



How can you control memory?

In this extract Orwell deals with the psychology of totalitarianism. Winston's guilt is his insistence on the individual's right to make up his own mind rather than following what the Party's truth is.

George Orwell
Nineteen Eighty-Four
(1949)

Part 3, Chapter 2

Without any warning except a slight movement of O'Brien's hand, a wave of pain flooded his body. It was a frightening pain, because he could not see what was happening, and he had the feeling that some mortal injury was being done to him. He did not know whether the thing was really happening, or whether the effect was electrically produced; but his body was being wrenched out of shape¹, the joints were being slowly torn apart². Although the pain had brought the sweat out on his forehead, the worst of all was the fear that his backbone was about to snap³. He set his teeth and breathed hard through his nose, trying to keep silent as long as possible.

'You are afraid,' said O'Brien, watching his face, 'that in another moment something is going to break. Your especial fear is that it will be your backbone. You have a vivid mental picture of the vertebrae snapping apart and the spinal fluid dripping out⁴ of them. That is what you are thinking, is it not, Winston?'

Winston did not answer. O'Brien drew back the lever on the dial⁵. The wave of pain receded almost as quickly as it had come.

'That was forty,' said O'Brien. 'You can see that the numbers on this dial run up to a hundred. Will you please remember, throughout our conversation, that I have it in my power to inflict pain on you at any moment and to whatever degree I choose? If you tell me any lies, or attempt to prevaricate in any way, or even fall below your usual level of intelligence, you will cry out with pain, instantly. Do you understand that?'

'Yes,' said Winston.

O'Brien's manner became less severe. He resettled his spectacles thoughtfully, and took a pace or two up and down. When he spoke his voice was gentle and patient. He had the air of a doctor, a teacher, even a priest, anxious to explain and persuade rather than to punish.

'I am taking trouble with you, Winston,' he said, 'because you are worth trouble. You know perfectly well what is the matter with you. You have known it for years, though you have fought against the knowledge. You are mentally deranged. You suffer from a defective memory. You are unable to remember real events and you persuade yourself that you remember other events which never happened. Fortunately it is curable.

You have never cured yourself of it, because you did not choose to. There was a small effort of the will⁶ that you were not ready to make. Even now, I am well aware, you are clinging to your disease⁷ under the impression that it is a virtue. Now we will take an example. At this moment, which power is Oceania at war with?'

'When I was arrested, Oceania was at war with Eastasia.'

'With Eastasia. Good. And Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, has it not?'

Winston drew in his breath. He opened his mouth to speak and then did not speak. He could not take his eyes away from the dial.

'The truth, please, Winston. Your truth. Tell me what you think you remember.'

'I remember that until only a week before I was arrested, we were not at war with Eastasia at all. We were in alliance with them. The war was against Eurasia. That had lasted for four years. Before that –'

O'Brien stopped him with a movement of the hand.

'Another example,' he said. 'Some years ago you had a very serious delusion indeed. You believed that three men, three one-time Party members named Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford – men who were executed for treachery and sabotage after making the fullest possible confession – were not guilty of the crimes they were charged with⁸. You believed that you had seen unmistakable documentary evidence⁹ proving that their confessions were false. There was a certain photograph about which you

1 wrenched out of shape. Dilaniato.

2 torn apart. Lacerate, fatte a pezzi.

3 his backbone was about to snap. La spina dorsale stava per spezzarsi con uno schiocco.

4 dripping out. Sprizzare fuori.

5 drew back the lever on the dial. Tirò indietro la leva sul quadrante.

6 effort of the will. Sforzo di volontà.

7 you are clinging to your disease. Ti stai aggrappando alla tua malattia.

8 charged with. Accusati.

9 unmistakable documentary evidence. Chiare prove documentate.



had a hallucination. You believed that you had actually held it in your hands. It was a photograph something like this.'

An oblong slip¹⁰ of newspaper had appeared between O'Brien's fingers. For perhaps five seconds it was within the angle of Winston's vision. It was a photograph, and there was no question of its identity. It was *the* photograph. [...] All he wanted was to hold the photograph in his fingers again, or at least to see it.

'It exists!' he cried.

'No,' said O'Brien.

He stepped across the room. There was a memory hole¹¹ in the opposite wall. O'Brien lifted the grating¹². Unseen, the frail slip of paper was whirling away¹³ on the current of warm air; it was vanishing in a flash of flame. O'Brien turned away from the wall.

'Ashes,' he said. 'Not even identifiable ashes. Dust. It does not exist. It never existed.' 'But it did exist! It does exist! It exists in memory. I remember it. You remember it.' 'I do not remember it,' said O'Brien.

