Reading Orwell Through Deleuze

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Abstract
George Orwell has often been accused of articulating a naive version of empiricism in his writings. Naive empiricism can be said to be based on the belief that an external objective world exists independently of us which can nevertheless be studied and observed by constructing atomistic theories of causality between objects in the world. However, by revisiting some of Orwell’s most well-known writings, this paper argues that it makes more sense to place his empiricism within the contours of Deleuze’s empiricist philosophy. By recourse to Deleuze’s ideas the paper argues that far from being a naive empiricist Orwell in fact engages in a reflexive exploration of his virtual affects through the particular events he writes about. The assemblage that is ‘George Orwell’ is thus comprised by a whole array of affects from this unique middle-class socialist as he crosses through particular events. Orwell subsequently acts as a ‘schizoid nomad’ who transverses the affects of others. As a result Orwell takes flight from his own middle-class surroundings in order to reterritorialise his identity within the affects, habits and sensations of others. By becoming a schizoid nomad Orwell is able to construct a critical and passionate moral standpoint against forces of domination.

Keywords: affects, empiricism, habits, George Orwell, Gilles Deleuze, nomad

I. Introduction: Orwell and the Problem of Empiricism

When one reflects upon the place that George Orwell holds in British culture it soon becomes apparent that perhaps no British literary figure
of the twentieth century has stirred up so much controversy than as is the case with ‘St George’. Some see Orwell as a purveyor of radical ideals while others prefer to see him as hostage to a form of English conservatism (see Hitchens 2002). In academic circles these debates have been played out previously in the fields of political studies (for example, Ingle 1993; Newsinger 1999; Woodcock 1984), literary studies (for example, Rai 1990; Williams 1991), linguistics and discourse analysis (for example, Bolton 1984; Hodge and Fowler 1979; Fowler 1995), cultural studies (for example, Coleman 1972), and feminism (for example, Beddoe 1984; Campbell 1984). In many instances debates about Orwell have been concerned with the underlying philosophical standpoint he adopts in his writings. Some critics, for example, argue that Orwell clearly works from within a philosophical perspective that can be broadly termed ‘naive empiricism’.

A common assumption made about empiricists is that they champion an atomistic theory of causality, namely that causality exists between two objects when a regular, constant succession can be observed between them (A causes B). According to its critics, there are a number of reasons why we need to remain sceptical of this causal theory. First, empiricists reduce a statement’s empirical content to the actual or hypothetical regularity of relations between independent objects. But if causality can only be arrived at through observation then causal production as an independent phenomenon must be an illusion—an illusion that critics of empiricism reject (Harré and Madden 1975). Second, and relatedly, critics argue that empiricists merely explore the surface appearances of the world and thereby fail adequately to enquire into the underlying real causal powers of the world. Causal powers, on this understanding, refer to those ‘real’ internal mechanisms of the world which might not be observable to us but which nevertheless have tendencies to produce events at an observable level through their contingent interaction with other causal powers in the world. Capitalism, for example, has a real tendency to go into a crisis if specific underlying contradictions assert themselves in contingent circumstances. Thus the ideas we have about the world are generated not only by observable events—as empiricists are said to argue—but also from underlying causal powers (Bhaskar 1975: 13; see also Collier 1993; Dean et al. 2005; Sayer 1992).

Orwell is believed by some to have articulated a naive and simplified version of empiricism in his writings. Christopher Norris (1984), for example, is suspicious of Orwell’s insistence that meaningful statements about the world are simply gathered from one’s personal experiences. Such a viewpoint, suggests Norris, strays dangerously close towards
a naive empiricist agenda in which truth can simply be apprehended through our senses. While Orwell critiques ideological themes evident in ‘pre-formed’ words (for example, the word ‘freedom’) he apparently nevertheless favours the transparency of experience through which to understand the world. Norris is harsh in reprimanding Orwell for this seemingly simplistic empiricist observation:

What exactly can Orwell have in mind when he conjures up a pre-linguistic stratum of innocent, original thought as yet untouched by the malign influence of words? . . . These are crude formulations, but nowhere near as crude—or as hopelessly confused—as Orwell’s way of stating the case. (Norris 1984: 254–5)

Raymond Williams also finds Orwell hard-going on these issues. Agitated at the supposed ‘plainness’ of Orwell’s writing style, Williams bemoans the successful impersonation of the ordinary person pursued by ‘St George’ – the type who bumps into experience in an unmediated way simply by telling the truth about it. The inclination is then, problematically, to bracket out the social context of the writer and to cancel out his/her social standpoint towards the context s/he is observing (Williams 1981: 385). Even a sympathetic commentator, Ingle, similarly claims:

For Orwell, reality, the external world, could be discerned by the undeceived intelligence of the ordinary individual . . . by means of Lockean sense experience interpreted and codified by reason . . . [F]or Orwell man’s very humanity and identity were rooted in this capacity to apply reason to sensory experience, and man’s capacity for reason led him to grasp the nature of objective truth. (Ingle 2007: 734)

But while it is indeed true to say that Orwell can be placed within an empiricist train of thought this does not necessarily mean that he also articulates a naive version of empiricism in his writings. Indeed, the purpose of this paper is to show that underlying Orwell’s writings lies a more sophisticated empiricism than his critics often give him credit for. This claim will be argued for by re-reading some of Orwell’s most well-known writings through the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.
perceptions of it; rather, it seeks to understand the forces of potential within the world, how these forces contingently assemble together during specific events, and how they impact on our sensations at a pre-subjective and pre-personal level (cf. Clough 2009).

