



Orwell's intentional fallacy in Nineteen Eighty-Four

by Paolo Caponi

If it is true, as it certainly is, that one never really finishes reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Freedman 1984: 603), it may be also because the novel establishes with the reader a relation which involves the diffusion of its "meaning" (whatever it may be) through a series of channels that exceed the purely narrative, diegetic one. Its graphic, visual layout, for instance, forms a compact surface corrugated here and there by the italicized party slogans and, of course, also by Julia's declaration of love meant to stand out precisely because of its deviation from Oceania, and graphic, norms. And then we have the meta-critical apparatuses to account for, the appendix on Newspeak and that baffling, "editorial" footnote in the first chapter which, besides contributing themselves to breaking up the monochord graphic continuity of the narrative, imply *en passant* a different scenario for the years to come after A.D. 1984 (1982, in fact, but of this more later). And then again we have the errors, that reiterated fallacy which is both intentional and misleading in that it works against the principles that the text has established.

The "intentional fallacy" in my title refers precisely to this deliberate administration of lies by George Orwell (incidentally, a pseudonym), meaning with this quite a different thing from Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1946 famous essay on authorship where "fallacy" was to refer to the (then) reiterated attitude of considering the understanding of the author's intention as a preliminary condition to understand his work, as if dictated by the necessity to consult "the oracle" (Wimsatt and Beardsley



1946: 487). A turning point in the history of literary criticism on the author's role, that essay demonstrated how much could be gained, in critical terms, by introducing a mild principle of alienation between the text and its deviser. An alienation that, in more recent times, has been mercilessly pursued by structuralism and, to fall back within the purview of this argument, by the deconstructive logic when the latter discovers in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a text "that differs from itself" and relies on its "formal inconsistencies [...] as if they were part of the canonical text, which of course they are" (Kennedy 1998: 77, 78). Even though not much ink has been spilled to determine the real nature of these inconsistencies, the underlying principle is that they are to be considered unintentional – indeed, it is because of their un-intentionality and because of the fact that they stem from "the realm of desire" (Kennedy 1998: 78) that they can provide a "differential reading" and finally achieve a "release of new possible meanings" (Kennedy 1998: 77, 78).

This said, we may reasonably wonder what we have to do with those inconsistencies and discrepancies which are in the text of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but are, at the same time, clearly intentional and, moreover, go against the grain of narration. It is, in its essence, the same problem that Winston faces as soon as he begins his diary, that of communicating "with the future" (Orwell 1989: 9) and being sure that his work will not fall into the wrong hands. "For whom", Winston asks himself, "was he writing this diary?" (9). Like Winston, the author cannot verify that his contrived path of hidden clues will be properly detected and re-contextualized, and this raises important questions on the author's role and his text, his "intention" and his legacy. Because, if on the one hand this procedure emphasizes the author's presence and powers, which extend to the rear of the text and its subtext, on the other it implies a collaborative reader capable of recognizing and verifying the errors, or the clues, artfully disseminated along diegesis. The engaging notion of "schizo-text", as introduced in relation to postmodern fiction (Thiher 1984; Thomas 1988), may be of some help here, even though the idea is that we are still in the domain of the unconscious, of "an estrangement of the author from what he writes" and "within himself" (Thomas 1988: 84). Rather, what is featured in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appears as a compromise formation between two different aspects of textuality that make the text "differ from itself" but at the same time find in it the proper site for the deliberate inclusion and coexistence of (textual) differences.

The story of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is told in third person and is internally focused. In a way, Orwell and Winston partake in producing lies and inaccuracies of a varying degree of fault and intentionality. The fact that Winston claims, after his arrest, that "He did not know where he was. Presumably he was in the Ministry of Love [...]. His cell might be at the heart of the building or against its outer wall; it might be ten floors below ground, or thirty above it" (Orwell 1949: 241), contrasts sharply, as has been noted (Kennedy 1988: 82), with what he says later on, i.e. that "At each stage of his imprisonment he had known or seemed to know, whereabouts he was in the windowless building" (295). But this may be – even though the time-space resonances



might alert us to its significance, as we shall see – a mere authorial slip, a discrepancy overlooked in the process of authorial revision.

