The Word Hoard

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Community and Dissent*

Article 12

7-5-2012

1984, Genesis Upside Down

Jamie Rooney
jrooney5@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Rooney, Jamie (2012) "1984, Genesis Upside Down," *The Word Hoard*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarsha1@uwo.ca.

The *Word* Hoard
/wərd/hôrd/ *n.* 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

1984, Genesis Upside Down
by Jamie Rooney

In the endbeginning, God defies Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic conception; language does not merely articulate and locate the reality of an external, otherwise "nebulous" world, but the very expression of a linguistic sign creates a world; or, rather, the fractured sign—signifier and signified—creates the worldly reference. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew verb for "create" is applied only to divine, never human, constructs; as the Godly articulation, "Let there be light" is (un)framed in the context of a conceptually "empty" and "formless" universe, the decree of the spoken sensory "sound-image" signifier simultaneously births both the previously non existent concept of light and, consequently the reference of "light" in worldly illumination: "there was light" (Genesis 1:2-3). As the auditory signifier has its "command" only in the "dimension of time" (Saussure 855), the structure of the spoken sign marks the establishment of a "chain"-like set of temporal coordinates in which the signifier "light" precedes and generates the signified and referential elements of "light." The insight must be taken to the endbeginning: as there are no temporal references before God's initial proclamation, only spatial references to "the heavens," "earth," and "the deep," as well as the pronunciation of the auditory sign "light," establish the dimension of time for the entirety of the universe, instantiated in the "evening and…morning—the first day" (Genesis 1:1-5). The temporal structuring, though, is only enacted as God, in the likeness of Walter Benjamin's angel of history, makes whole the sign which has been smashed. Signalling the unification and consequences of the originally sundered sign, as the non-Godly author of Genesis asserts, "God called the light 'day'" (1:5), there is no subsequent creation—in the traditional sense—but only the formation of the name "day" to represent the totality of the sign "light"; for, the complete sign—formal sound-image and foundational concept—thereafter inseparably corresponds to the referential distinction—the worldly illumination—of "light": the temporal ordering of worldly light and the illumination of God's universal chronological structure are predicated on the expression of a sign.

In binary opposition, George Orwell's dystopian spectacle is an inversion of the Genesis ordering of Saussurean principles; as Genesis thrusts the reader into an indefinite, infinite past, 1984 (1949) snatches the reader into a definite, calculable future; as Genesis commences in a formless, conceptually "empty" expanse, 1984 is initiated in a materially rigid and ideologically saturated arena; as the title "Genesis" denotes dynamic original creation in an undisclosed temporal coordinate, the title "1984" disavows any action or agency in signalling a static calendrical calculation. For, as Genesis presents the sign as a fractured yet ever unifying entity, Orwell presents the quintessential elements of the sign as preliminarily cleaving parts of a whole which are increasingly alienated; the consequence of the degeneration of the sign, in opposition to Genesis, corres-

ponds to the static temporal structure of Oceania: the perpetuation of the "eternal present."

Obviousness abounds in understanding the initial presentation of Big Brother's INGSOC, the Oceanic ideology, as a signifier divorced of its signified; yet, as Saussure asserts, "it is easier to discover a [linguistic] truth than to assign to it its proper place" (854); the monumental significance of INGSOC's form is its presentation not as an auditory sign—with its command only in the dimension of time—but as static lettering on a material poster (Orwell 4), transmogrifying the chain of temporal coordinates into a physical border line: when signifiers are represented in writing, "the spatial line of graphic marks is substituted for succession in time" (Saussure 855). As the signified element of INGSOC is mystified and estranged from the progressing historical concepts of the sign—English Socialism, Engineering Sociopaths, Ingenious Socialites—the form of the signifier correspondingly disavows any active historic temporality, disavows the fluidity of its contemporary temporal moment. Guy Debord's critique of mid-twentieth century "totalitarian" ideologies' belief, that their "brief freezing of historical time" would last "forever" (201), is matched *avant la lettre* by Goldstein's contempt for totalitarianism's attempt to perpetuate the "eternal present" (202): "The new movements…Ingsoc in Oceania, Neo-Bolshevism in Eurasia, Death-worship…in Eastasia…grew out of the old ones and tended to keep their names and pay lip-service to their ideology. But the purpose of all of them was to arrest progress and freeze history at a chosen moment" (Orwell 219).

