

Two Examples of Ordinary Language Criticism: Reading Conant Reading Rorty Reading Orwell – Interpretation at the Intersection of Philosophy and Literature

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Introduction

What is ordinary language criticism (OLC)? This chapter offers a partial answer by presenting two examples of OLC that both emanate from the same interpretative debate. The focal point of this text is the interpretative conflict between philosophers James Conant and Richard Rorty regarding how to understand the relevance of objective truth in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.¹ First, I will be taking Conant's contribution to that exchange as a working example of OLC. Next, I will offer my own, meta-critical analysis of the interpretative conflict between Conant and Rorty as a second example of OLC at work. Approaching this interpretative conflict on two different levels, raising slightly different yet related questions and concerns, will hopefully create both a clear overview of that conflict itself and a richer understanding of OLC and its varieties.

In the first part of the chapter, I will recount the interpretative conflict between Rorty and Conant and show how Conant's critique of Rorty, and embedded in it, his alternative reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, constitutes an example of OLC – even if Conant himself does not label it such. Through Conant's critique, I will also show that Rorty, though being greatly influenced by Wittgenstein, cannot be considered as doing OLC. In this first part of the chapter, I will be focusing on elucidating Conant's critique of Rorty.

In the second part I will make my own OLC analysis of the interpretative claims on both sides of the debate. This conflict can easily be viewed in terms of two recurring problems in interpretative theory: that of over-interpretation or reading-in, and that of authorial intention and interpretations of literary works. I will clarify the logic of the conflict by making some grammatical remarks, in Wittgenstein's sense, in response to how these problems surface in the debate.² I intend by this to illuminate those theoretical issues beyond this particular exchange from an OLC point of view.

Ordinary Language Criticism

Before I turn to the two examples, let me just briefly elaborate on what I take them to be examples of. In the introduction to *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary*

Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein, Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost write the following about OLC:

Since the ambition of ordinary language criticism is to return criticism to its grounds in the ‘ordinary’ or natural language we all speak, it is hardly even a rubric and offers little hope for systematic organization. We might go so far as to say that all criticism is really ordinary language criticism, that is, when criticism is criticism as opposed to something else (quasi-scientific theory, or ideology, or even nonsense). (Dauber and Jost 2003: xi)

There are two things I think we should note in this quote. The first concerns what the ‘ordinary’ in OLC means. OLC inherits its understanding of the ordinary from ordinary language philosophy (OLP). In particular, it is the American philosopher Stanley Cavell’s continuation and understanding of that tradition, and the specific way Cavell has picked up and developed the theme of the ordinary in J. L. Austin’s and Ludwig Wittgenstein’s works, that has influenced OLC. ‘Ordinary’, in OLP and OLC, is not to be taken in contrast to ‘unusual’ or ‘specialised’, or as meaning ‘the most common’ ways of using language. So, what does it contrast with? As Toril Moi writes in *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*: ‘it seems justified to ask whether everything is ordinary language. What is *not* ordinary?’ She goes on to answer as follows:

Fundamentally, there is just ordinary language, language that *works*, and thus helps us to draw distinctions, to see the world more clearly . . . [T]he opposite to this is not a different, non-ordinary language, but language that *idles*. In philosophy, this leads to metaphysics. (Moi 2017: 75)³

The opposite of ordinary language is language that has become empty, that has merely the illusion of meaning. This happens, not because of some inherent malfunction in language, but when we, as speakers, are unknowingly failing to give sense to our words. If we transpose this to criticism we get the following: if language is ordinary in the OLC sense when it works, then criticism fails to be ‘ordinary’ when it somehow fails to work as criticism; when it unwittingly abandons its own criteria and fails to adequately live up to its own claims. One way in which criticism can fail to be ‘ordinary’, and thereby fail as criticism in the relevant sense for OLC, is by being too deeply intertwined with philosophical commitments that are themselves examples of language idling.

Second, OLC can, therefore, not be a systematic methodology that dictates a certain way of reading. OLC is rather negatively defined; it claims that our ordinary ways of reading and talking about literary works are important; it suggests that we may need to reconnect ourselves to those practices when criticism has gone awry. But OLC does not claim that established readerly practices provide standards of correctness, or that our everyday critical practices never lead us astray. In *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell writes: ‘Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about’ (Cavell 2002: 95). Similarly, OLC favours no themes or

topics, it is about whatever the art, music, film, or –in this case – literature it investigates is about. OLC has no preference for any genre or mode of literature, say, realist fiction, prose, or even written texts. OLC is equally compatible with modernist poetry, absurdist drama, Shakespearean tragedy, romantic opera, 1930s movies, pop songs, or what have you. All of these different styles and genres are understood as taking place within ‘the ordinary’, but this does not mean that OLC conflates them or claims they are at bottom the same. Clearly, they are not.

What, then, one might ask, individuates OLC from just any other criticism that works? According to Dauber and Jost, two things. OLC has to, in some manner, ‘take as its point of departure the so-called ordinary language philosophy deriving especially from Ludwig Wittgenstein in the early twentieth century’ (Dauber and Jost 2003: xi). This means, I take it, that any writing inspired by the OLP tradition, and concerned with aesthetic matters, might qualify as OLC. Furthermore, OLC offers an alternative to what Dauber and Jost label ‘the dead end of contemporary critical theory’ (2003: xi). This means that OLC has a critical edge; it problematises ways theory or philosophy (I take the terms to be interchangeable in this context) can sometimes distort, rather than clarify, the arts:

[T]he attempt by some contemporary theorists to use theory as a means of mitigating or undoing reading altogether is what OLC critics would specifically oppose. Accordingly, where theorists today use theory to distance and even separate themselves from texts that they seem to feel too narrowly constrict them, OLC would employ theory to enable a fuller inhabitation of texts in a variety of ways . . . OLC reverses direction from removal to reinvestment, to seeing from the inside. (2003: xi–xii)⁴