Winston's heart sank. That was doublethink. He had a feeling of deadly helplessness. If he could have been certain that O'Brien was lying, it would not have seemed to matter. But it was perfectly possible that O'Brien had really forgotten the photograph. And if so, then already he would have forgotten his denial¹⁴ of remembering it, and forgotten the act of forgetting. How could one be sure that it was simple trickery? Perhaps that lunatic dislocation¹⁵ in the mind could really happen: that was the thought that defeated him.

O'Brien was looking down at him speculatively. More than ever he had the air of a teacher taking pains¹⁶ with a wayward but promising child.

'There is a Party slogan dealing with the control of the past,' he said. 'Repeat it, if you please.'

"Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past," repeated Winston obediently.

"Who controls the present controls the past," said O'Brien, nodding his head with slow approval. 'Is it your opinion, Winston, that the past has real existence?'

Again the feeling of helplessness descended upon Winston. His eyes flitted towards the dial. He not only did not know whether 'yes' or 'no' was the answer that would save him from pain; he did not even know which answer he believed to be the true one.

O'Brien smiled faintly. 'You are no metaphysician, Winston,' he said. 'Until this moment you had never considered what is meant by existence. I will put it more precisely. Does the past exist concretely, in space? Is there somewhere or other a place, a world of solid objects, where the past is still happening?'

'No.'

'Then where does the past exist, if at all?'

'In records. It is written down.'

'In records. And -?'

'In the mind. In human memories.'

'In memory. Very well, then. We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?'

'But how can you stop people remembering things?' cried Winston again momentarily forgetting the dial. 'It is involuntary. It is outside oneself. How can you control memory? You have not controlled mine!'

O'Brien's manner grew stern¹⁷ again. He laid his hand on the dial.

'On the contrary,' he said, 'you have not controlled it. That is what has brought you here. You are here because you have failed in humility, in self-discipline. You would not make the act of submission which is the price of sanity. You preferred to be a lunatic, a minority of one. Only the disciplined mind can see reality, Winston. You believe that reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right. You also believe that the nature of reality is self-evident. When you delude yourself into thinking that you

- 10 oblong slip. Striscia oblunga.
11 hole. Buco.
12 lifted the grating. Sollevò la grata.
13 whirling away. Volando via rapidamente.
14 denial. Rifiuto.
15 lunatic dislocation. Disturbo folle.
16 taking pains. Che ha un bel da fare.
17 grew stern. Divenne severo.



see something, you assume that everyone else sees the same thing as you. But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere
105 else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon
perishes: only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever
the Party holds to be the truth, is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking
through the eyes of the Party. That is the fact that you have got to relearn, Winston. It
needs an act of self-destruction, an effort of the will. You must humble yourself¹⁸ before
110 you can become sane.'

18 humble yourself. Umiliarti.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- 1 betrayal, treason
- 2 stubborn, disobedient
- 3 collapsed
- 4 places where two bones meet
- 5 moved quickly
- 6 insane
- 7 weakly
- 8 invaded
- 9 deception, artifice
- 10 remains of something burnt

> COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and answer the following questions.

- 1 Who causes pain to Winston and what kind of pain is it?
- 2 What is Winston warned against?
- 3 What is Winston's problem according to the man?
- 4 What questions is Winston asked and what is he shown?
- 5 What does the man do with it?
- 6 How does Winston feel? Why?
- 7 What do Winston and the man argue about?
- 8 What is Truth according to the man?
- 9 What does Winston have to do if he wants to survive?

> COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

3 SAY what kind of narrator is used by Orwell.

4 FOCUS on Winston Smith's character.

- 1 Who inspired Orwell in the choice of his name?
- 2 How would you explain the choice of such a common British surname?
- 3 His age and appearance do not correspond to the traditional features of the hero. How does he behave in this text?

5 GATHER information about O'Brien as regards his physical appearance and attitude. Do you think he is simply a torturer?



6 COMPLETE the table with references to Winston's and the Party's truth. Then answer the questions below.

Winston's truth	The Party's truth

What other features of the life in Oceania are there in this text that were not present in Text Bank 108? As a whole, which do you find most dangerous?

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

7 DISCUSS. Draw a comparison between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*.

➤ **COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

8 DISCUSS with the rest of the class. What does 'having an identity' mean to you? Do you think it is important to preserve the memory of the past? If so, why and how? Do you think the issues raised by Orwell in his novel are still up-to-date? Can TV and the press be genuinely independent? Are there any countries where books are still banned and intellectuals persecuted?