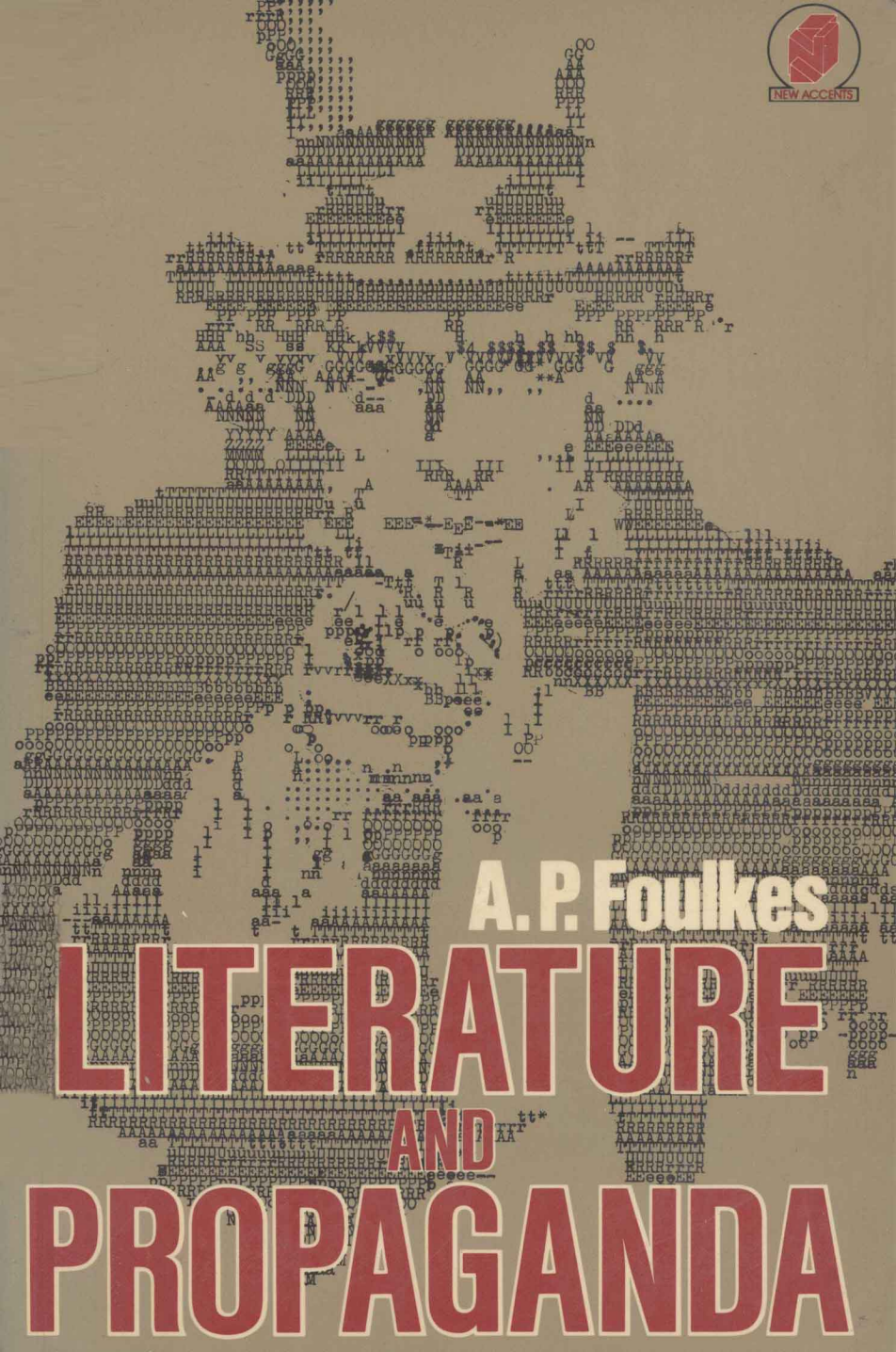
NEW ACCENTS
A. P. Foulkes
LITERATURE
AND
PROPAGANDA

Literature and Propaganda

A. P. FOULKES

METHUEN
London and New York

First published in 1983 by
Methuen & Co. Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Reprinted 1983
Published in the USA by
Methuen & Co.
in association with Methuen, Inc.
733 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Photoset by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd
Bungay, Suffolk

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Foulkes, A. P.
Literature and propaganda. – (New accents)
1. Propaganda
I. Title II. Series
303.3'75 HM263

ISBN 0-416-71710-1
ISBN 0-416-71720-9 Pbk

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Foulkes, A. Peter.
Literature and propaganda.
(New accents)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Literature—Philosophy.
2. Propaganda.
I. Title. II. Series: New accents (Methuen)
PN45.F58 1983 801 82-22913
ISBN 0-416-71710-1 (cased)
ISBN 0-416-71720-9 (pbk.)