OLC is not against theory, or against interpretations that have a theoretical or philosophical outlook. It is, however, against the kind of theoretically aloof interpretation that almost, as it were, attempts to overcome, or replace, the work it purports to analyse. OLC opposes theories that try to lay down rules in advance for what you can and cannot do in reading, thereby curtailing the very adventure of reading.⁵ While holding that suspicious reading offers one important, sometimes necessary, mode of interpretation, OLC rejects the notion that the hermeneutics of suspicious is always pertinent in criticism. Instead of thinking of theory/philosophy as something that penetrates the deceptive literary surface, enabling the reader to reach its hidden truths, OLC conceives of the interaction between philosophy/theory and literature in less violent and hierarchical terms: as a conversation between equals. In such a conversation both parties may reveal and find out more about themselves and their interlocutor than they could have done if philosophy/theory were from the start taken to be the trustworthy detective, forcing its suspect, literature, to confess (see Moi 2017: 175–95). It is through such anti-hierarchical, conversational ways of reading philosophy and literature together that theory’s claim to dominance can be overcome, according to OLC. In the words of Cavell:

I should like to stress that the way to overcome theory correctly, philosophically, is to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it. I would not object to calling this a piece of theoretical advice, as long as it is also called a piece of practical advice. Philosophers will naturally assume that it is one thing, and quite clear how, to let a philosophical work teach you how to consider it, and another thing, and quite obscure how or why, to let a film teach you this. I believe these are not such different things. (Cavell 1981: 10–11)

In response to this description of OLC, one question that may arise is: how does it differ from good old-fashioned close reading? Might the stress on the text itself, on it teaching us how to read it, evoke the suspicion that OLC promotes a kind of critical conservatism, perhaps even an ideologically suspect unwillingness to scrutinise texts from any other perspective than their own preferred self-understanding?

There are indeed certain similarities between close reading and OLC, if one stresses the aspects of attention to details, the focus on the reciprocity between form and content, the importance bestowed upon the reader's judgement and humility before the text. But what separates OLC from close reading and the New Critical idiom is that it has no predetermined focus – say on ambiguity, irony, paradox – nor does its conception of the literary work necessarily exclude the author and their intentions, historical and social context, power relations and politics, etc. In fact, OLC aspires to no general theoretical conception of 'the literary' or 'the meaning' of literature as such. On the contrary, OLC is fearful of what Wittgenstein labels our 'craving for generality' (Wittgenstein 1964: 17). This craving tempts us to define our concepts prior to specific investigations and readings – thus deciding beforehand what can be seen by them – rather than looking at different uses during our investigations and readings. Instead, OLC thinks that philosophising on concepts such as 'the author', 'the novel', 'subjectivity', 'character', 'context', etc., should be done in response to some concrete difficulty; when the critic encounters a text that actually creates some conceptual conundrum. A specific work, or an interpretation of a work, may show us that a concept is indeed in need of theorising. A case in point is the interpretative conflict between Rorty and Conant I am about to address, where the concept of truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes something that requires theorising in order for us to grasp what is actually at stake in the novel.

Before I turn to that conflict, I think this characterisation of OLC also licenses us to call someone an ordinary language critic who has not labelled him- or herself thus. This is important for my claim that Conant is doing OLC, even if he has not himself described his work thus. In the next part of this chapter I will show how Conant's text is characterised by the features listed by Dauber and Jost, in ways relevant to both his critique of Rorty and his own reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Thereby we will also see that Rorty, though an admirer of Wittgenstein and someone who philosophises through readings of literature, can hardly be considered as doing OLC.

Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Conant on Why Rorty is Unable to Read Orwell

Rorty Reading Orwell

The interpretative conflict between Rorty and Conant can be said to boil down to what significance the concept of objective truth has for Orwell's dystopic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In his 'The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty', Rorty makes the quite astonishing claim, for anyone who has read Orwell's novel, that 'the question about "the possibility of truth" is a red herring' (Rorty 1989: 182). Instead, Rorty claims, the novel is centrally concerned with cruelty: 'I think the fantasy of endless torture – the suggestion that the future is "a boot stamping on a human face – forever" is essential to *1984*' (Rorty 1989: 182). At the time of its publication, the real importance of the novel was not that it warned against totalitarian societies' assault on the very idea of truth. Rather, Rorty writes, its accomplishment was that it 'sensitiz[ed] an audience to cases of cruelty and humiliation which they had not noticed' (1989: 173).⁶ Regarding present-day readers, Rorty suggests, the work can teach us that cruelty is the worst thing you can do to someone – a view he equates with what it means to be a liberal – and that if we merely take care of freedom, then truth can take care of itself (1989: 173, 176).

Those who read the novel as significantly concerned with the defence of truth are committed, Rorty thinks, to a misguided philosophical position, namely, epistemological realism. Rorty takes this realist reading to be quite common among Orwell's critics. He finds, for instance, Lionel Trilling and Samuel Hynes guilty of it (Rorty 1989: 171–4).⁷ His own reading is thus offered in contrast, and as an alternative, to such realist readings.