More problematic appears Winston's rendering of 1984 Victory Square, ex Trafalgar Square, where Nelson's statue is conveniently replaced by Big Brother's at the top of the "fluted column" (119) with the four lions around its plinth. In Winston's passing description of the square, where he has now to meet Julia to decide on their future rendezvous, the historical references that are there cannot be properly deciphered – apart, of course, from BB's ubiquitous effigy now appearing at the top of the column.

Winston was in Victory Square before the appointed time. He wandered round the base of the enormous fluted column, at the top of which Big Brother's statue gazed southward towards the skies where he had vanquished the Eurasian aeroplanes (the Eastasian aeroplanes, it had been, a few years ago) in the Battle of Airstrip One. In the street in front of it there was a statue of a man on horseback which was supposed to represent Oliver Cromwell. At five minutes past the hour the girl had still not appeared. Again the terrible fear seized upon Winston. She was not coming, she had changed her mind! He walked slowly up to the north side of the square and got a sort of pale-coloured pleasure from identifying St Martin's Church, whose bells, when it had bells, had chimed 'You owe me three farthings.' Then he saw the girl standing at the base of the monument, reading or pretending to read a poster which ran spirally up the column. It was not safe to go near her until some more people had accumulated. There were telescreens all around the pediment. But at this moment there was a din of shouting and a zoom of heavy vehicles from somewhere to the left. Suddenly everyone seemed to be running across the square. The girl nipped nimbly round the lions at the base of the monument and joined in the rush. Winston followed. As he ran, he gathered from some shouted remarks that a convoy of Eurasian prisoners was passing. (119-120)

That systematic alteration of the past perpetuated by the Party, the same that rendered the study of history through architecture as unreliable as that "from books" (102) and that in its *pars construens* supplied citizens "with every conceivable kind of information, [...], from a statue to a slogan" (45), mixes syncretically with the natural disorientation of the average public when facing signs of remote provenance and dubious intentionality. The reference to the "man on horseback which was supposed to represent Oliver Cromwell" (120), casually made by Winston when despairing of seeing Julia again, deploys a multileveled degree of interference in its reference to a monument that, notoriously, no one has ever really wanted and that here functions to efface the memory of George IV, whose equestrian statue in Trafalgar Square required, towards the end of the 19th century, an explanatory inscription as the public were no longer aware of whom it was. Winston's uncertainty in front of that marmoreal relic of history, however, not only expresses the bewilderment of an Airstrip One citizen when confronted with a tangible instance of alteration of the past – it also expresses a more profound doubt about the general praxis of its reification. The past that cannot be



read is not merely the one tampered with by the party but also, more extensively, that of a heritage industry that persists in its policy of denominations and attributions even though it is not a policy that can rest on a real collective, and shared, experience. Because it is always that kind of anodyne past, “a past that is not shared anymore by a common memory”, that “becomes available to the constitution/construction of heritage” (Patey 2002, 597). Unlike the reference to the *ius primae noctis* (76), however, with which the false identification of Cromwell shares a macroscopic misunderstanding of history, the error concerning “the man on a horseback” involves visual and spatial perception in its first place, and extends to those space-time relationships that the novel tends repeatedly to gloss and undermine.

