

LANGUAGE AND POWER

George Orwell's *1984* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as sources for a critical study on ecclesial discursivity and hermeneutic

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1. *George Orwell and the language as an oppressive device*

Under the immediate appearance of a simple prose, Orwell's masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a philosophical understanding of dictatorship, which is still relevant nowadays as a source of reflections about power. Indeed, the book was regarded by the dissident intellectuals of the East as a "realistic and detailed analysis of the mechanisms of power"¹, rather than as just a novel. The device that makes totalitarian domination possible is clearly shown in the novel as a scheme that operates in order not only to manipulate, but mainly to define the domain of truth: the *Newspeak*. It is in relation to it that the language fully acquires its importance in the novel. Undeniably, by controlling language and information through a complex coercive apparatus, the Party realizes a mind control of its subjects that is "total" in both extension and intensity. In extension, because the totality of the subjects is dominated; in intensity, because any individual thought is totally dominated.

To understand how Orwell can conceive of such a tragic result in relation to the language, the ontological foundation of this linguistic device has to be investigated. This is well shown in the novel, particularly by some O'Brien's statements:

"Reality is inside the skull. You will learn by degrees, Winston. There is nothing that we could not do. (...) You must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of Nature. We make the laws of Nature. (...) You are imagining that there is something called human nature, which will be out raged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature."²

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1 Chilton, P. 1988. *Orwellian Language and the Media*. London: Pluto Press, 43–44.

2 Orwell, G. 1990. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin Books, 211.

These few lines reveal the idealistic traits of the Party, its identity and its power: subordination of reality to thought, collectivity of thought itself, subordination of the individuals to the social totality, divinity of the State. Truth, in this conception, is nothing but the will of the Party. This ontology allows the total control of the individuals because of the intersubjective character of thought. In fact, truth not only exists in individual minds: its conception is also in constant connection with the way in which truth is conceived by other individuals. This relation implies the mutual conditioning of individual thoughts. However, the relation also implies a means that makes the interactions possible. In Orwell, as in mid-20th century analytic philosophy, the means *par excellence* is language, which is not a neutral means that would not alter the thought it communicates. On the contrary, the individual thought consists in a linguistic construction. This is the critical point on which a monopolistic power able to impose changes on language may act. By changing the language, it would also change the “chess-board” of individual thought, determining all its possible “moves”.³

Changing the structure of the means has two main consequences. The first is about the richness of thought, for example the number of different thoughts, or also the different shades of the same concept, possible in the individual. Indeed, the *Newspeak* is obtained by simplifying the language, for example eliminating synonyms and adjectives, with the result of an impoverishment of possible thought and its vocabulary. However, in contemporary literary critics, it seems very difficult to judge whether such a language could be realized. For instance, modern linguistic models have cast many doubts on the possibility to use an artificial language in real life.⁴ Linguistic faculty seems to have a structure and learning mechanisms of its own, which cannot be changed without changing the very biologic structure of the brain. Moreover, this especially applies to syntax, while Orwell’s hypothesis seems to deal more closely with semantics.

But if this first consequence doesn’t seem to have a real impact on daily life, the second has. Indeed, the most powerful feature of language, vital for a totalitarian will, consists not only in its destructive, but also constructive, power over thoughts. By not only destroying terms, but also modifying their use, the Party can alter the significance of a concept, especially if abstract. In this sense, it is important to highlight that, according to Orwell’s description, *Newspeak* is not the result of a linguistic decay. The specific linguistic features of decadence deeply differ from the structure of *Newspeak* imagined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, to the extent of being almost opposite. New-

3 Lewis, F. 1983. *The Tyranny of Language in Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984*. London: Comedia Publishing Group, 45–57.

4 Chomsky, N. 1965. *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.

speaks seems to take to the extreme some of Orwell's own suggestions for the reversing of the language decadence process. Thus, while in Politics contemporary English is mainly accused of being too vague, prolix, and meaningless, *Newspeak's* chief characteristics are the extreme poverty of language and the substitution of abstract concepts with concrete and practical meanings. Therefore, the linguistic decadence process that has to be avoided in order to maintain freedom and autonomy is the process through which a language becomes meaningless, even if its vocabulary could paradoxically increase. From this point of view, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is a perfect example: a very bare language that, exactly because of its dryness, is capable of bringing people back to humanity.

2. *Cormac McCarthy and the life-affirming power of language*

The Road by Cormac McCarthy, a Pulitzer-prize winning post-apocalyptic novel, follows a man and his son on their journey to the southern states to avoid winter while encountering inclement weather patterns, cannibals, thieves, disease, and starvation. The prevailing question behind this narrative is why the man and the boy bother to continue living in an environment that is perilous, unforgiving, and hopeless. The key to the man and the boy's struggle to live despite the horrific circumstances stems from their dialogue⁵. Though their dialogue is sharp and clipped, there is great depth within their exchanges that posits affirmation for human life. Demonstrated by the characters' temporal language that focuses closely on future tenses, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* embodies self-reliance in response to a nihilistic environment. Therefore, McCarthy's characters, the man and the boy, demonstrate the novel's life-affirming message by portraying human agency specifically through re-naming the landscape, human behavior, and human identities in addition to scriptural storytelling to overcome the emptiness of a frontier reduced to nothingness, free of illusions and meanings⁶. Moreover, the telling language that caters to the verb tenses within dialogue mirrors the dynamic character development of the man and the boy. The man and the boy thereby utilize self-reliance by re-inventing the world after the old world ended. Furthermore, storytelling between the man and the boy is essential to recreating a stripped world by breaking away from the concrete bleakness of the world, thereby giving some fantastical and spiritual aspect

5 Edwin, T. 1999. *Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables*. In *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Diane C. Luce. 45-70. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press.

