Literary Writing and Linguistic Disalienation

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Abstract

In Geoge Orwell's *1984* (1948), literary writing is the last stronghold against "Newspeak" where the latter represents the limit point of the hypothesis concerning the homologation of reality. In a homologated world everything is subject to control by those responsible for social planning, consequently for communication-production in a world where the nonfunctional and the superfluous have been eliminated. But Newspeak can translate anything except for Shakespeare, Swift, Sterne…in other words, literature. So it will only enter into force and become law in 2050.

In his *Lezioni Americane* (*Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, 1988), the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923-1985) considers the gaze of literature as the "possibility of health" against the "pestilence" that has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty. A "plague in language" which manifests itself as homologation, automatism, levelling, not only of verbal expression, but also of life itself and even of the imagination and of desire: "At this point, I don't wish to dwell upon the possible sources of this epidemic, whether they are to be sought in politics, ideology, beaurocratic uniformity, the monotony of mass-media, or the way the schools dispense the culture of the mediocre. What interests me are the possibilities of health. Literature, and perhaps literature alone, can create the antibodies to fight this plague in language".

Literary writing disalienates language which is generally compromised by the "Order of discourse", made functional to dominant communication and reduced therefore to the mere status of "communicative language".

Literature enables us to see in verbal language what in the direct word of verbal language is not possible to capture: that is, the *other* word, not only the word of the other, but also the other voices that resound in the word of the "same" subject.

Keywords: alienation/disalienation, direct/indirect word, functionality/nonfunctionality, order of discourse, voice

How does literary writing look at things?—With an indirect gaze, from the corner of the eye. This means that literary language can use language to exit the boundaries of the world that language converges with, the sphere of being, the order of discourse, ontology: "Trasumanar" (to go beyond the human, to render the human superhuman, to push the human to the highest) *per verba*; even if "Trasumanar significar *per verba* / Non si porìa" (To *trasumanar* [to go beyond the human] with words / Isn't really possible) (Alighieri, 1980, "Paradiso" 1.67-1.70).

Using language to stay outside language thanks to the indirect gaze of literature, this "antigrammatical enterprise" (Artaud, 1989) in the face of language (historical natural language) and its ontology, confers a subversive character on literary writing: "non suspect subversion" (Jabès, 1982).

The person who presents himself with his own word, a direct word, is a publicist, moralist, scholar, etc., but not a *writer*. "A writer can write nothing in his own name" (Bakhtin, 1970-71, p. 367). In literary writing the *other* is at the beginning of the movement of its constitution. The position that gives rise to literary writing is not the I, the self, but the other. And the artwork characterizes itself as *other* with respect to its author even. What makes the literary artwork valid in literary terms is its alterity, its irreducibility to the subject that produced it, its autonomy, completeness and closure to projects related to the economy of the subject, to the unitary history of an I, from which that artwork is released. Literary writing renders the subject "transcendent", "transgredient", as Bakhtin (ibid.) says, with respect to the logic of identity, homologation, unitariness, monologism and coherence.

The indirect vision of literary writing puts us in a position to see and to depict what escapes the direct gaze which is far too exposed and vulnerable. Edgar Allan Poe says as much through Auguste Dupin. To look directly compromises our visual capacity. To look at a star from the corner of the eye, which is more sensitive to the weaker impressions of light (because of a greater concentration of retinal rods), allows us to contemplate that star distinctly, to appreciate the luminosity, to gain a more refined impression of it.

In his *Lezioni Americane* (*Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, 1988) the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923-1985), in the section entitled "Exactitude," describes the gaze of literature as the "possibility of health" against the "pestilence" that has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty. A "plague in language" which manifests itself as homologation, automatism, levelling, not only of verbal expression, but also of life itself and even of the imagination and of desire: "At this point, I don't wish to dwell upon the possible sources of this epidemic, whether they are to be sought in politics, ideology, beaurocratic uniformity, the monotony of mass-media, or the way the schools dispense the culture of the mediocre. What interests me are the possibilities of health. Literature, and perhaps literature alone, can create the antibodies to fight this plague in language" (Calvino, 1988, Eng. trans., p. 56).

And how? Doing what Perseus did, the "light hero" who, in the myth, conquers Medusa, the monster whose stare has the power to petrify, turn into stone. Perseus neither

gazes at the Gorgon directly, nor does he avoid her and turn his gaze away. Instead, he gazes at Medusa *indirectly*. He "does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield" (ibid., p. 4). Literary writing can defend itself from the petrification of reality, because the gaze of literature is an indirect gaze.