Ingsoc policy of systematic manipulation of memory produces effects also on a broader scale, with consequences related to the geographical perception of space and that also go far beyond strictly topographical data. When in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we read of the geographical knowledge required in Winston’s work (190), we may interpret this as a reference to the bulk of cartographical notions necessary to Winston so as to “rectify” news in the *Times* in relation to events occurring worldwide. However, the rather puzzling reference also made by Winston to the fact that in the past “Even the name of countries, and their *shapes* on the map, had been different” (34; italics mine) may alert us to a different way of representing the world visually. The concept of the shape of a state is something that, in Orwell’s times, could hardly be separated from Halford Mackinder’s profoundly influential theorization on “pivotal areas” and world “heartlands” which entailed for Europe an imperative of expansion to the detriment of Russia. Extremely popular after WWI in his institutional role of British geographer and strategist, Mackinder (1861-1947) left a deep mark on the European anti-Soviet Union geopolitical studies, to the point that his theory was muscularly taken up by the German Nazi regime during the Thirties and also later, by the US policy during the Cold War. While Mackinder’s notorious mantra (“Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world”) left a tangible, linguistic echo in one of the Ingsoc slogans (“Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”, 37), his rationale, which divided the globe in three areas of influence not much dissimilar to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s partition of the world in Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia, was one that involved massively the “shapes” of states in its figuring and disfiguring the geographical *status quo* against the impending communist menace. It should be noted, however, and *pace* Mackinder, that the problem of transporting the tridimensional nature of the earth to the bi-dimensional nature of the map implies a distortion *per se* of areas, borders and state morphologies that can influence our way of looking at the world and at its geography. While we are accustomed to the concept that our geographical maps represent the world as it “really” is, the meaning of maps is decipherable not just on the basis of their “factual” content or on that of their measurable accuracy and their tradition of representation, but also through the cultural and historical milieu in which images have been viewed and used (Harley 1968; Torresani 2001). A representational system is officially adopted in formal and political circumstances and every change in this sense marks a solution



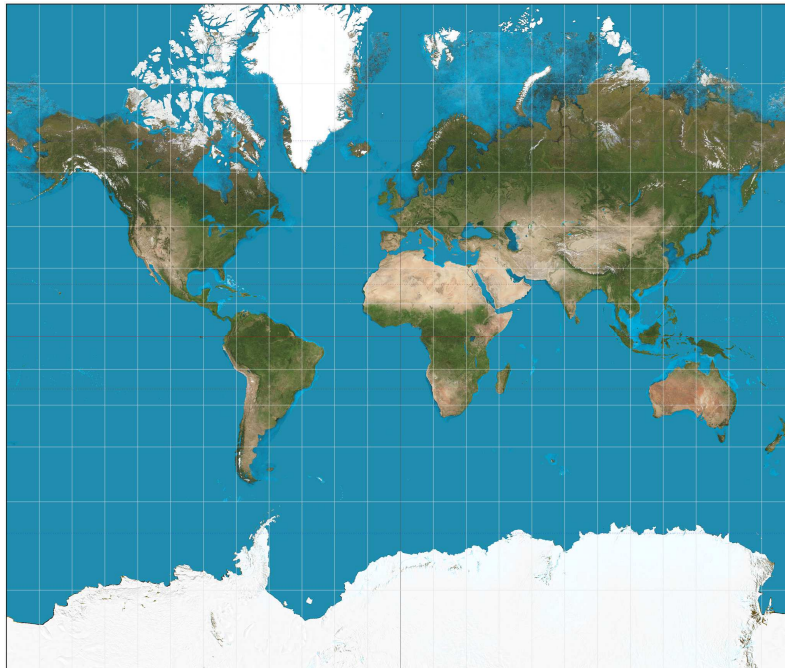
of continuity in the regular process of representation, which may entail a formal abandonment of the previous system in favor of a new one. The most frequently adopted "projection" (i.e., the process of geometrical adaptation of a solid to a bi-dimensional drawing) is that of Gerardus Mercator, a 16th century Flemish geographer and cartographer. In it, the visual representation of the shapes of the states is preserved at the expense of their effective areas. However, there are other cartographical projections that offer a different picture of the world. In Arno Peter's (Berlin 1916 – Bremen 2002) world-map, a distortion of the shapes of the states is the consequence of the imperative of preserving their respective areas, an inverted procedure compared to Mercatore's and one where Africa (a contended territory in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) is rendered realistically and gigantically, almost towed in by the surrounding parasitical superpowers (see below). Incidentally, when Mackinder expounded his theories to the Royal Geographical Society in 1904, Spencer Wilkinson objected to his use of Mercatore's projection, which "exaggerated the British Empire, with the exception of India" (Mackinder 1904: 438).