General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those academic disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change, to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself, and of how it communicates, are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them: one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

Acknowledgements

Many friends and colleagues helped this book along in ways too numerous to list. I should like to thank especially Catherine Belsey, Karl Eckhardt, Terence Hawkes, Jens Ihwe, Peter Juhl, John Poziemski, Janice Price, Lillian Robinson, Götz Wienold and Barbara Wood.

Part of Section 9 appeared originally in *Theater und Drama in Amerika* (Edgar Lohner and Rudolf Haas (eds), 1978). I am grateful to the Erich Schmidt Verlag (Berlin) for permission to reprint it here.

The book is dedicated to Imogen and Juliet, without whom I would never have seen through *Squirrel Nutkin*.

The author and publisher would like to thank the following for kind permission to reprint copyright material: Viking Penguin Inc. and Secker & Warburg Ltd for extracts from the Introduction to Arthur Miller's *Collected Plays*, © 1957 and 1958 Arthur Miller, and extracts from Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, © 1952 and 1953 Arthur Miller.

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Introduction

If we refer to the nineteenth century as the Age of Ideology, then it seems even more appropriate to regard the present century as the Age of Propaganda. The radical philosophical discussion of the nineteenth century, carried on by such writers as Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Comte, Spenser, Marx, Nietzsche and Mill, was essentially a western European intellectual phenomenon which only gradually and partially came to extend its influence in the form of political doctrine and social action. Twentieth-century propaganda, on the other hand, is worldwide and all-pervasive; its messages and recommended interpretations of events are not confined to a literate society, nor does it need to assume an audience which has inherited an eighteenth-century belief in progress based on mature reflection and the application of reason.

Remote communities in Africa and Latin America, although they may lack schools, medical facilities, drinking water and agricultural implements, need possess only a transistor radio in order to tune themselves in to the advertising jingles and political slogans which either desire to shape their social and economic reality or which in fact already do so. The advanced industrial societies, which to a large extent control the technology and generate the one-way communication typical of such propaganda, are themselves so saturated with propagandist practices that it has become extremely difficult to isolate

and identify propaganda as a generally recognizable and describable phenomenon.

It must be admitted that most people claim the ability both to recognize and to resist propaganda, but when pressed for examples of its methods and manifestations, they usually point to the 'distortions' of the politicians they do not vote for, the 'slanted' editorials of the newspapers they tend not to read, or the 'lies' put out by the foreign power which they happen to regard as the greatest threat of the day. What they in fact recognize, according to Jacques Ellul, are the 'paper tigers', the propaganda directly opposed to their own interests whose methods 'are so absurd and obvious that even the biggest fool can manage to escape them' (Ellul 1973, p. 257). What they fail to see is that the interests they perceive as being attacked by inimical propaganda may themselves be the product of propagandistic processes far more subtle than the ones employed by the 'other side'. It is above all this invisible propaganda, which in its most successful form establishes and perpetuates itself as the common-sense of an individual or a group, which led Ellul to write of the serious 'danger of man's destruction by propaganda' (Ellul 1973, p. 257).

The relationship of literature and art to propaganda is not at all straightforward, and would in any case be dismissed as insignificant by many modern critics, whose evaluative criteria would lead them to make a distinction between 'real literature' and 'tendentious' writing. Even so, George Orwell, who stated that 'all art is to some extent propaganda' (Orwell 1970, p. 276), was probably closer to the truth than Hitler, who on one occasion was heard echoing the popular view that 'art has nothing to do with propaganda' (Balfour 1979, p. 41). Not the least of the ironies contained in these seemingly contradictory statements is the fact that Hitler's remarks were addressed to Josef Goebbels who, as head of the Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda (Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda), had attempted to create a state apparatus for thought control which could have served as a model for the perfect totalitarian state depicted in Orwell's novel *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*.

Goebbels's Ministry moreover, despite Hitler's apparent claim for art's privileged status, concerned itself intensively and

in intricate detail with the production and dissemination of literary works. The more spectacular moments of this activity, especially the scenes of students publicly burning the works of Heine, Thomas Mann, Brecht, etc., were recorded on newsreel and are now housed in film and TV archives around the world. That they are periodically slipped into various documentaries dealing with the Third Reich has no doubt contributed to the widespread belief that Nazi Germany is to be identified with the very essence of twentieth-century propaganda, and that by witnessing and condemning such scenes we will somehow strengthen our resistance to propagandistic messages which may be aimed directly at us by sinister forces within our own society.