The intention here is therefore simply to argue that it makes more sense to place Orwell’s writings in relation to Deleuze’s version of empiricism than to that of naive empiricism. More specifically, it will be argued that Orwell contemplates not so much something called ‘objective truth’ as what Deleuze calls ‘affects’, and that he acts as a schizoid nomad in using his own assemblage of virtual singularities, or affects, to traverse the embodied virtual singularities of other human and non-human objects at particular events. In the process Orwell takes flight from his own middle-class surroundings in order to reterritorialise his own identity within a wider network of power relations. By becoming a schizoid nomad, then, Orwell gains a more precise understanding of how his own assemblage of affects is caught up within various mechanisms of power. Orwell thus operates on a plane of intensity whereby different singular affects fold into one another both within him and through and within others and vice versa (cf. Massumi 2002: 24–8). This being the case, Orwell does not exist as a singular person but only gains an identity through a number of affects; affects which combine both human and natural intensities. At the same time Orwell is able to bring these intensities into his own writing in such a way that he manages to avoid suffocating the intensities he experiences through signification.

What the paper will therefore show is that, unlike the naive empiricist who wishes to impose their own ‘sensory reason’ upon the world to arrive at ‘objective truth’, Orwell is more interested in entanglements of intensive affects, in how these affects might be relayed reflexively through his own embodiment, and in how various affects transform his personal embodiment into issues of public relevance. None of this, of course, is meant to imply that Orwell’s empiricism exactly mirrors that of Deleuze. But it is to suggest that Deleuze can help us rethink Orwell’s empiricism in a manner that is more in keeping with what Orwell actually writes. To demonstrate these points, some of Orwell’s most well-known documentary writings and essays will be drawn upon (for example, Orwell 1989a, 1989b), supplemented where necessary with some ideas expressed in his novels. But to begin with, we must first briefly examine the extent to which Orwell is in fact an empiricist. The next section will argue that Orwell is an empiricist of sorts, but one noticeably different to what is commonly understood by the term. This discussion will then lead on to our contention that Orwell’s own
brand of empiricism enables him to escape from a debilitating relativism in order to become a writer engaged in a critique of society.

II. Why Orwell is an Empiricist of Affects

Lionel Trilling once claimed that while Orwell was no genius, he could nevertheless be elevated to the heights of being ‘a figure’. ‘Plainness’ of writing and reporting is the foundation upon which this status of a figure is based. Orwell’s main strength therefore lies in ‘the virtue of . . . fronting the world with nothing more than one’s simple, undeceived intelligence, and a respect for the powers one does have and the work one undertakes to do’ (Trilling 1952: 220). It is, however, exactly this ‘plainness’ that has so infuriated some and led, in turn, to accusations that Orwell is a simple and naive empiricist.

There is little doubt that Orwell is an empiricist of sorts. For example, in his essay ‘Why I Write’ Orwell admits: ‘So long as I remain alive and well, I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information’ (Orwell 1981: 753). The empiricist nuances of Orwell’s description are obvious to see, especially his comment ‘to love the surface of the earth’. Critics of empiricism would no doubt highlight the limitations of this approach, believing that it misses the opportunity to explore causal mechanisms that lie beneath the surface of the earth. However, there are other passages in Orwell’s writings that seem to suggest a different empiricist standpoint is at work in his writings other than that of naive empiricism.

To begin to understand this alternative viewpoint let us momentarily look at a quote by Orwell from one of his essays – ‘A Hanging’ – in which he recalls his experiences working for the Burmese police force as part of the British imperialist state. In this particular essay Orwell describes the hanging of a male Hindu prisoner.

It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path. (Orwell 1981: 364; emphasis added)

The quote alerts us to another type of empiricism evident in Orwell’s writings, for what the passage conveys is a description of what it means to human: for Orwell, being human is, at least in part, being a bundle
of everyday habits. This comes through forcibly in the final highlighted sentence. About to be executed, the prisoner still nevertheless exhibits everyday habits of association: the simple association that stepping in a puddle makes one’s feet muddy and wet. For Orwell, as we will see, it is such habits that, when brought together with other habits, engender passionate holistic feelings about social life that are also profoundly moral. Before we explore this latter point, however, we need first to unpack theoretically the notions of habit and association. Deleuze’s work on the British empiricist philosopher David Hume is useful in this respect because here Deleuze outlines an innovative empiricist account of both of these terms.

In *Empiricism and Subjectivity* Deleuze argues that Hume is not primarily a philosopher of either knowledge or the mind. Rather, Deleuze claims that Hume is first and foremost a philosopher dealing with practical issues. For Deleuze, then, the real impact of Hume’s insights is to demonstrate that empiricism is a practical philosophy based not upon ‘abstract reason’ but upon distinctively human characteristics such as imagination, passion and sympathy. Empiricism should not therefore necessarily be regarded as an atomistic theory of causality based on external causal relationships between objects in the real world. Instead, Deleuze contends that a more fruitful empiricist philosophy demonstrates how ‘[c]ausality is felt. It is a perception of the mind and not a conclusion of the understanding’ (Deleuze 1991: 26).

By working through Hume’s main ideas Deleuze argues that causal relations emerge by forming associations from impressions of sensations rather than through the discovery of atomistic causal relationships in the world. Before we investigate subjectivity and causality, insists Deleuze, we must first investigate and understand how reason is ‘an affection of the mind’ (Deleuze 1991: 30). Through the mind we receive impressions of sensation about the world around us and through these impressions we form associations about aspects of the world—the means by which objects are associated with one another so as to provide a causal relationship. And through associations we form habits and expectations about the world—the ability ‘to move from the present to the future’ (63). We use these habits to reflect on our own subjectivity and our own sense of self. If this is the case then reason is a ‘kind of feeling’ (30) that not only provides a habitual mode of practical activity, but also instils in us a reflective passion for the world. Thus whereas impressions of sensations only develop within the mind, impressions of reflection give an individual a sense of subjectivity, ‘diversely qualifying the mind as subject’ (97). On this understanding association presupposes ‘projects, goals, intentions, occasions, an entire life and affectivity’ (120).
A practical illustration of Deleuze’s thinking on this subject matter can be gleaned once again from Orwell’s essay on hanging. Just after we are given the description of the prisoner stepping aside to avoid the puddle, Orwell says:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working – bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming – all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned – reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone – one mind less, one world less. (Orwell 1981: 364)