But what about all those numerous passages in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that appear to speak against Rorty's interpretation – where the defence of truth seem absolutely central to the novel as a whole? Rorty is of course not unaware of them. One, which he cites himself, is the following:

The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command. [Winston's] heart sank as he thought of the enormous power arrayed against him, the ease with which any party intellectual would overthrow him in debate And yet he was in the right! . . . The obvious, the silly, and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true, hold on to that! The solid world exists, its laws do not change. Stones are hard, water is wet, objects unsupported fall towards the earth's centre. With the feeling that he was speaking to O'Brien, and also that he was setting forth an important axiom, [Winston] wrote: *Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.* (Orwell 1990: 84)⁸

This passage is not, however, to be taken as textual evidence of the importance of truth in the novel, according to Rorty. The point is not that two plus two equals four,

but that you should be allowed to believe it and say it without getting hurt (Rorty 1989: 176). Commentators who have focused on the defence of truth instead, Rorty argues, typically conclude that:

Orwell teaches us to set our faces against all those sneaky intellectuals who try to tell us that truth is not ‘out there’ . . . Orwell has, in short, been read as a realist philosopher, a defender of common sense against its cultured, ironist despisers. On this reading, the crucial opposition in Orwell’s thought is the standard metaphysical one between contrived appearance and naked reality. (Rorty 1989: 172–3)

In this quote Rorty signals awareness of how his own philosophical position regarding the concept of truth – that it is part of an outdated metaphysical vocabulary that we should rid ourselves of – can put him in unflattering proximity to O’Brien and the advocacy of Newspeak. But in Rorty’s view, what is frightening about O’Brien is not his disregard for objective truth, but his taste for suffering. O’Brien is construed as a warning; this is what intellectuals become in a totalitarian society with no free outlet for intellectual talents – connoisseurs of pain (Rorty 1989: 176).

Torture is not for the sake of getting people to obey, nor for the sake of getting them to believe falsehoods. As O’Brien says, ‘The object of torture is torture’. For a gifted and sensitive intellectual living in a posttotalitarian culture, this sentence is the analogue of ‘Art for art’s sake’ or ‘Truth for its own sake’, for torture is now the only art form and the only intellectual discipline available to such a person. (Rorty 1989: 180)

Consequently, when it comes to such pivotal passages of the book as when O’Brien, through torture, makes Winston say – and believe – that two plus two equals five, O’Brien is not doing that because truth, and the destruction of Winston’s grasp of truth, are in any way important: ‘The *only* point in making Winston believe that two and two equals five is to break him’, Rorty writes (1989: 178).

In the end O’Brien rearranges those pieces into a creature who now ‘loves’ Big Brother. Producing such a Frankenstein’s monster of a soul, however, ‘is just an extra fillip’, according to Rorty. The real object of the torture is the exquisite sound a mind makes as it is being ripped into shreds (Rorty 1989: 179).

Conant Reading Rorty and Orwell

In ‘Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell’, Conant claims that ‘there is a fairly literal sense in which Rorty is *unable to read* Orwell and that this inability is tied to an inability to free himself from certain philosophical preoccupations’ (Conant 2000: 269–70). This is, I think, quite clearly something that qualifies as a kind of OLC critique: according to Conant, Rorty – in Dauber and Jost’s words – uses philosophy as a means of mitigating or undoing reading altogether.

How then, is this undoing of reading through philosophical preoccupations executed? It is created through what Conant calls Rorty's 'obsession' with realism, an obsession he labels 'epistemologism' (Conant 2000: 270). Due to this obsession, Rorty can only envision two alternative readings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Conant claims: either a realist reading that views the novel as centrally defending a metaphysical thesis about truth as correspondence with what is 'out there'; or an anti-realist reading, Rorty's own neo-pragmatist reading, in which the question of truth simply drops out as irrelevant. An irony of Rorty's epistemologism, Conant notes, is that he nevertheless remains in the clutches of the very form of metaphysical question he tries to dissolve:

In his criticism of Realism, Rorty invariably formulates his rejection of a thesis of Realism in terms of a counterposed thesis. He thus invariably ends up affirming a thesis that has the same logical form as a thesis which the Realist affirms, but with one difference: a negation operator has been introduced into the content-clause of the thesis. Rorty . . . ends up affirming an alternative answer to the Realist's question. He ends up claiming that there is something we cannot do or have which the Realist claimed we can do or have. (Conant 2000: 274)⁹

What Rorty fails to see, Conant claims, is that there is a variety of non-metaphysical ways of talking about the importance of objective truth, ways that are neither realist nor anti-realist, but simply ordinary. This is how Orwell speaks about truth, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and in other texts, and this is how Trilling's and Hynes's commentaries on the novel should be understood, Conant argues.

This brings out the second OLC characteristic in Conant's text: that he significantly draws on an OLP understanding of 'the ordinary' in his readings of Rorty and Orwell.

In Wittgenstein's sense of 'ordinary'[,] . . . *ordinary* contrasts (not with *literary* or *metaphorical* or *scientific* or *technical*, but) with *metaphysical*. In this sense of 'ordinary', the uses to which poetry and science puts language are as much part of ordinary language as calling your cat or asking someone to pass the butter . . . Rorty's anti-metaphysical response bears the characteristic earmark of an *anti-metaphysical metaphysics* (be it Berkeley's, Hume's, Carnap's, or Derrida's): a recoil from the ordinary. (Conant 2000: 323nn.51–2)

Conant's claim is not that all these ordinary uses of language – literary, scientific, technical, etc. – are all the same and no more difficult than asking someone to pass the butter. The point is that there are language uses, most of our everyday language uses, that are not secretly fused with and founded upon metaphysics; that it is perfectly possible to use the word 'truth', and to find truth to be utterly important, without being committed to any metaphysics at all. In his response to Conant, Rorty makes it clear that he neither understands what Conant means by 'ordinary' uses of language, nor thinks they have any philosophical significance: 'Commonsensual remarks or platitudes can

be used as objections to proposals for conceptual revision, but they should not be. Appeals to ordinary language are of no philosophical interest' (Rorty 2000: 345). And: '[I]f there were something like what Cavell calls "the Ordinary" – I doubt that I should have any interest in dwelling within it' (Rorty 2000: 349). This is enough to show, I think, that Rorty cannot be viewed as doing OLC.