Evidence for the existence of such thinking was provided a few years ago by the British Labour Party, which used some of its TV party-political broadcast time in an attempt to discredit the National Front by equating it directly, through juxtaposed images and other techniques, with National Socialism. The aim was presumably to utilize the predictable recognition of the historical enemy in order to influence the audience's attitude towards a contemporary threat. But the probable result of the campaign was that many people were made aware for the first time of the Labour Party's fear that its traditional supporters were susceptible to National Front propaganda. The Labour Party propagandists, in their attempt to illustrate the principle that those who fail to understand history will be condemned to repeat it, were no doubt also thwarted by the fact that in the popular imagination the Nazi has long ceased to be a real historical being. He now inhabits the demonic twilight of the entertainment world, the mass-produced collective subconscious within which Zulu warriors coexist with invaders from outer space and the Waffen SS. The objective correlate of such fantasy is not the National Front march with its massed Union Jacks but the apolitical motorcycle gangs wearing Nazi helmets and iron crosses.

Propaganda does not often come marching towards us waving swastikas and chanting 'Sieg Heil'; its real power lies in its capacity to conceal itself, to appear natural, to coalesce completely and indivisibly with the values and accepted power symbols of a given society. When Hitler claimed that art had

nothing to do with propaganda he was anticipating a perfectly integrated National Socialist Germany whose art would spontaneously and unthinkingly reproduce the desired images and perceptions. Even in the early revolutionary period of the Third Reich, Goebbels, who had objected to the word *propaganda* being used in the title of his Ministry, insisted that 'news is best given out in such a way that it appears to be without comment but is itself tendentious' (Balfour 1979, p. 434). He was contemptuous of overtly propagandistic exercises, such as Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, which he described as an 'ideological belch' (Balfour 1979, p. 43). Shortly after the Nazis assumed power he explained that there were two ways of making a revolution: 'You can go on shooting up the opposition with machine-guns until they acknowledge the superiority of the gunners. That is the simpler way. But you can also transform the nation by a mental revolution and thus win over the opposition instead of annihilating them. We National Socialists have adopted the second way and intend to pursue it' (Balfour 1979, p. 48). Goebbels's methods for pursuing these goals are worth quoting, both for the insights they provide into his view of the British press, and for the light they shed on his understanding of the relationship between propaganda and art. Claiming that propaganda was inevitable in almost any and every presentation of news, Goebbels continued:

> Even the *Times*, the most democratic paper in the world, makes propaganda in that it deliberately gives prominence to certain facts, emphasizes the importance of others by writing leaders or commentaries about them, and only handles others marginally or not at all.
>
> So I must simplify reality, omitting here, adding there. It is the same with an artist, whose picture can diverge a long way from the objective truth. What matters is that my political perception should, like the artist's aesthetic one, be genuine and true, that is to say beneficial to society. Detail doesn't matter. Truth consists in what benefits my country. (Balfour 1979, p. 431)

For Goebbels, then, the reporting of news shared with art the common feature of presenting a selective vision of 'reality' and 'objective truth'. To the extent that this selection process

furthers the interests of 'society' and 'my country' it could be regarded as desirable. Since Goebbels is commonly viewed as the supreme liar of history, some readers may be uneasy in the knowledge that his definition of propaganda has lost little in topicality in the past forty years. If one were to rewrite his comments, replacing the word 'country' with such expressions as 'company', 'profit margins', 'circulation figures', 'political party', etc., the relevance of his description to contemporary advertising and electioneering becomes strikingly clear. The cliché view of the Nazi propaganda machine – lies backed up by terror – is likely to obscure rather than clarify our understanding of these similarities, and at worst will reinforce the belief that once we have seen through the paper tigers of totalitarianism we will have achieved a kind of immunity to propaganda of all kinds. Goebbels did not accomplish his ultimate aim of producing a pure National Socialist state of consciousness, and it need hardly be repeated that the Third Reich's preferred way of dealing with opposition was annihilation rather than 'mental revolution'.

On the other hand, the Nazi vocabulary and terminology which today seem so alien had by the end of the war penetrated the German language to a remarkable extent. Even the opponents of the regime, as Victor Klemperer has documented, conceptualized events and experiences in a language which had been heavily infiltrated by the philosophy of the Third Reich (Klemperer 1969, pp. 237ff.).