What is interesting about this quote is the way Orwell describes the condemned man through impressions of the mind of what Deleuze elsewhere will name as virtual singularities or affects: bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissue forming, and so on. These virtual singular sensations come together to form habits and probabilities (not stepping in puddles). This simple causal relationship is therefore felt by Orwell. After all, Orwell consciously describes his own felt experiences of the hanging – ‘seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding’. And it is through his direct felt experience of the hanging event itself that Orwell is able to form the associations he does and from here to constitute a new set of relations from the simple habit of not stepping in the puddle. Orwell’s description, then, is a rejection of the conventional philosophical meaning of empiricism ‘according to which the intelligible ‘comes’ from the sensible, everything in the understanding comes from the senses’ (Deleuze 2002: 41). In place of this conventional meaning Orwell embraces an alternative empiricist viewpoint which suggests that relations are independent of their terms. Or, to put the same point slightly differently, relations operate independently of ideas attached to terms, the latter being embedded in the significations of language (Deleuze 2002: 41–2; see also Buchanan 2000: 84–6; Colombat 2000: 17).

The distinction between relations and ideas is one constantly invoked by Orwell, particularly in his writings on language. In ‘Politics and the English Language’, for example, he suggests that one way to overcome what is today known as ‘signification’ is to let the meaning choose the
word rather than the other way round (Orwell 1981: 743). Elsewhere, in ‘The English People’, Orwell suggests that too many words and phrases become mere thought-saving devices, ‘having the same relation to living English as a crutch to a leg’ (Orwell 1970a: 43). What Orwell insists on here and in other essays is that written language should aim to capture the reality of everyday speech. Indeed, in his essay ‘New Words’ Orwell explicitly suggests that words should be woven in with definable objects and relations existing in the real world. Accordingly, language is ‘practically useless for describing anything that goes on inside the brain’ (Orwell 1970b: 17). Feeling, emotion and sensation are too subtle to be translated fully into language, and much of these feelings fails to be conveyed through pre-defined linguistic forms such as ‘ready-made metaphors’, which for Orwell frequently go on to produce a ‘filthy stew of words’ (134). Orwell’s rejection of ‘ready-made metaphors’ is thus a rejection of a language form that seeks to represent and signify pre-conceived ideas. It is therefore not too far off the mark to say that for Orwell this linguistic procedure fails to capture how the relations between one’s sensations of the world are in contact with the real physical world; sensations which have the potential to be creatively combined in innovative ways so as to produce new visual images in language.

Returning to his essay on the hanging it is now possible to see how the distinction between ideas and relations is a crucial device which enables Orwell to express both the complex associations and relationships at work in the hanging event and his moral revulsion concerning public execution. One dominant idea pervading the essay is that execution is a normal matter-of-fact event. This is signified to the reader by what the various other figures (guards, jailers, a superintendent overseeing proceedings, a boy selling goods) say to one another about the actual hanging they witness. Yet the idea that hanging is a matter-of-fact event is destabilised by the relations evident at the execution. These relations are communicated not through language but through virtual singularities (for example, those of the prisoner) which then go on to open up a void in the idea that hanging is a normal matter-of-fact event. In other words, for Orwell, it is exactly what is not communicated by language that becomes the defining moment of the event he is actually witnessing. Ideas of hanging are turned on their head through their affectual relations: public execution is not a normal matter-of-fact event, nor should it ever be.

It is true to say that a phenomenological moment can be detected in much of what Orwell writes here and in many of his other works.
In respect to the hanging, for example, Orwell clearly describes an embodied intentionality in relating the prisoner’s perception of his execution. This is both conscious (the prisoner knows he is to die) and precognitive (still, he avoids the puddle out of habit) (cf. Coole 2007: 415). However, we must remain cautious as to the extent to which Orwell can be brought solely within a phenomenological perspective. After all, Orwell deliberately comments on the virtual affects of the prisoner, and it is these affects which seem for him to present a more powerful, deeper meaning of the hanging event than do either intentional or (precognitive) subjective attributes. Such affects move within and without intentionality and involve amongst other things muscles of the prisoner which ‘slid neatly into place’, a ‘lock of hair’, and feet which print ‘themselves on wet gravel’. These can all be taken as illustrations of what Deleuze refers to as ‘a primary sensibility that we are’ and demonstrate how ‘we are made of contracted water, earth, light and air—not merely prior to the recognition or representation of these, but prior to their being sensed’ (Deleuze 1994: 93; see also Kennedy 2000: 56–8).

The uniqueness of affects in this respect can be appreciated by comparing them with emotions. Massumi argues that one important difference between both is that emotions serve to narrate affects and thus often have a conscious moment to them. Affects, on the other hand, are a ‘never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder’ of indeterminate bodily reactions to specific events (for instance, how skin registers an event before emotions narrate the very same event). Thus affects carry different intensities associated with the strength and duration of an event’s impact (Massumi 2002: 24–5). Emotions often capture affects and enclose and name them so that we can then understand them at a conscious and intentional phenomenological level. In other words, emotions help us create a narrative around affects even if affects refer ultimately to non-conscious and non-phenomenological relations and not to ideas found in the language or in the emotions of a subject (see Deleuze 1988: 64; see also Wissinger 2007: 260–1).

In relation to the hanging essay this distinction between affects and emotions makes sense. The affects of the prisoner are emotionally connected by Orwell into a new narrative about reciprocal relations of hanging. That is to say, Orwell narrates the affectual relations of execution into emotional ideas about extensive relationships between ‘parts’ of the hanging event. He then reassembles these ‘parts’ into an emotionally charged ‘passionate whole’. For example, the relational ‘parts’ of the hanging event that lead to the prisoner avoiding the
puddle acquire an emotional and moral ‘passionate whole’ for Orwell concerning the wrongness of hanging and ultimately the debilitating effects of British imperialism. But, most importantly, Orwell instigates the movement from relational ‘parts’ to a passionate moral whole through his own body. Indeed, we, as readers, come to understand the passionate moral whole of the social injustice of hanging through the impact that the actual-virtual affects have on Orwell’s embodied emotions. In effect, the event of the hanging brings into being a new becoming for and of Orwell.