What stands in the way of Rorty seeing these ordinary uses, Conant argues, is his preferred method of dissolving philosophical problems by dropping the vocabularies in which they are formulated (Conant 2000: 278). Words that Rorty identifies as essential to certain philosophical positions that he opposes work as philosophical triggers for him (Conant 2000: 281). In numerous texts, Conant reminds us, Orwell expressed thoughts he found important in precisely the kind of vocabulary Rorty deems suspicious, such as: 'The feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world is – and should be – frightening' and 'There are objective historical truths. Historical facts are independent of what we say or believe happened in the past' (Conant 2000: 279).

Since Rorty can only hear such formulations as expressive of metaphysical statements, he must either excuse them as mere rhetoric or avoid them in order to lend credibility to his own reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is thus Rorty, Conant thinks, who perversely reads 'every line of Orwell (and every line of Orwell commentary) through philosophical spectacles', and it is 'Rorty – not Trilling or Hynes – who attempts to enlist Orwell on one side of an argument between a Realist and an opponent of Realism' (Conant 2000: 284).¹⁰ In this context Conant underlines how he and Rorty differ as readers of Wittgenstein:

[Rorty is unable] to exercise the sort of discernment that Wittgenstein's later work is centrally concerned to impart: an ability to discern between ordinary and metaphysical *uses* of language . . . In attacking (not the *use* that a philosopher makes of his words, but) *the words*, urging us to throw the words themselves away, Rorty would have us destroy (not only metaphysical houses of cards, but) precious everyday discursive resources and along with them the concepts (and hence the availability of the thoughts) which they enable us to express. (Conant 2000: 323 n.52)

The above point is vital for Conant's critique of Rorty's claim that the single purpose of getting Winston to believe that two plus two equals five is to cause Winston as much pain as possible. It is equally essential for Conant's alternative interpretation of that torture scene, and its relevance for our understanding of the importance of objective truth in the novel. This brings us to Conant's own reading and its third OLC characteristic: that of countering a theoretically aloof reading, in which Orwell looks like a neo-pragmatist, with a reading that theorises from inside the text.

Presenting his own interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Conant points out that Rorty has served us with a false conflict: why should we view O'Brien – or the novel as a whole – as concerned *either* with cruelty *or* with truth? Why can they not be concerned with both? Returning us to the text, Conant reminds us that there are several

passages in the novel that become quite mysterious on Rorty's reading. The following quote, where O'Brien tells Winston why he is being tortured, is one example:

We are not content with negative obedience, nor even with the most abject submission. When finally you surrender to us, it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him. We burn all evil and illusion out of him; we bring him over to our side, not in appearance, but genuinely, heart and soul. (Orwell 1990: 267)¹¹

Here O'Brien at least appears to declare a very strong interest, not just in tearing minds apart, but in putting them together again so as to make them completely obedient to the Party. If O'Brien was only interested in Winston's delicious pain, why devote so much time to arguing with Winston about historical facts and arithmetical truths? Why torture Winston in this specific way, Conant asks:

The question is whether O'Brien's concern is merely with 'breaking' people (in which case truth and falsity can drop out as irrelevant), or whether it is with breaking them in a very particular way, namely in such a way that their minds can be subsequently enslaved. If the aim is to break Winston in such a way that he is able to believe only what the Party wants him to believe, then breaking his hold on the distinction between truth and falsity might not be irrelevant. What does it take to enslave a mind? (One might have thought the novel as a whole was concerned to explore this question.) (Conant 2000: 290)

There is another way than Rorty's of interpreting O'Brien as an emblem of intellectual life in a totalitarian society. Conant reaches that interpretation by appealing to Orwell's explicit aim with the novel: 'Orwell summed up what he "really meant to do" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by saying that his aim was to display "the intellectual implications of totalitarianism"' (Conant 2002: 291, quoting Orwell 1968b: 460). It is in the light of this aim that Conant thinks we should view the pivotal scene where Winston is tortured into believing two plus two is five. By crushing his hold on the concept of truth, the Party deprives Winston of the ability to form beliefs and draw conclusions on his own. That is the goal: 'It is this capacity of individuals to assess the truth of claims on their own that threatens the absolute hegemony of the Party over their minds' (Conant 2000: 299).

For Winston this prospect is horrifying: 'If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, *it never happened* – that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death' (Orwell 1990: 37).¹² Conant juxtaposes this quote with the following words from Orwell: 'The really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits "atrocities" but that it attacks the concept of objective truth' (Orwell 1968b: 88).¹³ The reason why this is so horrifying in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not merely that Winston himself loses this capacity, but that the Party sets out to make this lack the normal condition of everyone – and may succeed in doing so.

Doublethink, reality control, and other Party strategies are only planned to be transitory in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Once the population has learned to do all this naturally, these strategies will no longer be required since there will be no alternatives to them in which to think. The same goes for Newspeak: the dictionary of Newspeak is important as long as people in Oceania still speak English (or Oldspeak, as it is called in Newspeak). But since the aim of Newspeak is to destroy all words that can invite heresies, words are destroyed in order to destroy thoughts: once that job is done, no one will be able to understand those dictionaries, because English, as we know it, will be gone. Here Conant underlines the similarity between O'Brien and Rorty: both want to do away with thoughts they find unfruitful by doing away with the *words* that express them. Both, for different reasons, find no need for the word 'truth' (Conant 2000: 308–15).¹⁴

This is the intellectual consequence of totalitarianism which Orwell warns against in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, according to Conant: the very 'undermining of the possibility of your leading a life in which you are free to think your own thoughts – to have your own take on whether, for instance, something is an atrocity or not' (Conant 2000: 295). A person who can no longer make use of the concept of truth cannot be free. She no longer has the capacity to even crave such freedom. Nothing beyond 'goodthink' will be within her conceptual grasp.¹⁵