In George Orwell's novel, *1984*, literary writing is the last stronghold against "Newspeak". Newspeak is the extreme expression of homologated reality as described in this novel, where everything is subject to control by those who plan the social reproduction system, so-called "communication-production" (Ponzio & Petrilli, 2005b, pp. 517-533). In this system the nonfunctional and the superfluous are eliminated. But Newspeak can translate anything except for Shakespeare, Swift, Sterne... in other words, literature. So its official inauguration has been deferred as far as to 2050.

For writing to acquire literary value, for it to become a literary work, the word must give itself as an *objectified word*, a word that is distanced, depicted as other with respect to the author, and not as an *objective word*, a direct word.

In the literary work the author is always outside his own word. The author can be traced but in the form of depiction. In the literary artwork the author is other, objectified. He becomes an extralocalized viewpoint, part of the construction of exotopic interpretants, of the "form" of the literary text. He cannot be traced in terms of the author external to the text, to the literary writing forming that text, as the pure author, the primary author, the man-author. A one-voiced, direct utterance, devoid of objectification, depiction, distancing, otherness, is useless on the literary level.

Unlike direct and indirect discourse, in free indirect discourse (present above all in the novel, but traceable also, for example with reference to Italian literature, in Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia* and in *L'Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto) the author's discourse is contaminated. The character's discourse and point of view enter free indirect discourse, and their "voices" can be heard in free indirect discourse: the word becomes double-voiced, internally dialogical or polylogical.

And this is not insignificant. Free indirect discourse is not only a sign that indicates, but also a practice that calls to issue the Subject and Identity, Monologism, Objectivity, Meaning, Power, connected to it.

According to Pier Paolo Pasolini (1972) the essential characteristic of the photographic image in contemporary cinema, "cinema of poetry", precisely, is that it is neither objective (vision external to the character) corresponding to indirect discourse, nor subjective (the character's vision) corresponding to direct discourse. Rather it is semi-objective. Similarly to free indirect discourse, the photographic image in "cinema of poetry" presents two points of view which are not melded into each other, but instead are dialogically interactive and dissymmetrical. Pasolini (ibid., p. 177) calls this "free indirect subjectivity". Gilles Deleuze (1984) takes up the idea of the free indirect as an essential form in the new novel and new cinema and assesses the role of "free indirect subjectivity" in Pasolini's own films. He evidences the effect of contamination in the permutation of the trivial and the

noble, in the excremental and in the beautiful, in the low and in the sacred, in everyday life and in myth.

A "writer", says Bakhtin (1979, It. trans., p. 229) is he who knows how to work on language while remaining outside it, he who possesses the gift of indirect speaking. As a primary author, as an author-man, the writer says nothing. In the literary work, the primary author dresses in silence (ibid., p. 367), and silence takes different forms, from parody to irony, to allegory, etc.

Silence in writing eludes sense; it subverts not the content but the practice itself of sense. Silence shifts the practice of signification, and it withdraws signifiers from customary interpretive routes; it uses verbal language in such a way that it does not find compensation in an objective, a goal, does not find justification in a function.

Silence is not at the service of the order of discourse, it is not functional to the production of meaning. Silence, instead, has a characteristic that Maurice Blanchot attributes to the "other night", that of *not serving the productivity of the day*.

Silence is not refusal of verbal language, but withdrawal from the use of language for the sake of identity. Silence alludes to indirect speaking, the distanced word, the ironical word, parody, laughter. As Kierkegaard, theoretician of the indirect word observes, the direct word, the objective word is not concerned with otherness, with the word that is other with respect to oneself. The direct word is not interested in the otherness of the subject who deludes himself that he is objectivated in it, nor is it interested in the otherness of the interlocutor if not to transcend the latter, inglobe the latter, assimilate him; this word pays attention to itself alone and consequently, as Soeren Kierkegaard says, it does not properly constitute a form of communication, or we could say that it is communication that imposes quietness.

The silence of literary writing, insofar as it is indirect writing, is that action of *glissement* on language that Roland Barthes (1978) considers proper to the writer. And such *glissement* can take different forms of expression, different forms of reduced laughter (irony), as Bakhtin (1970-71) says, allegory, etc.