We will later explore in more detail Orwell’s methodological strategy of drawing on his own embodied affects to make critical observations of specific events, but at this point it is worth clearing the way for that particular discussion. Once more Deleuze’s thought provides assistance in mapping out this moment in Orwell’s writings, particularly in terms of his notion of singular affects as forces within the world that produce distinctive states of becoming within specific events. As potential states of being, affects bring together and break apart various energy flows through relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness, in often contingent ways (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 300; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 315–16). According to Deleuze, such relations can be captured through an assemblage of rhythm. Rhythm relates to the sensation a body feels without its organs—or rather, without organisation (Deleuze 2005: 32). Rhythm in this respect is also an intensive vibration: a wave which flows through flesh and nerve and traces itself therein. In the paintings of Francis Bacon, observes Deleuze, we see rhythm displayed in respect to the non-organic figures depicted. Bacon paints pictures of organs that remain indeterminate. He paints pictures of organs which assume different shapes depending on the affectual forces that flow through them. Bacon does not paint representations of life but instead chooses to paint pre-subjective forces that act on the nervous system of bodies and yet also remain outside of bodies (36; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 168).

Naturally, it would be nonsensical to say that Orwell somehow prefigures Deleuze’s specific observations on affects. A more modest claim is to say that Deleuze’s work helps to illuminate and make sense of Orwell’s commitment to a variant of this type of empiricist thinking. As we now know, Orwell also insists on one level that the human body is comprised of pre-verbal affects which vibrate throughout the body so as to produce states of intensity. Orwell provides an illustration of the rhythm of sensations in his experiences of fighting in the Spanish Civil War for the non-aligned Marxist POUM group against Franco’s
fascists. While Orwell writes about his time spent on the battlefield in actual combat against the fascists, he also recalls other ‘rhythms’ of war which are not marked by such speed. War, for Orwell, is additionally a moment of rest and slowness, interspersed by moments of fatigue and boredom on the battlefield as one waits for combat. Flows of energy from the human and natural worlds vibrate across the body under these conditions and are assembled in unpredictable and contingent ways. Orwell is surprised that the greatest enemy in the trenches is not the fascists but the energy of nature itself.

We were between two and three thousand feet above sea-level, it was mid-winter and the cold was unspeakable. The temperature was not exceptionally low, on many nights it did not even freeze, and the wintry sun often shone for an hour in the middle of the day; but even if it was not really cold, I can assure you that it seemed so. Sometimes there were shrieking winds that tore your cap off and twisted your hair in all directions, sometimes there were mists that poured into the trench like liquid and seemed to penetrate your bones; frequently it rained, and even a quarter of an hour’s rain was enough to make life intolerable. (Orwell 1989b: 28–9)

Orwell’s organs are transformed through the energy of nature, and the energy of nature assumes new potentials as it assembles itself in Orwell’s organs. His bones become vessels for the liquid of mist, his hair is twisted by winds that cry out, and he is at the mercy of a sun that refuses to give heat and warmth.

But Orwell is also aware that vibrations of affects come to be narrated through embodied emotions. For example, the doomed protagonist of Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston Smith, feels that the body is the location for understanding the distinctively human qualities of particular events in everyday life. Winston says:

On the battlefield, in the torture chamber, on a sinking ship, the issues that you are fighting for are always forgotten, because the body swells up until it fills the universe, and even when you are not paralysed by fright or screaming with pain, life is a moment-to-moment struggle against hunger or cold or sleeplessness, against a sour stomach or an aching tooth. (Orwell 1983: 803)

Here, Orwell observes that while sensations move the body to ‘swell up’ this becomes manifest and narrated through emotions associated with social, natural and human qualities such as hunger, cold, or an aching tooth. Affectual sensations within distinctive events thus communicate something which is emotionally social about the event at hand.

Orwell’s own way of exploring rhythms is motivated in part to demonstrate his capacity to affect and be affected by others and by a
surrounding environment (cf. Massumi 2002). One way to understand this tactic is to utilise Deleuze and Guattari’s thoughts on percepts. Existing independently ‘of a state of those who experience them’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 164), a percept does not rest in one’s immediate lived experience as such but rather subsists in the zone of becoming, or in a ‘zone of indetermination’. Percept refers to that zone which allows for the ‘coupling of two sensations without resemblance’ (173). This is the ‘passing through’ of sensations from one object to another so that a new becoming is created between both that escapes the immediate perception of a particular state of affairs. We see this in Orwell’s rendition of the hanging discussed earlier. The condemned man is made up of a series of affectual singularities (bowels digesting food, growing nails, and so on) which go beyond his actual concrete manifestation of being that Hindu man just about to be hanged and enter Orwell’s own embodiment. By viewing the condemned man as comprising a set of affectual singularities which combine with various other sensations, including those in Orwell, a ‘percept’ of the hanging event is created that goes beyond the empirical immediacy of the hanging itself. This percept brings about a moral passionate event in Orwell: the awful event of ‘cutting a life short when it is in full tide’.