This means, Conant argues, that '[t]he central topic of Orwell's novel – the abolition of the conditions of the possibility of having an intellectual life – fails to come to view on Rorty's reading' (Conant 2000: 292).¹⁶ It also means that Rorty's advice, that we should let go of truth and concentrate on preserving freedom, fails to make much sense within the world of the novel:

According to Rorty's Orwell, if we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself . . . [T]his is roughly the opposite of Orwell's view. When 'the very concept of objective truth begins to fade out of the world', the conditions, not only for truth, but for freedom, are undermined . . . The preservation of freedom and the preservation of truth represent a single indivisible task for Orwell – a task common to literature and politics. (Conant 2000: 310)

This brings us to a further way in which Conant's criticism can be said to be a critique from the inside. Conant takes seriously Rorty's aim to protect freedom. If freedom is not protected, but rather made impossible, by our letting go of the vocabulary of objective truth, this does not only mean that Rorty's reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is faced with serious problems. It also means that Rorty's philosophy is faced with serious problems.

The Grammar of Interpretation: Authorial Intentions and Philosophical Heresies of Paraphrase

At this point, I hope to have established how Conant's text qualifies as OLC. However, so far, I have said nothing about to what extent Conant's critique of Rorty is fair,

or whether his interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is superior to Rorty's. Turning to these questions now, we see some familiar problems within literary hermeneutics being actualised by this conflict: if one of these readings is a misinterpretation and the other valid, what makes them so? If Conant's is valid, must Rorty's be invalid (and vice versa)? What does it mean for an interpretation to trump another? What is the relevance of both being philosophical readings of literature? What is the logic of this conflict?

To address these questions, let us look at Conant's most general critique of Rorty.¹⁷ It can be broken down into two parts:

- Rorty fails to understand what Orwell writes (and how Orwell means what he writes) when it comes to the issue of objective truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,

because

- Rorty is so philosophically obsessed with the conflict between realism and anti-realism that he *reads-in* that philosophical conflict into texts that contain his trigger-words.

I will assess this critique from an OLC point of view by asking two questions: to what extent does it matter that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is fiction, a novel, when it comes to

1. the relevance that appeals to authorial intentions have?
2. the difference between a reading that is informed by a philosophical outlook/concern in a benign way, and a reading that makes philosophical paraphrases/over- or mis-interpretations in order to facilitate a philosophical argument?

Question (1) is important here because, while Conant offers a very strong case against any claim that Rorty's reading captures what Orwell wanted to say with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is unclear whether Rorty's reading makes that type of claim, or that it needs to in order not to misread the work (or fail to read it altogether).

Question (2) is important because it could be argued that Conant is also informed by philosophy in his reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, namely by the OLP tradition, which certainly guides his understanding that Orwell uses words like 'truth' ordinarily. One could therefore ask what makes Conant's OLC reading any less of a distortive philosophical paraphrase than Rorty's neo-pragmatic reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In other words, this conflict gives me occasion to address, from an OLC perspective, the seemingly perennial questions within literary theory about authorial intention and the limits of, and criteria of validity in, literary interpretation. Here, these questions will be addressed more specifically with regard to philosophical readings

of literature. This meta-critical, theoretical, analysis will constitute the second example of OLC that this chapter offers.

Literary Works and Authorial Intentions

If we begin with the first issue, that about authorial intentions, it seems clear that Rorty did not attempt to make an interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that in any way depends on what *Orwell* wanted to say. Rorty explicitly declares that his reading 'is not a matter of wanting to have [Orwell] on my side of a philosophical argument' (Rorty 1989: 173), and in his response to Conant's critique he writes:

My reading of [Orwell] was not intended to claim him as a fellow pragmatist, but to explain why one could be a non-Realist and still have one's moral horizon expanded by *1984*, why one could agree with O'Brien's coherentism and still be intrigued, fascinated and appalled by O'Brien's way of coming to terms with the absence of freedom . . . The idea was to say how the book looks when seen through non-Realist eyes . . . Had Orwell taken an interest in such arguments, I imagine, he would have sided with the Realists. (Rorty 2000: 344)¹⁸

Rorty admits that there are passages where he sounds as if he wants Orwell on his side (2000: 349n.3).¹⁹ Conant, therefore, has reason to read Rorty this way. But if we accept Rorty's comments on this matter, which I think we should, those passages should be viewed as unfortunate and unsubstantial with regard to the main gist of the interpretation. So, what happens to Conant's claim that Rorty misinterprets the work because he fails to see what Orwell meant? Must Rorty focus on what Orwell wanted to communicate in order to make a valid interpretation?

No. Readers of imaginative literature are not obliged to read for authorial intentions. Usually when we read a philosophical text we are, and should be, interested in what the author meant. We can certainly read literature in this way too, and in Orwell's case it can seem particularly pertinent to do so. But we do not have to, which is why I conclude that the first part of Conant's critique – that Rorty's reading fails because he cannot read (what) Orwell (meant) – does not hit home.

Conant, on the other hand, is indeed reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the purpose of understanding how Orwell intended us to read it. This is a reading one could describe as intentionalist – if that term were merely shorthand for any reading interested in what the author wanted to convey with a text. But as that term, to my ears at least, is too deeply rooted in the notion of intentionalism, it does not fit Conant's position. Intentionalism in literary hermeneutics claims that the correct or best reading of a work is that which captures (as closely as possible) what the author intended to say.²⁰ It can be contrasted with the opposite theoretical position, anti-intentionalism, which claims that what the author meant with his or her work is irrelevant to what the literary work means as an aesthetic artefact.²¹ The latter might

be a fair description of Rorty's position, if we look at other texts he has written on the subject (see Rorty 1992). Conant, as far as I know, has no such general stance on authors' intentions and literary works. In this particular reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he finds Orwell's intentions important. But he does not espouse the theoretical claim that valid literary interpretations require that readers aim for authors' intentions. And that is, in my view, to his credit.