As God's initial pronunciation of the sign in Genesis engenders the temporal structure of the universe, man's first Biblical pronunciation of the sign imposes not the spatial, but the psycho-spatial limits of the world. God enflames the creative prowess of language as he asserts his signifier in the context of a conceptually "empty" and "formless" universe; at the antipode of this task, God's subtitled subject Adam merely applies names to the pre-materialized animals which are "brought" to him: as Saussure asserts, Adam reduces the function of language to a "naming process only," which has its highest purpose as "a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names" (852). While it is debatable that Adam's naming is arbitrary—"whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2:19)—it is certain that his dominion over animals is devoid of creativity; as Adam gives terms to termites and names to newts, he merely pairs signifiers with "ready-made ideas [which] exist before words" (852). As all creativity in the Old Testament is claimed by God in using language to generate the conceptual elements and worldly references of the sign, Adam's use of language to merely apply sound-images to pre-existing signified elements—corralling the elements of the sign and ensnaring their creative possibilities—is a distinct limiting of the psycho-spatial universe: Adam asserts more forcefully than Ludwig Wittgenstein that "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 89). In his Introduction to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Wittgenstein asserts that the purpose of the book is to limit the expression of thoughts by finding both sides of the "limit thinkable": as it is "only in language that the limit can be set," and the other side of the limit can only be "nonsense" (27), Adam's declaration of linguistic signifiers establishes not only the extent of man's thought in correspondence with language, but the beginning of his ignorance. God's use of language structures the temporal dimension of the universe, man's establishes the psycho-spatial boundaries; the divine signifier creates, the manly limits and recognizes the unsense beyond. "We set

up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no further…these are perhaps the horizons of our knowledge," writes Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* (482).

The Biblical relationship between the linguistically entitled and subtitled is reflected in the agents of *1984*; Big Brother and his Inner Party disciples are presented in the metaphorical aura of godliness, engendering their use of language with the prowess of the divinely entitled sign (while Outer Party members, sub'd). Emphasizing Big Brother's heavenly positioning at the spatially elevated symbol of godliness—Saussure asserts that the symbol (as opposed to the sign) is characteristically never wholly arbitrary, but has the "rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified" (854)—the apparatus of Big Brother's government is divided into four "enormous pyramidal structure[s] of glittering white concrete, soaring up, terrace after terrace, three hundred meters into the sky" (5). Having displaced and replaced God, Big Brother has accordingly become omnipotent and omniscient in commanding the spatial dimension of the heavens: "At the apex of the pyramid comes Big Brother. Big Brother is infallible and all-powerful. Every success…all knowledge, all wisdom, all happiness, all virtue, are held to issue directly from his leadership and inspiration" (222). The physical manifestations of the hierarchy's entitled "tower" over the "grimy" abodes of the Outer Party (5); the divine status and dominance of the language decreed from the summit of the pyramid is reinforced by the linguistic reactions of the spatially-demoted subtitled; in bearing witnessing to Big Brother's "few words of encouragement" on the telescreen, adults murmur "My Saviour" and offer "a prayer" to their deity (18). The entitled establish temporal structures linguistically, the subtitled react linguistically to the imposition of physical manifestations and spatial dimensions. God is to Adam what Big Brother is to the Outer Party.

The parallel form is problematized: as the biblical entitled brings materialized animals to his subtitled for the application of signifiers which limit the psycho-spatial dimension, the Oceanic entitled demands that the subtitled subjects retract and destroy, rather than invent, the language of "ready-made ideas" in order to re-establish the ever-shrinking boundaries of thought. The annihilation of language in *1984*, based in the relationship between Big Brother and the Outer Party, orients itself around a(n) (antithetical) linguistic enigma: "Who establishes Oceania's psycho-spatial limits and the revolutionary possibility which is 'set' in language?"