In the final substantive section we will return to these themes in order to draw out Orwell’s methodology and its relation to his critical social observations in more depth. Before this, however, one final related issue needs to be addressed. For some critics argue that Orwell’s insistence on using his own experiences as a methodological device to make social observations lead him to embrace a rather incapacitating relativism. According to Lucas (2004: 11), for example, Orwell’s subjective empiricism injects a ‘superficial immediacy’ into his writings whereby assurance in his political beliefs is gained simply through experience rather than through any intentional theoretical approach. Others develop similar critiques to argue that Orwell lacks any objective basis from which to make his observations. Rai, for instance, insists that Orwell’s belief that language is often used to deceive and to inject dominant meanings into everyday usage betrays an extreme form of relativism in which ‘language and therefore communication is beset by an apparently inescapable subjective falsification’ (Rai 1990: 124). Stuart Hall (1984) similarly argues that Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell’s dystopian vision of the triumph of totalitarianism, is a distorted mimicry of complex modern societies. According to Hall, Nineteen Eighty-Four presents a picture of state power that simply imposes its will upon poor unsuspecting souls. The idea that the modern state must actually aim to
win hegemony from sections of the population, and thus must produce policies that at least respond to some elements of popular culture, is anathema to Orwell. As a result Orwell cannot see beyond power relations operating in modern societies.

The next section begins the process of providing answers to these criticisms. It will argue that Orwell develops his own take on the distinction between ideas and relations through the motif of ‘vagueness’ and that this motif is itself part of Orwell’s broader empiricist theory of affects. Furthermore, Orwell’s celebration of vague affects enables him to demonstrate how ordinary people might resist dominant power relations. This will then take the argument back to Orwell’s own affectual methodology.

III. The Vagueness of Affects

Commenting on Charles Dickens, Orwell says that this acclaimed author combines ‘a quasi-instinctive siding with the oppressed against the oppressors’ with a Christian sensibility (Orwell 1984: 82). Dickens embarks on a radical journey in his novels without sermonising. He revolts against authority in a humorous manner that distils a human face without any highly worked out plans for social change. ‘The vagueness of his discontent is the mark of his permanence’ (81).

This basic motif of ‘vagueness’ is an important one for Orwell. Indeed, it informs his analysis of capitalism, which is in itself derived from his many experiences and, contrary to what Hall argues, from his deep appreciation of the potential resistance to authoritarianism embedded in popular culture. For example, in The Road to Wigan Pier Orwell says that the working class articulate vague socialist ideals. Socialism for them equals justice and common decency. The worst abuses are left out but life generally carries on much the same as before, ‘centring around . . . family life, the pub, football and local politics’ (Orwell 1989a: 164). Nobody disputes the fact that normative words such as ‘justice’, as well as others like ‘equality’, ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’, are abstract concepts. Orwell’s conviction turns on the surety that such concepts have found expression in all aspects of British life and therefore deserved to be honoured. They may all very well carry illusionary elements, as Orwell admits in his pamphlet The Lion and the Unicorn, yet they are powerful illusions affecting everyday conduct: ‘national life is different because of them’ (Orwell 1984: 150–1). Neglecting these ideals therefore implies neglecting a distinctively human and common culture.
But why is ‘vagueness’ celebrated by Orwell? One reason concerns his distaste for excessive intellectualism. Or, to put it in more Deleuzian terms, Orwell rejects that ‘neurosis’ in which a writer demonstrates ‘no risk of seeing the power of life which runs through a work. All has been crushed in advance’ (Deleuze 2002: 37). Neurosis is evident in such approaches in so far as, through clearly defined ‘manifestos’, ‘ideologies’, ‘theories of writing’ and so on, a writer imposes pre-conceived ‘critical’ significations onto an object of analysis. For Deleuze, this neurosis towards writing lacks creativity because of its failure to open itself up to the flux of life, to the different affects that run through the body of a writer and which go onto imprint themselves on the page.

Vagueness is Orwell’s own device for denouncing something similar to the intellectualism of neurosis. Visiting the north of England’s working-class communities in Wigan Pier planted in Orwell the view that the dogmatism expounded incessantly by many in the Church or disseminated by numerous socialist intellectuals just didn’t exist among the working class. ‘It is only the ‘educated’ man, especially the literary man, who knows how to be a bigot . . . The creed is never found in its pure form in a genuine proletarian’ (Orwell 1989a: 165–6). Rather than reading every word of the Bible or talking incessantly about class struggle, the working class revel in their cheap luxuries despite the fact that these are a sorry compensation after years of being plundered by the rich. Even though their lives are on no account desirable, the workers have made the best out of difficult circumstances. Talk from some on the Left about progress being brought about through mechanisation only disaffected workers, leading to ‘a spiritual recoil from socialism’ (174) as creative life was seen to be increasingly sapped by industrialisation. Above all else, those ‘possessing a technique which seems to explain everything . . . do not often bother to discover what is going on inside other people’s heads’ (173). Or, to put it in more blunt terms, they do not bother to understand people’s everyday vague experiences.

What these writers therefore lack is an ‘emotional sincerity’ of the sort that Orwell finds in the American novelist Henry Miller. Miller’s exceptional gift, Orwell claims in his famous essay on the novelist, is his aptitude for a style of fiction ‘dealing with recognisable experiences of human beings’ (Orwell 1981: 496). Specifically, Miller projects a familiarity with the reader beyond the confines of his novels by bequeathing ‘the feeling that these things are happening to you’ and by dragging ‘the real-politick of the inner mind into the open’ (497). Like Jonah inside the whale, Miller allows himself to be swallowed whole by his surroundings. Miller is thus secure in the whale’s belly—‘the dark,
 cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between
yourself and reality’ (514). Indeed, Orwell equates Miller’s writing with
those of First World War writers who turned their backs on the carnage
they witnessed by simply switching off mentally from the destruction
around them. Under these truly horrendous conditions the only avenue
open to remaining human was to write or think about a void, a space
where other sensations might flower and blossom far removed from the
surrounding destruction. Miller does not therefore stipulate how people
ought to feel but how they do feel (516–17; cf. Deleuze 2002: 23).