I do not think this conflict should be viewed in terms of the debate between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism. In fact, I think that debate itself is a red herring. It exemplifies quite well the attempt to mitigate or undo reading through theory that Dauber and Jost declared as inimical to OLC; it is an attempt to lay down rules, from the outside of theory, about what we must – or must not – do as readers in order to adequately capture 'the meaning' of a work.

From my OLC perspective, the questions of whether authorial intentions are relevant in literary interpretation or not, whether they should be seen as belonging to the 'inside' or the 'outside' of texts, are not questions that can be assessed, as it were, in general. In fact, as general questions I think they are only seemingly meaningful. The relevance of authorial intention has to be assessed piecemeal, in response to specific works and specific questions and claims about those works – not through theoretical definitions of interpretative validity, or of 'literary meaning', made in advance, and before the unruly act of reading begins.

The point is not that we never need to theorise on these matters – say, on the concept of authorial intention in literature – but that we should do so precisely when we need that theorisation: when we encounter some specific problem in our critical practice that requires philosophical clarification. We should not assume, gripped by our craving for generality, that unless we make clear our general view on 'the relevance of authorial intention for literary interpretation' (as if all the various ways we might give that expression meaning could be reduced to one thing), we are unfit to do our interpretative job.

Conant and Rorty have quite different interpretative aims: one is interested in the author's intentions in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the other is not. In this regard, both exemplify ordinary ways we interpret literature, and both have their place in everyday readerly practice. If we are to pass judgement on which reading is the better in this particular case, we have to look at something other than who is interested in what the author meant and who is not.

Literary Works and Philosophical Paraphrases

What then, about the claim that Rorty's reading is flawed because he makes a distorting philosophical paraphrase of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? That is, can he be charged with missing the relevance of truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* because he *reads-in* his own obsession with realism into the novel?

Here my answer is: yes. Regardless of Orwell's intentions, Rorty, in fact, ignores important sections in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* foregrounding truth. He also ignores

O'Brien's explicit explanation about why Winston is being tortured. Here is one such scene:

'No!' exclaimed O'Brien. His voice had changed extraordinarily, and his face had suddenly become both stern and animated. 'No! Not merely to extract your confession, nor to punish you. Shall I tell you why we have brought you here? To cure you! To make you sane! Will you understand, Winston, that no one whom we bring to this place ever leaves our hands uncured? We are not interested in those stupid crimes that you have committed. The Party is not interested in the overt act: the thought is all we care about. We do not destroy our enemies, we change them. (Orwell 1990: 265)

One may, of course, think that O'Brien is lying to Winston here. But I see little textual evidence fuelling that suspicion. Winston, for one, thinks that O'Brien means what he says:

'By the time we had finished with [Jones, Aaronson and Rutherford] they were only shells of men. There was nothing left in them except sorrow for what they had done, and love of Big Brother. It was touching to see how they loved him. They begged to be shot quickly, so that they could die while their minds were still clean.' His voice had grown almost dreamy. The exaltation, the lunatic enthusiasm, was still in his face. He is not pretending, thought Winston; he is not a hypocrite; he believes every word he says. (Orwell 1990: 268)

These passages are hard to square with Rorty's reading of O'Brien as only concerned with causing Winston pain, and not with enslaving his (and everyone else's) mind. So even if we dismiss any reference to the aims of the author, Conant's and Rorty's interpretative claims are still opposed with regard to the relevance of the concept of objective truth in the novel.

In that conflict, I would say that Conant's reading trumps Rorty's. This is not because if we have two opposing interpretations, and one is valid, then the other must be invalid. I am not defending monism in interpretation. As Cavell reminds us in *Pursuits of Happiness*, it is part of the grammar of interpretation that there has to be room for more than one – though not all need to be of equal standing.²² The reason Conant's reading trumps Rorty's is quite simple and ordinary: it is because he can make better sense of central passages of the novel and of the novel as a whole.

This is also why Rorty, but not Conant, can indeed be charged with making a distortive philosophical paraphrase, with reading-in his philosophical obsessions in the novel. Philosophical readings are not distortive per se. Both Conant and Rorty are readers guided by philosophical concerns and conceptions. Rorty, however, avoids reading certain passages of the novel in order to preserve his philosophical interpretation, he ignores central parts of the work in order to make a philosophical point.

What is wrong with doing that? Can you not do that? Well, you can do it, but then that is what you have done; you have – to speak with Dauber and Jost – used philosophy as a means of mitigating or undoing reading; you have distanced yourself from the work as if it too narrowly constricts you. Doing that comes at a price, and the price might be that you have pushed yourself outside of criticism, that what you do is no longer criticism.²³ Whether that is a price worth paying of course depends on what you take yourself to have gained by it. Perhaps you rather think of it as broadening the criteria of literary interpretation, changing the game from inside? Games do change in these ways. But how do you know if you have succeeded? This brings us to questions about the limits of interpretation, the sharedness of our criteria of critical validity, and what kind of authority we appeal to when we make interpretative claims.

Acknowledging the Vulnerability of Interpretative Claims

All interpretations, of course, suffer from omissions and blind spots. That is part of their grammar: you emphasise some parts of a work and not others. Only the work itself can say exactly and all of what it says.²⁴ This means that it is the job of the interpreter to make discerning choices, to judge what is central and not. In this evaluative task we can, and do, disagree.

So how do we judge whether an interpretation is valid or an over-interpretation? If our normal condition allows for plenty of disagreement on this matter, it can seem a hopelessly subjective task, drenched in uncertainty. Or as Cavell writes about interpretative claims: ‘How can serious people habitually make such *vulnerable* claims? (Meaning, perhaps, claims so *obviously* false?)’ (Cavell 2003: 83). Cavell hardly thinks interpretative claims are false by default – that there is no such thing as interpretative validity; he does not espouse interpretative scepticism. Interpretations are, however, vulnerable in ways that claims that are either true or false (in a more straightforward manner) are generally not. They are vulnerable because as much as they are claims – to community and shared intelligibility – they are invitations to others to try to see what I see.