A similar relationship between language and ideology has been observed in comparative studies of the language of the German Democratic Republic and that of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the East German *Duden* published in 1957, for example, *fascism* is defined as a 'chauvinistic and frequently terroristic form of imperialism', whereas the West German *Duden* of 1961 glosses the word as an 'anti-democratic and nationalistic philosophy of the state' (Mueller 1973, p. 38). *Capitalism* is described in the East German version as being based on 'the exploitation of wage labour', but the West German definition emphasizes it as 'an individualistic and social order' (Mueller 1973, p. 38).

In so far as a dictionary may be part of a dominant group's attempt to control recorded knowledge and prescribe linguistic

behaviour, its definitions may of course not accurately describe the actual semantic agreements which exist in a given society. Of greater interest to the analyst of propaganda is the degree to which language in its social context reflects and transmits ideology without seeming to do so. An obvious example is the way in which modern English is pervaded by the buried metaphors of capitalism: we 'exploit' opportunities, 'profit' from experiences, 'cash in' on situations once we have assessed their 'debit' and 'credit' side; we 'sell' good ideas and refuse to 'buy' the opinions of those with whom we disagree; pop-singers and politicians may become 'hot properties' once they have been taught to 'capitalize' on their talents.

If a simple principle can be derived from the discussion so far, it is that the recognition of propaganda can be seen as a function of the ideological distance which separates the observer from the act of communication observed. This principle cannot be made to yield a formal definition of propaganda, for it is in the first place a statement about the subjectivity of perception and the relationship of perception to the values, beliefs and assumptions of the group or community with which the individual identifies. The principle does possess a certain explanatory usefulness, however, for it permits us to examine more closely the divergent points of view for which Orwell and Hitler were taken earlier as examples. Hitler's assertion that art has nothing to do with propaganda does not contradict Orwell's statement that all art is propaganda, but is rather contained within it, for the propaganda-free art which Hitler envisaged was an art within which the values and beliefs of National Socialism would be dominant, invisible and totally natural. This 'illusion of pure aestheticism' was for Orwell a reminder that 'propaganda in some form or other lurks in every book, that every work of art has a meaning and a purpose – a political, social and religious purpose – that our aesthetic judgements are always coloured by our prejudices and beliefs' (Orwell 1970, p. 152).

Hitler's words, moreover, reveal a dilemma that confronts all totalitarian regimes which attempt to use art as a vehicle for propaganda, namely that art and literature are capable of producing a counter-vision which in turn creates the sense of ideological distance which renders propaganda visible. In the occupied Polish territories the Nazis acted on this knowledge

with an unparalleled ruthlessness: libraries were closed; dictionaries, atlases and the Polish classics were confiscated; special writing teams were established to produce a steady stream of soft pornography and sensationalism; even the possession of a radio became a capital offence (Brenner 1963, p. 138). In Germany itself, such harshness was precluded by the fact that the Nazis wanted to appropriate the German classics for their own purposes, and thus in 1934 books appeared with such titles as *Schiller as Hitler's Comrade-in-Arms: National Socialism in Schiller's Dramas* (by Hans Fabricius).

These attempts to Nazify the past were not totally successful, for in 1941 a directive issued by the Reich Chancellery banned performances of Schiller's *William Tell* and withdrew the play as a school text (Taylor 1980, pp. 240–1; Brenner 1963, p. 209). Despite such vigilance, and notwithstanding the censorship and suppression of authors, texts and even literary commentary (Strothmann 1963, p. 283), Hitler's controllers of culture were constantly reminded of art's disconcerting potential for subversion. Even the popular light entertainment meted out to the troops in the later years of the war proved itself capable of appropriation in a manner far more effective than the official attempts to make Nazis out of Goethe and Schiller. British observers of German public opinion and morale, for example, were quick to note the significance of the growing popularity of a song containing the words:

> Es geht alles vorüber,
> Es geht alles vorbei.
> Nach jedem Dezember
> Kommt wieder ein Mai.

(It all passes over/It all drifts away./Every December/Leads on to a May.) The Wehrmacht, adding its own tribute to the many which National Socialism had unwittingly paid to the power of literature, banned the song before the end of the war on account of its 'fatalist' message (Balfour 1979, p. 324).

2

What is propaganda?