6 Brewton, V. 2004. *The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's The Road*. *The Southern Literary Journal* 3: 121-143.

to a world where “there is no God and we are his prophets”⁷. By developing a spirituality that goads the man and the boy towards survival rather than the negation of human life (such as suicide or cannibalism), *The Road* is a novel in which Cormac McCarthy does not endorse nihilism. Contrasting to McCarthy’s previous novels, *The Road* focuses on the “good guys” rather than the typical anti-heroes and villains that McCarthy usually develops as his protagonists. Thus, the characters in *The Road* develop a language that posits human agency, and their use of language signals a significant understanding of how language will influence life-affirming action even though the new world will never again look like the old world.

Language shapes the way humans perceive the world, such as the utilization of euphemisms in the event of a tragedy; a person “passed away” instead of “died.” One exchange between the man and the boy exemplifies that the way that we view the landscape in our world is obsolete. For another example, the man explains to the boy that on their map there are lines drawn to represent “what used to be called the states”⁸. In this case, the man explains to the boy that on their map there are lines drawn to represent “what used to be called the states”. After the boy asks what happened to the states, the man does not know how to explain to the boy that the states’ names simply do not exist anymore. Nonetheless, this exchange exemplifies the loss of socially constructed language thereby signaling the loss of society and culture. The topography of the United States still remains intact, but there are no more political and economical divisions in which certain “states” reside. As the past world itself becomes meaningless, the names of the past become meaningless as well. This is not to say that meaning has gone out of the world. The point here is that the nature of the meaning has changed: McCarthy’s method of naming offers a refiguring of meaning in the language of the new, post-apocalyptic world⁹. There is nothing left of the world that used to be except the very ground that the man and the boy travel. However, this loss of language only leaves possibility for reinvention. After the boy asks what happened to the states, the man does not know how to explain to the boy that the states’ names simply do not exist anymore. Thus, *The Road* not only dismisses illusions but highlights the importance of facing the transience of life in a sober and straightforward way. Nonetheless, this exchange exemplifies the loss of socially constructed language thereby signaling the loss of society and culture¹⁰. The geography of the land still remains,

7 McCarthy C. 2006. *The Road*, London: Pan Macmillan, 170.

8 Ivi, 43.

9 Bell, M. 1988. *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 34.

10 Hawkins, S. 2011. *The End of the World as We Know It*. Oakland Journal 20: 53–58.

but there are no more political and economical divisions in which certain “states” reside. There is nothing left of the world that used to be except the very ground the man and the boy travel hence the simple, nameless title *The Road*. Unspecific to where the man and the boy are within the United States, the landscape is, again, reduced to nothing of the old world. Therefore, the man and the boy view the world as an almost clean slate and re-invent the notions that shape the language of this world.

By demonstrating the reinvention of naming, utilizing the spirituality of storytelling, and constructing perseverance through verb tenses, Cormac McCarthy’s characters the man and the boy reveal the indicative reasoning behind their struggle to survive. This demonstration of human agency through the face of adversity reveals how the man’s apprehension to face death exhibits the dreading truth that the boy must face the world on his own. Nevertheless, not all hope is lost for the boy after the man dies. Indeed, the boy finds a “good guy” that welcomes him into his family. In addition, the baffling final paragraph actually demonstrates that although the world will never be the same, the world is indeed facing a redemptive state. Thereby, the uncertainty for the boy’s future is not lost. The future’s uncertainty does not necessarily mean that there is only bleakness in store. In fact, the future’s uncertainty is an opportunity for reinvention, life-affirming spirituality, and formation of vivacity through language. This is the only way that the boy may face the world¹¹. Thus, even if the man dies, the boy carries on his legacy and remembers to always “carry the fire”.

3. *Ecclesiastical tendencies in discursivity and hermeneutic today*

How a language used as an oppressive device can be turned into a life-affirming language is a query that deeply provokes contemporary theology¹². The old statement “*Roma locuta, causa finita*” reveals that the temptation of violently exerting power was — and still is — at work in ecclesial discursivity. Hence, the hermeneutical question concerns how we can be aware of a device of power behind a theological language, and how we can make it not only inoffensive, but also fruitful. To be aware of a coercive style of speaking inside the Church, it might be stated that there exist three basic forms of ecclesial power: inner-ecclesial power, socio-ecclesial power and

11 Carlson, A. 2007. *With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy’s The Road with Augustine and Heidegger*. *Religion and Literature* 3: 47–71.