As a literary interpreter, I can, and should, present evidence of different sorts in favour of my reading: quotes from the work, comments by the author, facts about literary conventions or historical facts at the time the work was written, etc. – in short: material we critics consider relevant for the kind of reading I make and the kind of interest I take in a text. Readers of my interpretation will, however, have to make up their own minds whether they see these connections the way I do, or even see them at all. I have no way of proving that my reading holds. The ‘proof’ is in the eating of the pudding: in what I make others see in the work.²⁵ If I have displayed all the textual evidence I can think of, and pointed out the pattern I find, there is nothing more for me to do: ‘I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned’ (Wittgenstein 2008: §217). What my interpretations crave – and are vulnerable to – is not proof or disproof but acknowledgement or rejection by fellow

readers. The risk that I may go too far, that I may read-in, cannot be cleared out in advance. On that subject, Cavell writes:

‘[R]eading in’, as a term of criticism, suggests something quite particular, like going too far even if on a real track. Then the question would be, as the question often is about philosophy, how to bring reading to an end. And this should be seen as a problem internal to criticism, not a criticism of it from outside . . . [T]he moral I urge is that this assessment be made the subject of arguments about particular texts. (Cavell 1981: 35)²⁶

What is the difference between seeing the risk of reading-in as something internal to criticism and seeing it as something we need to tackle from the outside? One outside strategy would be to create a theory of interpretative validity – say, that we must read, or must avoid reading, for the author’s intention in order to get literary meaning – and then regulate our criticism accordingly. But that would be precisely to yield to interpretative scepticism by trying to refute it head-on; it would be to yield to the misconception that we need such a theory to ground our critical practice, or anything goes. But as David Rudrum points out: ‘Claims made in literary criticism and in any discussion of aesthetics are . . . in an important sense groundless; in fact, they seek to secure their own grounding’ (Rudrum 2013: 17). This means that the proper way to deal with interpretative scepticism – say, the fear that there are no common criteria of validity, or no real difference between valid and invalid readings – is to acknowledge the truth in it (not that *it* is true!): namely, that occasionally we do not share criteria, our claim to community remains unanswered, and we do not recognise what the other is doing as criticism at all.

The fact that we disagree, however, takes place against a backdrop of a shared practice of reading. OLC’s way of treating the risk of reading-in as ‘internal to criticism’ is to view the assessment of validity as something done from the inside of reading, every time, case by case.²⁷ What separates philosophical interpretations of literature that are clarifying from distortive paraphrases can thus not be settled on a general, theoretical level. It can only be assessed through the act of reading itself, by our reading particular interpretations and their particular claims. This is what I take myself to have done in assessing Rorty’s and Conant’s interpretations. What I appealed to then were, I take it, our common criteria of validity in literary interpretation, not to a theory of interpretative validity.

But what about my appeals to Cavell and the OLP tradition? Is that not appealing to theory? Perhaps in a minimal sense, but not in the sense of laying down theoretical rules for what counts as interpretative validity or literary meaning. The authority of Cavell’s grammatical reminders does not reside in his being an ‘authority’ within OLP, but in that we, as critics, who are equally authoritative in using our common, ordinary, critical terms, acknowledge those reminders as being expressive of what we mean by our words. Likewise, my authority in claiming that Rorty reads-in, and that Conant’s reading trumps Rorty’s, is no greater and no less than

any other critic's and has the same source: our sharing the practice and criteria of criticism. Our criteria cannot protect us from experiencing interpretative conflicts, mistakes, and disagreement as to whether a specific interpretation has played itself outside the game of criticism or changed its rules, etc. That is what can make criteria so disappointing, make them seem in need of theoretical underpinning. Criteria do not guarantee success – they 'only' make conflict, mistake, and disagreement possible at all, just as they make attunement, success, and agreement possible at all.

If our ordinary criteria of criticism can be disappointing in this way, OLC can seem equally disappointing, for anyone on the lookout for the next intellectual fashion. OLC offers no hip theory, no trendy methods, and no exclusive jargon by which I can claim authority and importance. OLC puts its trust in literature and its readers, convinced they are enough for criticism to flourish. OLC wants to return us critics to the ordinary language where we – not some theory – speak. This also means daring to hear and claim my own voice, shouldering responsibility for my language. In criticism I have to acknowledge myself as a reader, acknowledge that my reading exposes me – my prejudices, my blind spots, my hobby horses – beyond my knowledge and control; that I am – or at least may be – read and known in return. This condition of literary interpretation is as blissful as it is terrifying. Which in turn, I think, hints at why we might be tempted to escape reading, by means of theory, in the first place.

Notes

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1. See Rorty 1989, 2000; Conant 2000.
2. Wittgenstein's 'grammar' denotes something like the logic, the discursive and conceptual possibilities, that you learn as you learn your mother tongue. Grammatical remarks and reminders are produced in order to dissolve some specific philosophical confusion. They are not intended to describe logical relations in language in general, or to reveal any new knowledge. They are supposed to merely make us aware of something we already know but fail to appreciate while philosophising, thus leading us to philosophical bewilderment:

Something that one knows when nobody asks one, but no longer knows when one is asked to explain it, is something that has to be called to mind. (And it is obviously something which, for some reason, it is difficult to call to mind.)
(Wittgenstein 2008: §89)

3. We will see later in this chapter that Conant offers a similar understanding of 'the ordinary'. See also Wittgenstein 2008: §§116–19.
4. What this 'seeing from the inside' means will hopefully become clear through examples of how this notion is used in OLC, in the subsequent two parts of this chapter.
5. Moi 2011 discusses this succinctly.