Naturally enough, Winston's reference to the shapes of the states may be an allusion to their political borders rather than to their representation. But, more coherently, it could be an allusion to a visual system of selection that has opted for certain data to the exclusion of other elements. Here again, as in the labeling of monuments, Winston's narrative, and his hesitations in the course of it, open the door to a dimension of relativism and arbitrariness which finds in cartographic representation a potential site for conflicts and lies. The geopolitical relativism the novel points at implies a representation susceptible of manipulation and propaganda, finding its legitimization in the "objectivity" of cartographic and scientific discourse, as it was to be found in the biased policy of denomination of monuments which disposed arbitrarily of the legacy of historical landmarks.

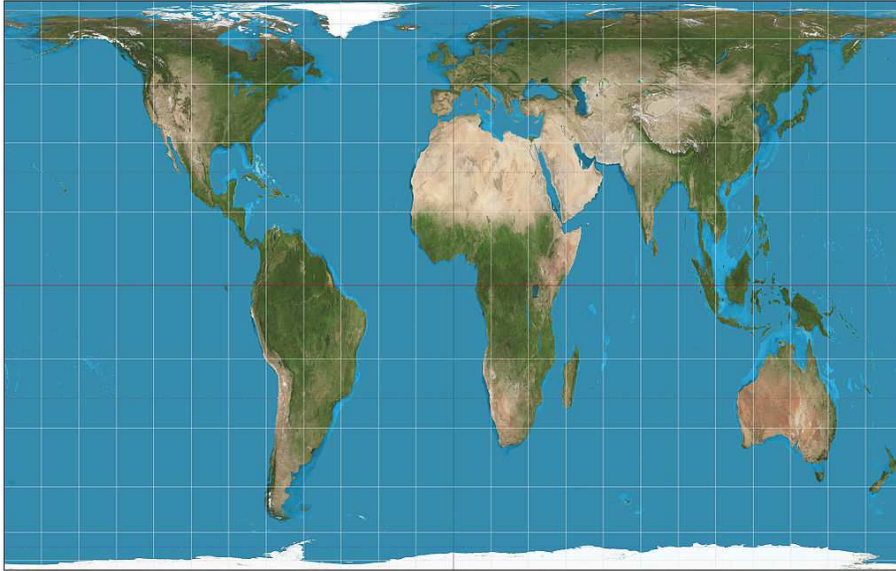
Even passages apparently detached from the geographical issue, like Winston's authorial creation of "Comrade Ogilvy" (49) – a routine task he has to perform for the *Times* and that "sprang to his mind, ready made as it were" (49) – bears the signs of the typical, anti-communist geopolitical obsession of the post-war period in the inherent "fallacy" of its accomplishment. Significantly bereft of his Christian name, Ogilvy accretes the narrative discourse on cartography and manipulation in that he is both a manipulated, arbitrarily generated character and an extra-textual reference that combine the lives, and surnames, of two canonical British cartographers of Orwell's past and present. John Ogilby (1600-1676) and Alan Grant Ogilvie (1887-1954) distinguished themselves for their cartographical research, the first producing in the year of his death the first collection of English road map ever, under the name of *Britannia*, the latter discussing the shape of the states at the Versailles peace conference where he was sent as a member of the British delegation. While the fictional Ogilvie chose to die in the Indian Ocean ballasted with his machine gun so as to preserve the secret of the dispatches he was carrying with himself, Ogilby the cartographer survived his shipwreck, together with his complete translation of Virgil's work, thanks to a providential waterproof cloth (Ereira 2016: 126). A. G. Ogilvie, in particular, was a Stakanov of geography, a staunch worker whose occupation at the