An inquiry into the mode of existence of propaganda has two aspects, both of which are related to central questions concerning the nature of literature. In the first place we can ask about the cultural, social and historical conditions within which propaganda is produced: When and why does it appear? Whose interests does it serve? How is it 'consumed', and by whom? But we could also investigate the formal aspects of propaganda, attempting to describe the way it functions as a system, or as a set of systems, and seeking to differentiate it from other forms of communication. The same questions are asked of course about literature, and although they have not been answered to everyone's theoretical satisfaction, the very asking of them is facilitated by a general social agreement that a certain body of texts, and the writing and reading of them, constitute the phenomenon of 'literature'. Propaganda, as we have seen, is a far more elusive concept to define, partly because its recognition or supposed recognition is often a function of the relative historical viewpoint of the person observing it.

Because of this elusiveness, many investigators of propaganda have limited themselves to extreme situations, such as war, where it is comparatively easy to identify communication intended to demoralize the enemy or strengthen the resolve of one's own side. Michael Balfour's *Propaganda in War 1939–1945* is more illuminating than many such studies, mainly because

its account of the organizations and policies of war-time propaganda differentiates carefully between the way in which information was structured for home consumption and the way it was transmitted to the enemy, both by the British and the Germans.

Balfour distinguishes five categories of propaganda: false statements made in the genuine belief that they are true; deliberate lies; *suggestio falsi* (i.e. the suggestion of falsehood, for example the information leaks and military activity designed to suggest to the Germans that the Allied landing would not take place in Normandy); *suppressio veri* (i.e. the suppression of truth – an example is the way in which the British Government concealed the extent of damage caused by German flying bombs in the Second World War. Goebbels's own propaganda, which desperately needed facts about the destruction caused by the 'wonder weapons', was frustrated by this silence. On the other hand, ploys of this kind can rebound on the propagandist if the domestic population, which may have access to the truth, interprets the suppression of information as an attempt to conceal casualty figures from the public); the slanting of news (Balfour 1979, pp. 427–32). All five involve the active participation of a propagandist, for even the first category implies the conscious fabrication of falsehood, usually with the intent to have it transmitted unsuspectingly through a respected or authoritative channel. The 'propagandist' is not to be identified on all occasions with the 'author', however, for, as Richard Taylor points out in his study of Soviet and Nazi film propaganda, one of the functions of the propagandist is to create new contexts of meaning for familiar messages by 'activating propaganda potential' (Taylor 1979, p. 21). During the First World War, for example, the British Army put out a series of broadsheets, conveniently just the right size to be slipped into an envelope being sent to the Front, containing various patriotic poems and prose pieces. Some of the material was written on demand, but much of it was taken directly from Wordsworth, Shakespeare and so on (Taylor 1979, pp. 20–1). The defining characteristic of propaganda for Taylor is in fact the existence of the propagandist; if we cannot establish a link between the propagandist and his or her audience, then we cannot speak of 'propaganda' (Taylor 1979, p. 21).

This insistence on the identifiable presence of a propagandist can be misleading when it confirms the common notion of propaganda as 'the work of a few evil men, seducers of the people, cheats and authoritarian rulers who want to dominate a population' (Ellul 1973, p. 118). This view, Jacques Ellul continues,

> always thinks of propaganda as being made voluntarily; it assumes that a man decides 'to make propaganda', that a government establishes a Propaganda Ministry, and that things just develop from there on. According to this view, the public is just an object, a passive crowd that one can manipulate, influence, and use. (Ellul 1973, p. 118)

This popular view of propaganda is not the only one rejected decisively in Ellul's comprehensive and pioneering *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. He sees the tendency to equate propaganda with 'lies' as likely to further the interests of propaganda by concealing its nature as 'an enterprise for perverting the significance of events' behind a façade of unassailable 'factuality' (Ellul 1973, p. 58). It is in this sense that education, despite its professed belief in the liberating effect of literacy, can be seen as a pre-propagandist process through which facts are interpreted according to the symbols which express a group's collective ideas about its past and its future (Ellul 1973, pp. 108–12). Ellul's account is disturbingly provocative, even though he occasionally slips into a mood of what has been rightly criticized as 'Aristotelian Christian pessimism' (Szanto 1978, p. 205). I shall return later to some of his arguments and examples, but would first like to summarize a section of his book in which he makes a crucial distinction between two types of propaganda, the understanding of which is essential to a discussion of propaganda in literature.

In his attempt to define categories of propaganda, Ellul (1973, pp. 61–87) makes four distinctions within the general phenomenon. Each of these distinctions embraces a pair of types, the first one of which is associated with popular views of 'classic' propaganda. The four distinctions he makes are between: 1 political and sociological propaganda; 2 agitation and integration; 3 vertical and horizontal propaganda; 4 rational and irrational propaganda.