The possibilities of this practice of silence in the face of quietness as the dominant form of communication in today's world are analyzed very clearly by Pasolini in a text titled *Il romanzo delle stragi* (The novel of massacres, in Pasolini *Scritti corsari*, 1975). This text begins from silence with an "I know". This knowledge comes from his being a writer, an inventor of stories, a novelist

> who tries to keep track of all that is happening, to know about everything that is written about it, to imagine all that we don't know and that is silenced; who associates facts that may be even distant from each other, who puts together pieces that are disorganised and fragmentary into a complete and coherent political framework, who reestablishes logic where arbitrariness, madness and mystery seemed to reign. All this belongs to the craft and instinct of my profession. (Pasolini, 1975, p. 89)

This is knowledge without proof or clues, which as such can denounce, accuse, but without any power; that can denounce and accuse *because* it is not compromised in the practice of power, because it is outside politics, but precisely because of this, it is not the Knowledge of proof and clues and it does not have any power, and is not on the side of power. And yet, even without power, indeed precisely because of this, the indirect word of literature, this form of silence, allusive, parodical, ironical silence, this form of laughter, is perhaps that which today asserts the rights of otherness more than anything else, against homologation and leveling with identity and communication reduced to quietude, to muteness.

As Maurice Blanchot (1959) says evoking Stéphane Mallarmé, the work is created once the author of that work disappears, with the absence of the writer-man, with omission of the self, with a form of death connected with writing. Death of the subject that speaks in order to possess, achieve, be enabled, in order to judge and to teach. Literary language relates the subject to that which is other with respect to that subject's own self, to the other which is not part of the objective word through which that subject is constructed and with which it identifies, to the other irreducible to the horizon of Being, to the horizon of the possibilities of the Same and of the Totality, as Emmanuel Levinas would say: otherness beyond ontology, knowing and truth, beyond the totality, the objective word, beyond the utility, the functionality of equal exchange economy, the power of language.

To take the point of view of literary writing means to give up presupposing a subject who is always ready to answer for his or her own word, who is always ready to justify it and explain it. Literary writing puts into crisis the right of ownership over the word and the category itself of the subject.

Literature, above all in certain genres and in certain works, deconstructs the self; it implies the capacity for self-distancing, self-irony, disengagement with respect to the edifying word, the authoritative, unilaterally ideological word. And even when literature tries to forget its nonfunctionality and engages in political and social action, this too is accomplished in the form of disengagement if the text is not reduced to the status of a pamphlet for political propaganda, of a sociological study, but instead perseveres as a literary work. In this case the action becomes literary (Blanchot, 1981, It. trans., p. 70). In texts that do not belong to literary writing, coherence, textual cohesion not only concern the written text, but also involve the nonwritten text, the text that is the "author", the text that answers for the written text, that must "account for" the written text. In this case, a connection is assumed between these two texts, such that they form a sort of "macrotext", accounted for by the same I.

The literary text withdraws from participation in the macrotext of the writer as a subject. In literary writing discourse, in this case discourses, can no longer be attributed to a single I. There is no I as a fixed referent, as in implicit interpretant, as an owner of what is said and of the style it is said in. Not only does the writer of literature not answer for the contents, for the ideas expressed in the artwork, but these ideas and

contents belong to different subjects, different points of view, to the character, narrator, self of the lyrical composition. Nor does the style belong to the writer either. He speaks differently according to the literary genres he uses, according to the characters, their social position and vision of the world, according to how he imagines what the narrator would speak, etc. Literature frees the objective word from roles: the writer speaks now like a father, now like a husband, now like a middle-class person, like a political leader, a man of religion, a teacher, an intellectual, without being a father, a lover, a middle-class person, a politcal leader... or an intellectual; in literary writing, the author does not write according to his role, his social position, as a subject outside writing, literary writing. As Bakhtin says (1970-71): the writer does not have a style of his own. He stages styles and discourses, pictures them, objectifives them, without ever identifying with any of them. The subjects that are made to speak by the author all have a style of their own and are in situations of their own: they are appropriate to a given situation, they are coherent with it, they are situated; instead the writer does not have a style or a situation.

To speak with reserve, to assume a position, to stylize or parody: all this stops us from getting trapped in the order of discourse, in the roles, styles, communicative situations foreseen and predetermined by it. Literature cheats verbal language, it defrauds the discourse of identity, difference, roles. To cheat with language (Barthes, 1978), this playing with signs, cheating signs, is the irony of literary writing. Bakhtin describes such play as a form of silence, a way of silencing dominant discourse, of defending oneself from the deafening noise that covers the multiple voices, voices that are incoherent, contradictory, and channels them into monological discourse that unifies them into an identity, whether individual or collective, and obliges them to recount themselves according to a single sense, a single story, to find a place in a unitary macro-text.

Similar to art in general, literary writing is disengaged thanks to its otherness, to the autonomy of the artwork with respect to the author, thanks to the artwork's capacity to supercede the historical-biographical and historical-social boundaries in which it was produced, to its capacity for excess with respect to any goal or function attributed to it. Much as the author may wish to engage, disengagement of the artwork is inevitable. The artwork is essentially disengaged (Levinas, 1948). This is what Blanchot (1955) calls "the essential solitude of the artwork". At the origin of the artwork there is its absence, its separation from the author, its inevitable distancing, autonomy, alterity. This origin is that which is essential in the artwork, its central point.