12 Holmer, P. 1965. *Language and Theology: some critical notes*. In *The Harvard Theological Review* 58/3: 241–261.

theoretic–ecclesial power. Each of these general types can be understood not as unrelated airtight compartments, but as a particular directionality of power as it emerges in homilies, encyclicals, gestures, expectations, canon law, dress, prohibitions, pedagogical models and so forth¹³.

The first form, inner–ecclesial power, denotes power relations within the Church itself and can be understood as economical or ecumenical. So to speak, the law of the home. Socio ecclesial power refers to those inevitable relations with extra–ecclesial bodies, such as the Church’s role in the democratization of China. Finally, theoretic–ecclesial power can be properly understood as any use of influence to guide, limit, renew, silence, dismiss or alter academic investigation.

Having delimited general forms of Ecclesial power relations between three social realms, the key elements of the discursivity can be thematized. At least, three interdependent dimensions appear as a common denominator of most contemporary ecclesial discourses.

First, a traditional *philosophia naturalis* or some version of classical metaphysical realism can be still found at work in most catechetical texts. Forms of conceiving reality in terms of essences, substances and universals show that nature does not fail because of the emergence of new forms of knowledge or competing interpretations. Such a frame of reference gives the impression of being an essentially conservative moment of a politicized hermeneutic.

Therefore, a second group might be denominated the hermeneutics of continuity. Like discourses involving metaphysical realism, hermeneutics of continuity both preserve and differentiate by privileging of the past over the present and future. This can be seen at work, for instance, in the encomiums for the past Church fathers and popes in encyclicals; in the reluctance to critically correlate historical–critical methods with scripturally derived normative claims. Concerning inner–ecclesial power, particular institutions and practices proliferate this hermeneutical tendency. The disciplinary and pedagogical rubrics of diocesan seminaries, which are still recovering from the era of “manual Thomism”, constitute just one instance of those practices.

A final thematic for the interpretation of ecclesial power might be labeled *mores*. This Latin term connotes “morals” and/or practices and therefore it highlights an important ambiguity in ecclesiastical discursive events. That is, the omnipresence of *mores* within the forms of discourse under consideration both seeks to provide a somewhat theoretical guide to ethical norms and to encourage the practical embodiment of such guidelines. So to speak, how the Church tries to turn codes into behaviors. The ambiguity

13 Bourdieu, P. and Thompson J. B., 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 69.

appears when nature and its interpretation are both considered unquestionably good. Thus, implications of “go and do likewise” need not to be explicit.

Having demonstrated the ubiquity of forms of ecclesial discursive power and where these forms can be found at work under a variety of discursive events. The last question concerns the possibility of a pragmatic and linguistic “counter-conduct”¹⁴. However, before proceeding to positive suggestions for this type of praxis, an insufficient response has to be first outlined. In order to alter ecclesial discursive power, it does not seem reasonable to simply, passively hope that, when it proves convenient, member of the Roman Church will make use of the vocabulary that characterized Vatican II — that is, language of collegiality, dialogue, charisma, change, cooperation and so forth¹⁵. Such language not only often conceals the stark social differentiation of the clergy from the laity, but it also functions to reinforce complicity to the authority that derives from such divergences in social status. Nor can the deployment of this language by layperson bring about substantive change in power relations. In other words, whether or not ecclesial groups employ the language of dialogue, community and *aggiornamento*, it matters very little, if marginalization occurs by means of, for instance, theologically backed androcentrism. Pious language that silences alterity does just that. What, then, might constitute the practical ideals for concrete praxis, in which realistic hope for the metanoia of ecclesial power might find traction?

To begin, laity must not wait for a progressive conciliar period to collectively demand, through direct action and the nonviolent generation of consensus, a significantly increased democratic role within a radically decentralized church. This direction is clearly showed by Pope Francis and it would amount, at the very least, to a complete reopening of questions concerning radical reform of the curia and the significance of episcopal synods. Only when the empty language of equality and dialogue becomes replaced with forms of structural decentralization that incarnate *logoi*, will the employment of these terms have any meaning¹⁶.

14 Foucault, M. 1992. *The Subject and Power*. In *Critical Theory: The Essential Readings*. New York: Paragon House.

15 Tracy, D., 1981. *The analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad, 111–131.

16 Kohn, M. and McBride K. D. 2011. *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of Foundation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 33.

Abstract

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This work analyzes two post-apocalyptic novels written in very different times and cultures: George Orwell's masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949, and Cormac McCarthy's *The road*, Pulitzer Prize in 2007. It is assumed that they both are a philosophical understanding of totalitarianism, and this is the reason why here they are considered relevant as sources of reflections about power. More specifically, the way the authors describe and use language, such as the Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or the dialogues between the father and the son in *The Road*, represent two very different, by some extent polar opposite models of exerting power. In its conclusions, the comparative study suggests some critical issue concerning the way in which language is used by contemporary theology and ecclesial discursivity.

KEYWORDS: Cormac McCarthy, Discursivity, George Orwell, Hermeneutic, Language, Power.