University of Edinburgh was marred by intermitting ill health dating from war service and who, like his heroic avatar, almost “perished in action” (49) for the dedication to his job while “always advising others to save some time for recreation and necessary rest” (Freeman 1967: 171; indeed, he was to die suddenly at the end of a full day’s work on 10 February 1954, 186). And it is part of the same coincidence that, like Winston, Ogilvie was entirely dependent on maps, photographs and printed sources which he considered a valid substitute for field work, as when he published his widely acclaimed *The Geography of the Central Andes* in 1922 without ever having been there (Freeman 1967, 170). A recipient of some of Mackinder’s letters, Ogilvie took in Versailles a critical stance, shown in a 1922 essay where he advocated the necessity to consider the value of the retention within one state of natural entities such as intermontane basins and valleys, a principle largely overruled by Versailles politicians (Freeman 170).



Mercatore’s projection.



Peter's projection.

(Sources: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_map_projections>, 20 February 2018).

The question of memory, as well as its retention and fallacy, repeatedly raised by Winston during his office hours and also in his peripatetic bouts of *"ownlife"* (85) about London, becomes more acute when the novel confronts itself with its calendar and the net of dates (both the days, and the appointments) which form its temporal and semantic structure. It is here, in the articulation of its chronological frame, that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reaches its peak of unreliability and it is here that the role of posterity, of "the unborn" (9) invoked in Winston's declaration of intents when he starts writing, emerges as crucially collaborative. As is clear from the incipit of Winston's diary, the novel begins on 4 April (9). Winston and Julia have their first rendezvous in the woods on "the second of May" (125), a Sunday (121). Their liaison goes on all May (134), then June (148), and they are finally caught in Charrington's love-nest "on an August evening" (233), even though some doubts remain in Winston as to the unusual amount of sunlight for that late hour. After their parallel stages of reintegration, Winston and Julia meet again only "on a vile, biting day in March" (304), very likely of the following year. And, as Winston realizes when "the long-hoped-for bullet" starts "entering his brain", it had taken him "forty years" (311) to love Big Brother, a statement that fits coherently with the certainty expressed before of being "thirty-nine" (9).

A perpetual calendar is a system designed to allow the calculation of the day of the week for a given date in the past or in the future. The determination of the day of the week for any date can be performed with a series of algorithms, something that users born before the spread of computers could achieve only by relying on their arithmetic proficiency, while second-wave Googlers can profit from simple lookup tables. By capitalizing on the only full date we have in the novel, that Sunday, 2 May that celebrates Winston and Julia's entering the Golden Country, many things can be



deduced. In fact, there was no Sunday, 2 May in the year 1984, 2 May 1984 falling on a Wednesday. In spite of an outstanding bulk of biographical work, we cannot determine if Orwell's mathematical proficiency extended to the world al algorithms; we can reasonably infer, though, that he wrote the novel with a 1982 calendar in front of him, since the nearest Sunday 2 May took place precisely two years before 1984. Even more likely, Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* keeping an eye on the calendar of the year he was living, since 1982 and 1948, Google tells, had the same distribution of weekdays. This said, the fact that Orwell "first set his story in 1980, but, as the time taken to write the book dragged on (partly because of his illness), that was changed to 1982 and, later, to 1984" (Davison 1989: II), is not to be considered a mere consequence of the slowness of writing or of bad health, but acquires a more complex dimension in the light of the discourse on manipulation and alteration that the novel articulates.¹ Incidentally, 4 April was also a Sunday, when the novel begins (assuming 1982 as the year of the events), which would imply regular Sunday shifts for the population of Airstrip One, a fact non surprising in itself and also confirmed by Julia's fatal question in Trafalgar square ("Can you get Sunday afternoon off?", 121).