Disengagement of the artwork, in literature as in art in general, has nothing to do with the aesthetics of art for art's sake. In his paper of 1919, "Art and Answerability" (in Bakhtin, 1990; Russian original and Italian translation in *Bachtin e il suo Circolo*, 2014), the first text ever published by Bakhtin that we know of—through all his works he insisted on the indissoluble connection between art and alterity, art and otherness—, he already presents the difficult identification between disengagement and unlimited

responsibility. In other words, Bakhtin evidences a relation of mutual implication between the artwork's disengagement and *responsibility that is not limited by given conventions*.

If when man is in art he is outside life, and vice versa, if therefore there is no connection between art and life in the unity of the subject, Bakhtin asks himself what connects them?

He responds that the connection is given by the unity of responsibility. The movement towards the other, proper to the artwork, that art has enabled, must not remain as an experience internal to art as a separate sphere, but it must be extended to life. Living itself must keep account of opening towards otherness, as in the artwork, and tend to become an *artwork* itself. As Bakhtin says:

> I must answer with all my life for what I experience and understand in art so that all that has been experienced and understood does not remain inactive. But responsibility is also associated with guilt. Life and art must not only be mutually responsible for each other, but they must also carry each other's guilt. The poet must remember that his poetry is responsible for the vulgar prose of life, while the common man must know that his lack of aspirations and his foolishness as to the problems of life are responsible for the sterility of art. […] Art and life are not the same thing, but they must become all one in my own self, in the unity of my responsibility. (Bakhtin, 1979, It. trans., pp. 3-4, see Note 1, below)

Responsibility of the artwork, due to its original movement towards otherness, contrasts with the aesthetics of art for art's sake, which Levinas (1948, It. trans., p. 176) considers a false formula to the extent that it puts art above reality and frees it from any form of dependency; immoral to the extent that it frees the artist from his duties as a human being and ensures him an easy and pretentious nobility.

The artwork's distancing from the subject, its exit from the sphere of the *same*—both from the sphere of the single subject-author and from the whole social context where this unreversible movement towards the *other* is produced—establishes a relation between art and responsibility.

This is a different type of responsibility from the juridical or from the moral, relatively to a "good conscience" and compliance to an ethical norm or political program.

The subject answers for himself according to these different types of responsibility, and this "answering for" is internal to the sphere in question, and it is relative to a given code, to given duties, to a given contract, role or law.

Instead, concerning the type of responsibility which involves art, this is not a question of answering for self, but for the *other*. Responsibility for the other supercedes limits of individual responsibility, responsibility of the ethical-normative, juridical and political orders; it supercedes the laws of equal exchange, functions fixed by roles and social position, distinctions sanctioned by the law among individual identities, each with its own sphere of freedom and imputability. The artwork's disengagement does not contradict

unlimited responsibility, but on the contrary presents itself as the condition of unlimited responsibility, responsibility without alibis towards the other.

Literature enables us to see in verbal language that which we cannot perceive in the direct word, the objective word: that is, the word that is other, not only the word of another person, but also the other voices that resound in the word of the "same" subject.

Writing, as it results from *1984*, has a force of its own, a capacity for resistance as well as a capacity to demolish the discourse of power, that is, discourse that generates guilt, the guiltiness of the person who receives it. Writing as a contestational practice, a special standpoint in relation to the Order of Discourse, offers spaces for evasion and escape despite "closure of the universe of discourse" (Marcuse, 1964).

In the socio-political system described by Orwell in *1984*, the death penalty is foreseen for anybody who practices literary writing, intransitive writing, nonfunctional, unproductive and therefore "perverse" writing.

Alterity and the impossibility to assimilate literary writing make them intolerable to the discourse of power: perversion of literary writing and perversion of erotism, perversion of what is nonfunctional and unproductive and therefore cannot be integrated into the system: this is what makes the two protagonists from *1984*, Winston and Julia, guilty and condemns them.

1984 presents an unhuman *reality*, if we consider excess—the surplus, the useless— as that which characterises the properly human. Human need cannot be separated from desire, and if needs and desires are kept distinct, this occurs in a world of exploitation and dominion (dominion over others and over onself). Reality in *1984* is far too unhuman to be "verisimilar". But this is the typical non-verisimilarity of narrative experimentation in the novel genre.