Miller’s writing style is in opposition to some other well-known
authors of the day. Orwell notes for instance how W. H. Auden could
casually scribble down the requirement for murder in the Spanish Civil
War. Orwell’s own encounters of people being killed in Spain had
accorded him ‘some conception of what murder means—the terror,
the hatred, the howling relatives, the post-mortems, the blood, the
smells’ (Orwell 1981: 510). In this instance Auden simply imposes
linguistic pre-significations, his neurosis, onto a minimal linear narrative
of the Spanish Civil War, without trying to understand the underlying
sensations that murder causes in real events. ‘Mr Auden’s brand of
amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always
somewhere else when the trigger is pulled . . . It could only be written by
a person to whom murder is at most a word’ (510).

But Orwell’s injunction to take everyday experiences seriously is not
a plea to stay merely at the relativist level of concrete experience.
Experiences for Orwell are ‘vague’ precisely because they do not appear
in a clear and concise concrete form but rather live and breathe through
what might be termed a complex and creative intermeshing of actual and
virtual affects. And it is exactly these affects that open up a space through
which Orwell suggests people gain the potential to become conscious
of distinct power relations. Orwell’s observations on time in Nineteen
EIGHTY-FOUR provide an illustration.

One scene in the novel has Winston Smith take a bite of a piece
of chocolate that stirs up memories of his sister, memories that
the authoritarian government of Big Brother had tried to extinguish.
‘But some time or another he had tasted chocolate like the piece she had
given him. The first whiff of its scent had stirred up some memory which
he could not pin down’ (Orwell 1983: 815). It is the smell and taste of the
chocolate that helps Winston to go back to his preserved virtual past, to
fill in the interval between perception and recollection with another time-
image that disrupts the linear narrative of the past given by Big Brother
in the actual present. Orwell thus shows the importance of recovering a
number of times that travel along multiple paths: actual-virtual circuits. Memories thus emerge between the actual present image that passes onwards and the past virtual image which is preserved (cf. Deleuze 1989: 79; see also Colebrook 2006; Martin-Jones 2006). Indeed, for Winston, useless scraps of information and everyday ordinary objects initiate various time-images of different cultural heritages through the memories and affects they elicit. At a junk shop Winston buys a paper weight, an apparently useless object. Yet the paper weight holds an immense importance in ‘belonging to an age quite different from the present one’ (Orwell 1983: 799). A few solid objects become the key to a preserved virtual past, to a culture almost dead in the linear movement-image created by Big Brother, a culture which, once revived in Winston’s mind, might open up a space for him to recognise himself as being different to how he actually appears to himself in the present.

The point for Orwell is that associations with one’s imagination in both the past and present have the potential to create a passionate moral appreciation of one’s conditions only if they are related to actual-virtual everyday affects. The main character in Orwell’s novel, Coming up for Air, George Bowling, returns to the town of his childhood, Lower Binfield, in order to escape the oncoming threat of Nazi bombs during the Second World War. When he reaches his hometown he discovers none of the old characteristics he remembers from when he lived there as a child. Manifestly Bowling’s desire to construct a linear movement-image of his past is out of step with his affectual sensations in the present. Returning to his hometown opens his eyes to a quandary. ‘All those years in Lower Binfield had been tucked away somewhere or other in my mind, a sort of quiet corner I could step back into when I felt like it, and finally I’d stepped back in and found that it didn’t exist… The old life’s finished, and to go back to Lower Binfield, you can’t put Jonah back in the whale’ (Orwell 1983: 565). The events of his past remain just that—events of his youth, hazy images and untimely recollections that remained out of step with the smells, sights, sounds and feel of his current life.

Of course, the aim of Big Brother in Nineteen Eighty-Four is to enter the interval between perception and recollection, to stop people from producing new assemblages of affectual singularities that make connections between the past and present. ‘The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command’ (Orwell 1983: 790). Winston Smith eventually realises this when he begins again to recall his own past. He manages to gain a faint vague image of being with his younger sister when they were
children. He thinks back to the time when he stole some chocolate from her. His sister immediately takes refuge in the safe arms of their mother; maybe an unconscious and trivial act by his sister, but it taught Winston a momentous lesson about the ruling oligarchy of Big Brother. ‘The terrible thing that the Party had done was to persuade you that mere impulses, mere feelings, were of no account, while at the same time robbing you of all the power over the material world’ (841). Big Brother’s aim is to stop people feeling a vague sincerity by controlling ‘mere impulses’, by controlling everyday affects. Memories, then, are not just a bundle of emotions. Memories instead mix up the past, present and future and enable one to use affects in order to resist dominant power relations. Winston recognises the force of memories, which is why he secretly obtains a diary in which to document his thoughts. In it he writes: ‘To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free . . . to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone . . . greetings!’ (758).

The next section continues the discussion of how vague everyday affects might be used to escape the relativism associated with naive empiricism in order to develop a critical social theory. Indeed, we will suggest that Orwell manages to articulate a moral and political standpoint that dissolves the boundaries of objective and subjective. By recourse once again to Deleuze, the section will show that Orwell dissolves these boundaries by assembling affectual singularities evident in specific events within his own body that then allow him to make moral and political statements about an empirical context beyond how it immediately appears to the senses.

IV. Becoming a Schizoid Nomad: Or, an Assemblage of Moral Affects

When Orwell speaks about the importance of the body in helping one gain a critical awareness of one’s surrounding environment he does not mean this to imply that the body simply represents, or signifies, an interior self-contained ‘reality’. Instead, Orwell draws attention to the forces, or singular affects, that inscribe themselves on the body in contingent ways within the interiority of the context at hand and from forces exterior to the self-same context. One illustration of Orwell’s thinking here is when Winston Smith describes his apartment block. Winston is struck by how a neighbour’s apartment ‘was shot through by a sharper reek of sweat which – one knew this at the first sniff, though it was hard to say how – was the sweat of some person not present at the
moment’ (Orwell 1983: 754–55). The neighbour is not visibly present
through his/her physical appearance within the interior context where
Winston is standing. Nevertheless, the neighbour is present through
his/her singular affects which themselves become entangled with other
forces penetrating the apartment building such as ‘the usual boiled-
cabbage smell, common to the whole building’. In fact such is a smell’s
explanatory potential that in *The Road to Wigan Pier* Orwell judges it as
a sort of responsibility to employ an aroma to convey the social intensity
and reciprocal relations of a particular context (Orwell 1989a: 14).