The fact that the novel is set in 1982, instead of 1984, undercuts the narrative in the least obvious of places, i.e. not in any received notion of history manufactured by Ingsoc, as should be reasonably expected, but in that part of Winston's own narrative where we would locate the maximum of transparency and authenticity. Rather than being alerted by Winston's uncertainty about the proper date of the events ("To begin with he did not know with any certainty that this *was* 1984", 9, italics in the original; "Everything faded away into a shadow-world in which, finally, even the date of the year had become uncertain", 44), the reader's attention is deflected in that it partakes of the general acquiescence to the party's logic that blankets reason and critical scrutiny. Winston's capitulation to the Party propaganda and manipulation of history is not circumscribed to his persona, but extends to the reader's role as passive decoder of the more general message that the novel artfully encodes and who stubbornly ignores that 1984 is a date that resonates as "doubtful" (9) even in Winston's reasoning, given the impossibility "nowadays to pin down any date within a year or two" (9). Although the novel ends with an almost synchronic disappearance of its two authors, both Winston when the bullet enters his brain and Orwell for whom, as in homage to the structuralist credo, the end of writing has coincided with his biological death, the decrypting of the proper structural and temporal frame of the story alerts us to the author's role, capable of interfering throughout the years with the process of transmission of his own text and legacy.

¹ Davison devises this sequel of dates on the basis of his analysis of the extant manuscripts of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Davison 1984). There, he also gives an explanation of the final choice of 1984 as the year of the events which differs substantially from mine: "Perhaps the most intriguing interpretation of the year finally chosen was the subject of an anonymous note in *AJR Information*, November 1983; it stated that one of Orwell's Jewish friends had pointed out to him that 5744, the Jewish calendar's equivalent of 1984, 'represented the letters t-sh-m-d with its accompanying idea of «destruction»'" (xvi).



Adolph Hitler's notorious concept of *große Lüge*, as devised by a true authority on totalitarianisms, according to which the bigger the lie the more people are going to believe it, fits usefully here when the reader's response to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is measured against the supine acceptance of the articulated set of political lies that accompany our social existence. The big lie that nests in the pattern of dates and in the title of the novel is to be believed a-critically, like the Party's lies that the novel administers at a diegetic level. Curiously enough, this "error" was not even amended during Michael Redford's film production of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which occurred in and around London from April to June 1984 and which praised itself, in the final credits, for having shot the scenes in "the exact time and setting imagined by the author" (Radford 1984).

I have argued elsewhere that Orwell's description of a prole quarter of Airstrip One has a figurative palimpsest in William Hogarth's diptych *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street* (Caponi 2015), this influence being possibly an instance of that cryptomnesia that Carl Gustav Jung described so well when noting the almost literal influence of Justinus Kerner's *Blätter aus Prevorst* on an episode in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (Jung 1905). In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, however, as with the notion of schizo-text discussed above, the intervention of the unconscious seems to give way to a more deliberate stance, especially once noted, again in one of those Google lookup tables, that 1982 (the actual year when the novel takes place), 1948 (the date of its composition), and 1751 (the year of appearance of Hogarth's prints) had precisely the same distribution of weekdays.² Given this double, or triple, trajectory of meaning as a characteristic constituent of the narrative of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the author's role not only transcends posterity, which is obvious, but speaks to his different generations of readers with a profound awareness of the prolonged effects of his writing, provided a reader open to deciphering its various codes of expression is available. It is the reader's, more than the author's, intentions which are at stake here, in the sense that the reader is drawn into a kind of complicity while also repeatedly stirred in the paralyzing force of his habit. With unsurprising prescience, the novel most persuasively counters the postmodernist claim that the author's self is not represented at the scene of writing. Only, it is a self that cannot stand alone.

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² Noteworthy, and prolonging the list of coincidences, is the fact that the shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, effected in England in September 1752 (and which caused the obliteration of eleven days) was narrated in a 1965 American comic book (*The Atom*, no. 21) where a character was a magistrate Fielding (Kakalios 2005: 17-18). Henry Fielding was, as is well known, also behind Hogarth's diptych with his essay on the effects gin and addiction. Believe it or not, 1965 and 1982 had the same distribution of weekdays.



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