6. That is, it made leftist intellectuals see what was going on in the Soviet Union differently. This should not be understood ‘as a matter of [it] stripping away appearance and revealing reality’ but as ‘a redescription of what may happen or has been happening – to be compared, not with reality, but with alternative descriptions of the same events’ (Rorty 1989: 173).
7. Rorty is referring to Trilling 1971 and Hynes 1971.
8. Also quoted by Rorty 1989: 172.
9. Conant’s critique of Rorty here is isomorphic with Cavell’s critique of the anti-sceptic who tries to refute the sceptic head-on by claiming that we *do* know whatever it is that the sceptic denies that we know. That, according to Cavell, is not to cut ties with scepticism (see Cavell 1999: 37–48).
10. Conant does not deny that there may very well be Realist readings of Orwell; he thinks that Peter Van Inwagen is an example of such a Realist reader. But as Rorty is still captured in the same form of reading as Van Inwagen – a reading that centres on a dispute between Realism and anti-Realism, ‘neither [of them] allows for a reading of the novel which takes the author to identify with the sentiments of his protagonist but doesn’t take such identification to commit the author to Realism’ (Conant 2000: 283).
11. Also quoted by Conant 2000: 340n.197.
12. Also quoted by Conant 2000: 297.
13. Also quoted by Conant 2000: 295; this can be compared to what Winston reads in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, by Emmanuel Goldstein: ‘The two aims of the Party are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought’ (Orwell 1990: 201).
14. See also Orwell’s ‘Appendix: The Principles of Newspeak’ (Orwell 1990: 312–25).
15. ‘Goodthink’ means, roughly, orthodoxy: to think in alignment with the Party (Orwell 1990: 317).
16. This of course means that Conant and Rorty have quite different views on what an intellectual – and a liberal – is (see Conant 2000: 291–5, 310–11).
17. ‘[T]here is a fairly literal sense in which Rorty is *unable to read* Orwell and ... this inability is tied to an inability to free himself from certain philosophical preoccupations’ (Conant 2000: 269–70).
18. This quote does seem to affirm Conant’s claim that Rorty construes his own reading on the assumption that we must embrace either a Realist reading or an anti-Realist reading, and that the Realist is the most common one.
19. One such unfortunate passage is the following: ‘As evidence that this way of reading the last part of *1984* is not entirely factitious, I can cite a column which Orwell wrote in 1944’ (Rorty 1989: 176). If what Orwell meant to say is irrelevant, then this column should also be irrelevant. Other such lapses are when Rorty writes about what Orwell does and claims, such as: ‘Orwell did not invent O’Brien to serve as a dialectical foil ... He invented him to warn us against him’ (Rorty 1989: 176); ‘I take Orwell’s claim that there is no such thing as *inner* freedom, no such thing as “autonomous individual,” to be ... that there is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature ... to use as moral reference point’ (Rorty 1989: 177).
20. See, for instance, Hirsch 1967; Juhl 1980; Carroll 2002; for a recent defence of ‘extreme intentionalism’, see Stock 2017.
21. In this camp we find such, in other respects antagonistic, texts as Wimsatt and Beardsley 1982 and Fish 1980.

22. '[F]or something to be correctly regarded as an interpretation . . . there must be conceived to be competing interpretations possible, where "must" is a term not of etiquette but of (what Wittgenstein calls) grammar, something like logic' (Cavell 1981: 36).
23. Could such failed criticism work as something else, say, as philosophy? I will have to leave this question open. In fact, I think it should remain open, as a question left for case-by-case assessment. However, since I agree with Cavell's view that we should look at philosophy as a form of – or something analogous to, say, literary – criticism, it is not obvious what the contrast between criticism and (good) philosophy would be within an OLC understanding (see Cavell 1984). One could argue that while Rorty's reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* may fail as literary criticism, as an interpretation of the work, Rorty's main concern is not to be faithful to the text, but to make a philosophical point. I cannot go into a detailed discussion about how we should respond to such a complaint here. I can say, though, that I read Rorty as indeed making some substantial interpretative claims about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, claims that have to be answerable to the text if we are to take seriously the notion that his reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is supposed to achieve something philosophically. Otherwise, the reference to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appears to do no philosophical work and could be dropped. Conant argues that it is precisely Rorty's philosophical shortcomings that are revealed in his shortcoming as a reader of Orwell: that these two things, in this particular case at least, go hand in hand.
24. But with regard to *that* sense of 'exactly' and 'all', interpretation can neither fail nor succeed in capturing 'it' either. To capture 'it' is not a logically possible goal for an interpretation. It would not make sense to even try. I discuss this as being part of Cleanth Brooks's confusion in 'The Heresy of Paraphrase', where he tries to argue that there is a substantial something that a paraphrase cannot say which the poem says (see Löfgren 2015: ch. 6).
25. On the impossibility of proof on these matters, see Cavell's excellent discussion in 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', especially his discussion on what validates the wine tasters' judgements (Cavell 2002: 73–96).
26. Colin Davis has a rather different reading of this passage from mine. He sees it as indicative of Cavell espousing what Davis calls 'overreading'. My view is rather that Cavell is here acknowledging that the risk of overreading is one we cannot avoid, and that our fear of that risk should not deter us from brave and experimental readings. Nevertheless, Cavell concedes that reading-in is a real risk and that there is such a thing as going too far (see Davis 2010: 139–40).
27. In 'Music Discomposed', Cavell writes: 'you cannot tell from outside; and the expense in getting inside is a matter for each man to go over' (Cavell 2002: 209). In this quote Cavell is discussing how we expose fraudulence in modernist art, but the point holds equally well for how to expose over-interpretation in literary interpretation.

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