As if affronting the barrel of a gun with a flower —a cliché with a "fresh, vivid" thought—one meets dystopia with a classy joke:

> [a] German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: "Let's establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it's true; if it's written in red ink, it's false." After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink: "Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair—the only thing you can't get is red ink." (Žižek 3)

At the most superficial level, the letter from the German worker expresses his lack of red ink: the very language to articulate his non-freedom; correspondingly in *1984*, the subtitled subjects of Oceania do not control the very language—the red ink—to articulate their unfreedom: the capacity of

ideological criticism is entirely arrogated by the entitled Big Brother. The auditory language of criticism is accordingly propagated through the Big Brother's central censorship system, the telescreen, and is fittingly orated in "polysyllabic speech" as a "parody" of the Inner Party orators (15). Goldstein's "red ink" speech, which seemingly "abus[es] Big Brother" and elicits "fear" (16) in the experience of the "other," is an intricate part of the propaganda apparatus of Oceania; the visual metaphor of Goldstein's face melting into the face of Big Brother corresponds to the language that seemingly articulates unfreedom melting into Big Brother's subsequent "words of encouragement" as a parallel duality of official state ideology (18); through the symbiotic use of "subversive" and "sanctioned" language, the state reinforces Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's master-slave dialectic; the subtitled subjects' respective fear (of Goldstein) and love (of Big Brother) is the foundation for their acceptance of the imposed psycho-spatial boundaries: the Bible extols, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10).

Paralleling the auditory, Oceania's written language of criticism is accordingly propagated through the "red ink" of Goldstein's book; as a seemingly subversive text, not only is it produced by Big Brother's Inner Party—O'Brien asserts, "I wrote it" (274)—but its formal function melts into that of Big Brother's entire collection of coercive literature: while the newspapers that Winston edits propagate untruths that he initially perceives to be inauthentic, Goldstein's book propagates "truths" (274) that Winston initially perceives to be genuine; both texts are symbiotic illusions generated by Big Brother. By inverting the standard method of Big Brother's propaganda, the book's claims are founded in, and reinforce (although they seem to undermine), the intricate fabric of Oceanic ideology. While the "truth values" of the claims are presented as sound (Winston questions whether the book's assertion are "true"; O'Brien answers, "As description, yes" [274]), their re-contextualization as Big Brother's technique to limit the possible thought of dissenting subjects renders the critical language of Goldstein's book as the ultimate illusion that Winston mistakes as truth. "What then is truth?," writes Nietzsche; "Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions" (47). The "red ink" of Oceania—the language to articulate unfreedom—is entirely manipulated by the entitled: after perpetuating ideological criticism of the state charged with the revolutionary possibility of transcending psycho-spatial borders, the state purposefully exposes its apparatus, the illusory language of criticism which functions as a radical entrapment of its subjects. Big Brother ensures, on the most superficial level, that the exclusive language available to the subtitled re-enforces the ever-shrinking limits of Oceania's thought.

"Certain diachronic facts are typical in this respect. Take the countless instances where alteration of the signifier occasions a conceptual change and where it is obvious that the sum of the ideas distinguished corresponds in principle to the sum of the distinctive signs" (Saussure 862), asserts Saussure at the onset of the twentieth century. Yet, notwithstanding the historical blatancy of the insight, countless traditional critics of *1984*—with the unanimity of Party members—assert and reassert that the destruction of Oceania's signs corresponds to, and determines the depletion of, the subtitled subject's capacity of thought: united in the bondage of linguistic relativism, of the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis." As if chanting in unison at an INGSOC rally, Jean-Jacques Courtine declares, "The road leading to [the Newspeak] language purifies all heretical thought" (69),