But to assemble sensations in new and creative ways is no easy task.
Certainly Orwell is aware that it is often difficult to surpass our own
habits in order to understand the habits of others. In his novel, *Keep the
Aspidistra Flying*, the middle-class character Ravelston is enticed into a
working-class pub:

Ravelston persuaded himself that he was fond of pubs, especially lower-class
pubs. Pubs are genuinely proletarian. In a pub you can meet the working
class on equal terms—or that’s the theory, anyway. Ravelston never went
into a pub unless he was with somebody…and he always felt like a fish out
of water as soon as he got there…There was a moment’s hush and people
glanced inquisitively at Ravelston. He was so obviously a gentleman. They
didn’t see his type very often in the public bar. (Orwell 1983: 631)

Orwell is thus conscious of the difficulties involved in merging one’s own
experiences with those of others. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* he evokes
the metaphor of a pane of glass to describe these difficulties:

Whichever way you turn this curse of class-difference confronts you like a
wall of stone. Or rather it is not so much a stone wall as the plate-glass pane
of an aquarium; it is so easy to pretend that it isn’t there, and so impossible
to get through it. (Orwell 1989a: 145)

This separation between spatial frames of meaningful experiences does
not, however, instil in Orwell the belief that it is impossible to achieve
significant levels of empathy and understanding with others. On arriving
in Spain to fight against fascism the first person to officially greet Orwell
is an Italian militiaman aged about twenty-five. They shake hands and
an immense sense of comradeship flows through Orwell’s veins.

It was as though his spirit and mine had momentarily succeeded in bridging
the gulf of language and tradition and meeting in utter intimacy. I hoped
he liked me as well as I liked him. But I also knew that to retain my first
impression of him I must not see him again; and needless to say I never did
see him again. (Orwell 1989b: 2)
Orwell momentarily submerges his thoughts and feelings with the Italian militiaman through the touching of hands. However, this special bond of intimacy is only fleeting and soon relapses back to one of different zones.

It is this realisation of the difficulties in merging one’s own experiences with another that leads Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* to ask his middle-class readers: ‘[I]s it ever possible to be really intimate with the working class?’ Orwell thinks that it is not possible. Why? ‘The essential point is that your middle class ideals and prejudices are tested by contact with others which are not necessarily better but are certainly different’ (Orwell 1989a: 106). The crucial phrase here is ‘really intimate’. Although Orwell wants to locate a common place with his readers and with those he deems to be treated unfairly, he does not believe that it is possible to diminish essential differences between them and him. While staying in working-class homes during his excursus to the north Orwell notes of ‘the proles’: ‘However much you like them, however interesting you find their conversation, there is always that accursed itch of class-difference, like the pea under the princess’s mattress. It is not a question of dislike or distaste, only of difference, but it is enough to make real intimacy impossible’ (145).

Orwell concludes that, for him as a member of the middle class, to pretend to be really intimate with members of the working class would be dishonest, insincere, and end up simply creating a degree of fictitious sympathy since ‘to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing part of yourself’ (149).

Yet, it is exactly through his assemblage of affects that Orwell can in fact gain a degree of intimacy with others. If we think of an assemblage as being characterised by its ability to map out its own territory by bringing together different molecular affects then there is also a process of ‘detrerritorialisation’ as an assemblage seeks out new molecular affects to link up to during specific events. Deterritorialisation, in turn, raises the possibility that objects have a ‘nomadic’ existence. Nomads have no fixed spatial boundaries; they do not travel from A to B along a linear pathway. Nomads traverse a number of zones and boundaries. Indeed, they blur the boundaries between spaces by often being in two spaces at once (Deleuze 1994: 46). And by distributing themselves across an open space, nomads gain the potential of creating percepts of their surroundings—that passing through of affectual sensations between different bodies and objects discussed above.

It is by creating percepts in this way that Orwell becomes a nomad and from here can relate to his readers something about the sensations that
flow through the events he depicts. Indeed, it is precisely this assemblage of affects in distinctive percepts that develop in Orwell a schizoid state of being: the unbearable coming together of different states of becoming through affects. The tension between these states of becoming is summed up by Deleuze and Guattari in the term ‘celibate machine’: a schizoid ‘cry suspended between life and death, an intense feeling of transition, states of pure, naked intensity stripped of all shapes and form’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1984: 20) that lead one to feel both repulsion and attraction towards an indeterminate state of becoming.

We can begin to understand what this means by briefly turning to Orwell’s own experiences. Visiting working-class towns in northern England, Orwell describes some of the awful conditions he was witness to. Once more the assemblage of his sensations is the main focus of attention for wider observations about the working lives of miners. In one scene Orwell is taken down a mine. Inside the mine cage he is within minutes nearly 400 yards underground. As he crawls out of the cage into the mine a terrible anxiety suddenly descends upon him. A miner, once out of the cage, has to creep ‘through passages as long as from London Bridge to Oxford Circus’ in order to reach the coal face (Orwell 1989a: 22). Being extremely narrow the passages make the excursion an excruciating endeavour. ‘You have not only got to bend double, you have also got to keep your head up all the while so as to see the beams and girders and dodge them when they come. You have, therefore, a constant crick in the neck, but this is nothing to the pain in your knees and thighs’ (23). The pain is so intense that ‘a week afterwards your thighs are so stiff that coming down downstairs is quite a difficult feat; you have to work your way down in a peculiar sidelong manner, without bending the knees’ (25). In the north of England, then, Orwell’s sensations act as both repulsion and attraction to gain a critical insight into the working conditions of miners. Orwell thus produces an assemblage of sensations by temporarily merging his own bodily experiences with those of others in specific events.

