vague, imprecise language hid its true nature. He goes on to declare that the Christian concept of a 'just war' has become completely irrelevant, having been replaced by the morally neutral

'limited war'.[16]

Merton was especially suspicious of the phrase 'better dead than red'. The popular Cold War bumper-sticker slogan assumed that we should prefer to be corpses over communists. Merton attacks the phrase as the most inimical of false dichotomies. Why, he asked, must surrender or suicide be the only options? We are asked to accept that 'the destruction of communism has become the one all-important aim of life, more important than the survival of civilization, crucial enough to risk the annihilation of the entire human race.'[17] Furthermore, Merton notes that the slogan assumes that totalitarianism is superior to democracy, and that it cannot survive unless aided by violence. It is 'a mentality of defeat', he writes, in which truth does not possess the strength or appeal to prevail on its own. And perhaps Merton's most Orwellian of criticisms is his assertion that the logic of the cliché is that it leads people to associate 'destruction' with 'rescue'.[18] Annihilation is victory. Death is life. When we blow the world up, we win. Of course, this is the mentality of INGSOC, the ruling Party of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> WAR IS PEACE
> FREEDOM IS SLAVERY
> IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH [19]

The 'Big Hole'

In his commentary on Camus, Merton asks: 'Can language make sense if there is no God? Is not man, in that case, reduced to putting together a series of more or less arbitrary noises in the solitude of a mute world?'[20] Here, Merton is echoing St. Augustine, who taught that words are 'signs' endowed with a divine purpose. All speech, whether written or spoken, aims to describe some aspect of truth. We might also point to C.S. Lewis's famous criticism of the *Green Book* in his *Abolition of Man* for elaboration. Lewis despairs when the authors reduce a statement of absolute values to a mere statement about feelings.[21] For Lewis, Merton, or Augustine, the statements, 'the sky is blue,' or 'the grass is green,' are statements engineered toward truth, not arbitrary ideas or feelings about the sky or grass. To use language, therefore, is to acknowledge truth, and therefore, to acknowledge God. Even the atheist who declares, 'there is no God,' is saying, 'there is no truth,' and must therefore confront the reality that he has made a paradoxical statement. Simply put, we cannot have words for 'good' or 'bad' unless there is some ultimate meaning underlying them. As

Merton writes, 'If language has no meaning, then nothing has any meaning.'[22]

Although Orwell was an agnostic who kept his distance from the Church, he never officially left it. One can visit his grave today at All Saints' Church in Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire, England, where he requested a traditional Anglican service at his funeral. Still, Orwell most likely died a doubter. During his life he thought that Christian literary giants such as G.K. Chesterton and T.S. Eliot were brilliant but misguided writers whose talents would have better served humanity if liberated from archaic dogma.

Despite his skepticism about religion, Orwell would have understood Merton's point: if language is rootless, detached from any ultimate meaning, then it becomes arbitrary and circular—a mere 'sign' pointing only to itself. Orwell acknowledged this problem in a letter to a friend, stating, '[Christianity's] disappearance has left a big hole, and we ought to take notice of that.'[23] Elsewhere, he wrote that the central existential issue for modern, atheistic society is 'how to restore the religious attitude while accepting death as final.'[24]

Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) is one possible answer to how the 'big hole' left by religion might be filled. As the scholar Patricia Hill rightly observes, INGSOC, the ruling Party in Orwell's dystopia, has created a political structure that parodies the Church: The Ministry of Truth is the Holy Office, Hate Week echoes Holy Week, and the Church's liturgy is mocked in the Two-Minute Hate. And of course, the omnipresent 'Big Brother' is a proxy for God.[25] These symbols do not represent, as some have suggested, Orwell's personal attack on religion. Rather, they are Orwell's vision of what human existence may become without the value system once provided by the religion.

Oceania's first line of attack is the repurposing of language. INGSOC declares: 'War is Peace,' 'Freedom is slavery,' and so on. Winston Smith, an employee of the so-called Ministry of Truth, spends his days 'rectifying' news reports, official speeches, Party policy, and even the weather. He must follow the INGSOC's ongoing project to rewrite the English language so that it conforms to Party ideals—which are always shifting. Negative language is prohibited. Nothing is 'bad', but rather, 'ungood', and if something is particularly odious it is 'doubleplus ungood'. Adding further complication, any word can be at once a noun, a verb, or an adjective, thus seriously undermining any attempt to communicate with precision. Merton clearly echoes the policies of INGSOC in his essay

'War and the Crisis of Language':

> The illness of political language—which is almost universal and is a symptom of a Plague of Power ... is characterized everywhere by the same sort of double-talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity, and pseudoscientific jargon that mask a total callousness and moral insensitivity, indeed a basic contempt for man. The self-enclosed finality that bars all open dialogue and pretends to impose absolute conditions of one's own choosing upon everybody else ultimately becomes the language of totalitarian dictatorship, if it is not so already.[26]

Conclusions and Reflections

In 1946, George Orwell lamented that language was a in a 'bad way'.[27] Perhaps his fears were not so novel. In the fifth century BC, Plato worried that the shift to writing from an entirely spoken medium would damage the human capacity for rational thought. Speakers are responsive to dialogue, argument, and hence, to truth. But words on paper, removed from their speaker, are no better than fingerprints, mute witnesses to a past life. Merton and Orwell, who lived their lives by the pen, would have likely argued with Socrates' assessment of writing.