From this there also ensues the hypothesis of the system of language, the New language, described in the appendix to *1984*: indeed Newspeak represents the limit point of the hypothesis of a reality in which the nonfunctional and the superfluous have been eliminated. It is not incidental that this new language will only be fully adopted as late as the year 2050. Otherwise, Julia and Winston could not have been what they are: the new language in fact foresees total subservience to official language, cancellation of all residues and excesses, of all alterities with respect to the Order of Discourse.

On the basis of what we have said so far, the characteristics of Newspeak are easily imagined: univocality, monologism, subservience of the signifier to a preestablished meaning, elimination of meanings that are heterodox and in any case secondary, reduction to a minimum in the choice of words, reduction of vocabulary to the essential, homologation of morphological and syntactical rules, absence of irregularities and exceptions. "All ambiguities and shades of meaning had be purged out of them [...]. It would have been quite impossible to use the A Vocabulary for literary purposes or for political or for philosophical discussion [...]". In this language there is no room for the expression of desire and jouissance, enjoyment; the body is interdicted: "His sexual life, for example, was entirely regulated by two Newspeak words: SEXCRIME (sexual

immorality) and GOODSEX (chastity). SEXCRIME covered all sexual misdeeds whatever. [...] and, in addition, normal intercourse practised for its own sake" (Orwell, 1948, pp. 384-385).

What is the most difficult thing to translate into this language when a question of works from the past? Obviously, literary writing: Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Byron, Dickens... literary authors all cited by Orwell as exemplification. It was primarily in order to allow time for this work of translation, and this is how the novel concludes, that the final adoption of Newspeak had been fixed at so late a date as 2050, distant from 1948, the year the book was written, distant from 1984, the year of Julia's and Wilson's story, and distant from us too in 2016.

What does *1984* tell us with this extreme hypothesis of a language that has eliminated excess, otherness, imagination, desire, nonfunctionality, therefore literary language, with the elimination of plurivocality, plurilogism, pluridiscursivity?

We could respond with Giacomo Leopardi who (like many others in the history of ideas) had already reflected on such a hypothesis in his *Zibaldone* when he stated that such a language is necessarily by its very nature the most enslaved, poor, timid, monotonous, uniform, arid and ugly, the most incapable of beauty, the most improper to the imagination, the least dependent upon the imagination, the most separate from it, the most inanimate and dead language ever that anybody could conceive; a skeleton, the shadow of a language more than well and truly a language, not really a live language as much as it may be written and universally understood by all. And despite the desperate condition of humanity, Leopardi concludes this passage by expressing his hope, but also his conviction that humanity will never be enslaved by the geometry of life, and with the prediction that humanity will never be completely geometrized, that is, it will never be entirely reduced to a geometrical schema (see Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 23 agosto 1823, see Note 2, below).

Translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli

Notes

1   Di ciò che ho vissuto e compreso nell'arte devo rispondere con tutta la mia vita affinché tutto ciò che è stato vissuto e compreso non rimanga in essa inattivo. Ma alla responsabilità è legata anche la colpa. La vita e l'arte non devono avere soltanto responsabilità reciproca, ma anche colpa l'una per l'altra. Il poeta deve ricordare che della prosa volgare della vita è colpevole la sua poesia, mentre l'uomo comune bisogna che sappia che della sterilità dell'arte è colpevole la sua carenza di aspirazioni e la sua mancanza di serietà nei problemi della vita. [...] L'arte e la vita non sono una cosa sola, ma devono diventare in me un tutt'uno, nell'unità della mia responsabilità. (Bakhtin, 1919, Russian original and It. trans. in Bachtin e il suo Circolo, 2014, pp. 28-31)

2   Una lingua del genere, qualunque ella mai si fosse, dovrebbe certamente essere di necessità e per sua natura, la più schiava, povera, timida, monotona, uniforme, arida e brutta lingua, la

più incapace di ogni genere di bellezza, la più impropria all'immaginazione, e la meno da lei dipendente, anzi la più di lei per ogni verso disgiunta, la più esangue e inanimata e morta, che mai si possa concepire; uno scheletro, un'ombra di lingua piuttosto che lingua veramente una lingua non viva, quando pur fosse da tutti scritta e universalmente intesa; anzi più morta assai di qualsivoglia lingua, che più non si parli o scriva. Ma si può sperare che perché gli uomini siano già fatti, generalmente, sudditi infermi, impotenti, inerti, avviliti, languidi e miseri della ragione, ei non diverranno però mai schiavi moribondi e incatenati della geometria. E quanto a questa parte di una qualunque lingua strettamente universale, si può non tanto sperare, ma fermamente e sicuramente predire che il mondo non sarà mai geometrizzato. (Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, 23 agosto 1823)

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