Steven Blakemore adds that the novel "crystallizes a linguistic ideology, reified in the newspeak world through a procrustean violence which narrows human thought by linguistically narrowing the semantic space of language itself" (349), and William Lutz extols, "The Party in Oceania understands the power of language, for it has based its control of society on the control of language…disorder, dissent, rebellion and even independent thought are prevented by the use of newspeak" (105); not merely the subtitled subjects of Oceania, but the critics of *1984* seem to be deprived of "independent thought" in their deference to Orwell's dystopian language. For, the Saussurean form of enacting conceptual changes through the alteration and omission of signs is articulated in parallel by a character of the dystopian novel and in Orwell's companion essay, "Politics and the English Language"; Syme, a master of destroying language, exclaims, "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of through?…Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller" (55), and Orwell, a master of creating self immolating language, asserts, "Political chaos is connected with the decay of language…[I]f thought corrupts language, language corrupts thought" ("Politics" 10). The ques-tion is not: "Who thinks Big Brother's imposition to destroy language limits the subtitled subject's psychospatial boundaries?" but, rather—who unthinks it?

1984's paramount discourse on the function of destroying language—seemingly validated by Syme's role as professional editor of the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak dictionary—attempts to maintain an illusion of practical linguistic correctness by relegating the deformation of signs to the realm of aesthetics. As Syme commences the speech with the statement, "It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words," and concludes with the question, "Don't you see the beauty of that…?" (54), the inner contents of the discourse are framed as a persuasive device to convince the audience of their aesthetic merit—Benjamin's culture of "self-alienation," that has "reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (242)—as opposed to subjecting them to the practical rigours of linguistic precision. Injecting the yet unsubjected:

> The great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn't only the synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other words? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take 'good,' for instance. If you have a word like 'good,' what need is there for a word like 'bad'? 'Ungood' will do just as well—better, because it's an exact opposite, which the other is not. (55)

By undermining the quiddity of Syme's speech, the traditional reading of Big Brother's linguistic model can be un/stabilized, not by extratextual references as those of Steven Pinker's multi-disciplinary scientific approach in *The Language Instinct* (1994), for, it is possible, as Paul de Man states, to "undo assertions…made in the text by means of elements which are in the text" (Moynihan 156): in the central passage—"A word contains its opposite in itself"—of the speech, the complete contents; in the entire speech, the totality of the novel's discourse on destroying language.

In a premier defence of "deconstructionist" readings—those which intercept the traditional reading's monogamous interpretive relationship with

the text—J. Hillis Miller's essay "The Critic as Host" simultaneously validates the concept of a "fresh, vivid" critical interpretation of *1984*—in a triangular affair with the text and traditional reading—and illuminates the substance of a antithetical, double antithetical (and doubleplusantithetical) word: A word contains its opposite in itself. In affirming, notwithstanding a dominant contrary belief, that the deconstructionist critic is both host and parasite with regard to the traditional reading and text, Miller "blasts out from the continuum of history" the etymological distinction of the duality's pejorative element; the prefix "para" is an "uncanny" double antithetical sign, at once signifying closeness and farness, sameness and otherness, simultaneously on the near side of a limit, and beyond it (441); "'Parasite' is one of those words which calls up its apparent 'opposite.' It has no meaning without that counterpart. There is no parasite without its host. At the same time both word and counterword subdivide and reveal themselves each to be fissured already within themselves and to be…an example of a double antithetical word"; the antithetical relationship exists not only between parasite and host, host and parasite, but "within each word in itself" (441-43): A word contains its opposite in itself. Syme, however, is not referring to a word in the system of the prefix "para" (parasite, paragraph, parallax): for, in the etymological labyrinths of history, the affix "un" and the sign "good" permit only univocal interpretations: "un" represents only a negative value, while "good" represents only a positive value: "un" and "good" do not contain their opposites in themselves. The crucial point, through, is between univocal traditional interpretations and equivocal deconstructionist interpretations; for, as Miller asserts, just as the uncensored, free literary use of an antithetical word—as "parasite"—causes it to diachronically become univocally understood—parasite only as "leech"—the hyper-censored and rigid use of non-antithetical words eventually causes them to adopt an equivocal connotation: in the absolute censorship of Oceania, non-antithetical words as "ungood," precisely through the rigid process of attempting to restrict words to an univocal meaning, absorb their equivocal, antithetical meanings. Simultaneous positive and negative values, affirmations and unaffirmations are never obvious; antithetical words, such as Oceania's "ungood," maintain their living vitality through seductive concealment in order to bypass the murderous guard of censorship; equivocal meanings never fully expose themselves in the pornography of language—for, this would be their self-immolation—but they are "always there as a shimmering or wavering in the word which makes it refuse to stay still in a sentence" (447).