Orwell and Merton also agreed that empty language hides unpleasant facts. For the disingenuous politician, ambiguity provides a pathway to power. Since the 1947 shift from the Department of War to the less belligerent-sounding 'Department of Defense,' the United States has adopted several euphemisms meant to mask violent realities. Jets no longer accidentally kill people; they cause 'collateral damage', a phrase that emerged during the First Gulf War. The Second Gulf War introduced 'enhanced interrogation techniques', a wordsmithing of 'torture'. More recently, 'inoperative statements' or 'alternative facts' have become expanded code for 'lies'. One of the more interesting enigmas to be adopted by the State Department is the acronym VUCA, which refers to a dilemma, situation, or context (usually of a military nature, but not necessarily so) that is 'volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous'.

But paper has given way to the screen, and with it, a landscape of possibility that would have made Plato throw up his hands in despair. Merton worried that human speech would one day devolve to the point at which language contains only 'mechanical words,' or words generated entirely by machines. (And he lived before Artificial Intelligence—ChatGPT, Bard, and so on—threatened to eliminate the need for human

beings to form complete sentences). If this dystopian world of mechanical language comes to be, then Plato's ancient fear that printed language would someday replace human memory will take on an entirely new dimension. Moreover, consider the impact of social media and its barrage of advertisements, news stories, and hash-tagged political content. As objective journalism is nudged aside in favour of less-scrupulously researched content, we must wonder about the fate of free societies. 'Democracy cannot exist,' wrote Merton, 'when men prefer ideas and opinions that are fabricated for them.'[28]

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, Journals vol 6, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 283.
2. As far as I know, there is no intertextual comparison of Merton and Orwell's thoughts on language in print. In 2015, The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, gave an excellent lecture for the Orwell Foundation titled 'War, Words, and Reason: Orwell and Thomas Merton on the Crisis of Language'. This is the only scholarly work I know of that engages both Merton and Orwell.
3. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language' in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 349.
4. See Robert E Daggy, 'Thomas Merton's Critique of Language' in *The Merton Seasonal* vol 27/1, Spring 2002, pp. 11-15.
5. Thomas Merton, 'Day of a Stranger,' in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, edited by Patrick O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), p. 235.
6. Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), p. 249.
7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1964), pp. 10, 43.
8. 'Politics and the English Language', p. 353.
9. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), p. 66
10. *Conjectures*, p. 86.
11. *Conjectures*, p. 86.
12. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', p. 356.
13. 'Politics and the English Language', p. 356.
14. Thomas Merton, 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolph Eichmann' in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), p. 29.
15. *Raids*, p. 32.
16. Thomas Merton, 'Target Equals City' in *Passion for Peace*, edited by

William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 35.
17. Thomas Merton, 'Red or Dead' in Passion for Peace, p. 49.
18. See Thomas Merton, 'Better Red than Dead: Anatomy of a Cliché' in *Passion for Peace*, pp. 48-52.
19. George Orwell, 1984 (New York: Signet, 1977), p. 5.
20. Thomas Merton, 'Camus and the Church,' in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 271.
21. C.S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), p. 2-3.
22. Thomas Merton, 'Camus and the Church', p. 271.
23. Cited in Ada Sandison, *George Orwell: After 1984* (New Hampshire: Dover, 1978), p. 111.
24. Cited in Arthur Pollard, 'George Orwell: The Pious Atheist' in *The Churchman* (1984, 98:2), p. 103.
25. Patricia Hill, 'Religion and Myth in Orwell's 1984' in *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 10, no. 3, (Fall 1984), pp. 273-287.
26. Thomas Merton, 'War and the Crisis of Language' in *Passion for Peace*, p. 313.
27. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', p. 348.
28. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 86.

John Gillespie, PhD, is the organizer of the Houston chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society. He has published essays on Thomas Merton for ABC-CLIO's *American Religious History: Belief and Society through Time, An Unexpected Journal, Conceptions Review, The Anglican Compass, The Merton Annual, Sehnsucht: The C.S. Lewis Journal,* and *The New Ray Bradbury Review*.