In descriptions such as these Orwell certainly seems to articulate something akin to the ‘double hermeneutic’ method put forward by Anthony Giddens. According to Giddens, this method is founded on the relatively simple idea that any social investigation will comprise a ‘duality’ in the sense that ‘the findings of social science do not remain insulated from the subject-matter to which they refer, but consistently re-enter and reshape it’ (Giddens 1993: 9). For example, by collecting data which challenges existing ideas around an object of analysis a
social investigator might initiate a public debate around the object in question, which in turn influences future social investigations of the object, and so on. But how Orwell as a nomad operates is in fact quite at odds with the double hermeneutic method. Giddens tends to sever the link between the researcher and the researched. Ultimately, his method is based on an external standpoint in which different people, including the social investigator, occupy their own frames of meaning and descriptions of the social world, even if each frame makes contact with the other (Giddens 1993: 170). This external step-by-step guide to social research through the double hermeneutic method therefore posits a divide between the researcher and the researched. In contrast, Orwell develops and situates his own categories of understanding in the very moment of his actual-virtual experience. As such, he is able to evaluate his categories within practical encounters and actual events and at the same time generate an internal critique of these encounters and events.

This schizoid nomadic moment in Orwell’s writing can be clarified by momentarily reflecting on the autobiographical procedures involved in his social analysis. Broadly speaking, autobiographical procedures tend to abandon psychologically reductionist explanations of the individual, preferring instead the idea that people are fully social and cultural products (see Stanley 1992: 5). An autobiographical account is conscious of the fact that the self goes beyond the individual level as it reaches out to other lives and their experiences. Authorial power is a socially constructed phenomenon, a highly partisan accomplishment, which must also grapple with the complexities of social presentation to different audiences.

Orwell, however, discards the projection of an ‘autobiographical I’ veering towards an analysis of one’s subjective life story and one’s personal encounters in a social and objective environment. Indeed, he abandons the use of the subjective/objective dualism altogether. More precisely, Orwell focuses on the relation ‘AND’ that exists between subjective ‘AND’ objective. The middle term ‘AND’ is the zone of indeterminacy where subjective and objective fold into one another to create new assemblages (Deleuze 2002: 42–4). Orwell does not therefore converse with his readers from a subjective ‘unified I’ within an objective world but readily accepts and welcomes his indeterminate schizoid formation. His own character is that of the bourgeois English socialist typically mindful of his seemingly contradictory stance, but creatively playing upon it all the same. His public school background respects, even cherishes, Englishness. His socialism subverts it, yearns for elements to
be thrown away. This persona is constantly being creatively opened up through his nomadic experiences and it is Orwell’s brilliance as a writer to publicly convey the intermingling of these different sensations on his own body. Contrary to Williams’ (1981: 385) claim, therefore, Orwell does not simply bump into experience in a naive relativistic manner but allows a plethora of other actual-virtual affects to wash over his body and combine with his own sensations to create something anew.

V. Conclusion

Such have been the perceived debilitating consequences of naive empiricism in Orwell’s writings that Raymond Williams was moved to admit that he could no longer read Orwell (Williams 1981: 392). This paper, however, has argued against the charge that Orwell is a naive empiricist who, thanks to this, is also a subjective idealist and relativist. Indeed, if what has been argued here has some validity then it is legitimate to ask why Orwell is so often accused of being a naive empiricist in the first place. One response is that he is too good at setting out what he says he wants to do, which is to make ‘political writing into an art’ (Orwell 1981: 753). For Orwell, this entails the ability to ‘reconcile my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us’ (753). As such Orwell endeavours to assemble his empiricist and aesthetic feel for the world, including everyday and ordinary objects, and along with how he uses language, with the events he becomes part of and the indeterminate zones he visits. By entering these indeterminate zones the body of George Orwell is broken down into a new molecular bodily assemblage. Orwell’s body momentarily merges with the affectual singularities (sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and so on) of an event and this remakes the virtual identity ‘George Orwell’.

Orwell therefore demonstrates how one can utilise a language style that to all intents and purposes creates an asignifying way of writing. While Orwell is not of course the only writer who accomplishes this, his conscious and explicit injunctions to write in this style, and his numerous practical illustrations of how to achieve it, constitute perhaps one reason why his work still provokes such debate in the public sphere. We might add that, arguably, it is this asignifying ability that transforms his political writings into an art form. After all, Orwell is able both to convey his own affectual sensations through words and to break down the pre-conceived signifiers of language.
Deleuze and Guattari champion a similar approach to language. In their book on Kafka they note that

Kafka deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of escape. (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 22)

Deleuze and Guattari find in Kafka an author who is able to describe states of becoming amongst collective assemblages. Kafka is interested in how language no longer signifies observable characters as such but rather can be made to describe the different intensities produced when different characters encounter one another.

Notice, however, that what Deleuze and Guattari endorse in Kafka—how he ‘kills all metaphor’—is not in fact taken up by Orwell. Refusing to reject metaphors per se, Orwell prefers instead to discard ‘ready-made metaphors’ and to ‘let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way round’. His reasoning here is that metaphors are used in everyday speech to make sense of everyday experiences. The problem of rejecting all metaphors, then, is that one risks also rejecting a way in which ordinary people make sense of their lives. Massumi might very well claim that ‘matter-of-factness’ conveyed through language ‘dampens’ the intensity of affects (Massumi 2002: 25), but matter-of-factness is creatively used by Orwell to sense the affectual vibrations of ordinary lives. He therefore seeks to creatively produce new language styles through ordinary affectual singularities. Orwell’s brilliance, in part, is to make this immensely difficult and complicated task look relatively easy.

Notes

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2. It is in this way that, as Deleuze suggests, passions ‘give the relations a direction and a sense; they attribute them with a reality, a univocal movement, and hence a first term’ (Deleuze 1991: 63).
3. Some of Deleuze’s books, *A Thousand Plateaus* being the most obvious example, also attempt to work in a non-representational (asignifying) style (see O’Sullivan 2006; Massumi 1988).

References


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