The unwritten rules of laughter demand a return to the refined point of the joke on the German worker; the letter's ability to express its meaning—notwithstanding the lack of red ink—illuminates Oceania's subtitled subjects' linguistic prowess to simultaneously express and counter-express the meanings of their censored signs. In the joke, although there is a prearranged way for the German to signal that his words are a lie—the use of red ink—his use of blue ink nonetheless succeeds in expressing the meaning of his signs, precisely by "inscribing the very reference to the code into the encoded message, as one of its elements" (Žižek 3). The blue-ink mention of the lack of red ink signals that the letter should have been written in red ink. Identically, *1984*'s rigid censorship of language seeks to abolish language—the red ink—to articulate unfreedom; yet, although the subtitled subjects are made to destroy the possibility of articulating unfreedom in the prearranged oldspeak method, they

none the less succeed—using the "blue ink" of newspeak—to articulate their simultaneous unfreedom. The rigorous linguistic code between the entitled and subtitled—the institution of newspeak—establishes a technique to purify language and suppress rebellious thought; yet, the very enactment of this censorship code causes rigid univocal newspeak words—such as "ungood"—to adopt equivocal, antithetical meanings: their use succeeds in simultaneously expressing orthodoxy and unorthodoxy, party ideology and rebellious ideology, precisely by inscribing the very reference to the code into the encoded message, as one of its elements. "Unorthodoxy is ungood," simultaneously expresses positive and negative values, affirmations and unaffirmations of INGSOC, of Big Brother, of the entitled. Each word contains its opposite in itself, though in precisely the opposite way of that which Syme expresses: even his statement contains its equivocal, antithetical meaning in itself.

While the Outer Party members are victimized by the destruction of language and its corresponding, ever-shrinking, limits of thought, as the unanimous masses of critics assert, already in this traditional interpretation of *1984* one finds the antithetical deconstructionist interpretation: the use of Oceania's deformed language simultaneously establishes the subtitled subject's psycho-spatial limits and transcends these limits; the equivocal word "parasite" and the signs of the newspeak language are "simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and outside…the boundary itself, the screen which is at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside, confusing them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them but also forming an ambiguous transition between one and the other" (Miller 442): in using the equivocal, antithetical signs of censorship, the Outer Party members are simultaneously the ultimate subtitled "slaves," and are beyond themselves as hyper-entitled "revolutionaries," they wear the heavy black moustache of Big Brother, and have the piercing eyes of Goldstein: in a single word, a single moment, they exist in a darkened Fukuyamist culmination of history and in the Genesis of its commencement: they are—and they are not—in the beginningend.

University of Western Ontario

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007. Print.

Blakemore, Steven. "Language and Ideology in Orwell's '*1984*'." Social Theory & Practice. Volume. Number 10:3 (Fall 1984): 349-356. Print.

Courtine, Jean-Jacques. "A Brave New Language: Orwell's Invention of Newspeak in 1984." *Substance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism.Volume.Number 15:2* (Spring 1986): 69-74. Print.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle.* New York: Zone Books, 2006. Print.

De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. Print.

Lutz, William. "Language, Appearance and Reality: Doublespeak in 1984." *The Legacy of Language*. Reno: U of Nevada P, 1987. Print.

Miller, J. Hillis. "The Critic as Host." *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*. Ed. Julian Wolfreys. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2005. Print.

Moynihan, Robert. "Interview with Paul de Man." *A Recent Imagining: Interviews with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, Paul De Man*. Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1986. Print.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense." *The Portable Nietzsche*. London: Penguin Books, 2007. Print.

—. *The Will to Power*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. Print.

Orwell, George. *1984*. London: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.

—. "Politics and the English Language." *A Collection of Essays*. New York: Mariner Books, 1970. Print.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* 1921. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* New York: Verso P, 2002. Print.