POLITICAL SYSTEM AND INDIVIDUALITY IN BURMESE DAYS AND NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR

Minodora SIMION
Universitatea "Constantin Brancuşi", Tg-Jiu

Abstract: *Orwell is a political writer mainly because he recognized the way in which political power influenced the lives and aspirations of ordinary people. Thus we read Burmese Days and Nineteen Eighty-Four not so much for its specifically political message as for what it has to say about human vulnerability in the face of political power and that will be the object of my article.*

Keywords: aspirations, human, political power

Orwell was concerned not only with political thought but also with moral thought and focused on and made judgements about human conduct too(not only about political conflict).

Flory of *Burmese Days* is permanently marked, both literally and figuratively. His ugly birthmark that glows or fades according to his emotional needs seems to be the mark of Cain: it identifies him and disallows his escaping his fate, which is obviously to be marked from birth for some role. It can also symbolize his alienation from his fellow Europeans and each time Flory sets himself in position it must be with his "good" side to the person he wishes to impress. In Karl Fr.'s view, it is clearly a physical manifestation of a psychological weakness and it follows Flory through every emotion, lighting up and announcing a disconcerted man.

Caught by what he is, marked by his ugly sign, psychologically weakened by his inadequacy, he has conflicts which can be resolved only by suicide. The tensions in Flory are those he creates by trying to gain a kind of happiness impossible for one of his character. In reproducing many facets of his own Burmese service, Orwell enables Flory to see the perversion of his motives as well as the rottenness of English rule in Burma. Beneath the English assumption of superiority is the great fear which underlies all imperialistic action, an anxiety which Orwell prophetically catches. This fear dictates that the conqueror deny completely the natives'intelligence. Accordingly, the English colony demands that the Burmese be ignored or treated as servants, for the Englishman is aware that the natives are biding their time. Flory, who knows the nature of such self-deception, cannot live the lie of his daily existence. His course of loyalty to the English colony demands what only an Ellis, with his racial rabble-rousing, can offer. Thus Flory is sapped within and without. Too weak to aid his Burmese friend when he knows the doctor needs help, Flory cannot face himself. Torn by self-doubt, he sees in Elizabeth, the young, foolish girl who has come to Burma looking for a husband, much more than she can possible offer. When he "rescues" her from a relatively harmless water buffalo, something seems "to thaw and grow warm in him."[1] He wants to share his fondness for Burma and the Burmese with her, but his feelings of inadequacy make him wait too long. Elizabeth seems to be more than she is because she carries with her wisps of England: freshness, a white complexion, youthful vigour-all the things that go dead in

[1] Ibid., p80

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Burma. She is a relief from native women and from the boredom of drinking in the local club, the centre of white superiority. But beyond this, she is nothing and Flory half realizes her inadequacies while he woos her with his agonized plea for her "cultured" companionship. By the time Flory musters his courage to help the Burmese, to defend his friend Dr. Veraswami, and to propose Elizabeth(after Verall abandons her), Flory realizes it is all tragically too late.

Orwell starts with the premise that the system traps the individual and although he may want the individual to succeed, the latter-Flory, for instance is cursed from birth. This type of frustration has of course been the stuff of great literature but only when the author has been able to project and intensify his material imaginatively. Otherwise, the novel becomes merely another demonstration of society's attempts to crush its dissenters.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is probably one of the best political satires of the twentieth century, but its status as one of the most disturbing horror stories of all time is mainly due to its relentless psychological study of the disintegration of its main character.

In a social system where there is no privacy and conformity is the golden rule for survival, the frail and un distinguished hero of the book has no real chances for a successful rebellion. In secret revolt against the Party and his own miserable life, Winston Smith keeps a diary in which his private thoughts and feelings are recorded-not an easy matter when there is a telescreen in every room through which the smallest action may be observed.

Another stage in his rebellion is his attraction to Julia, a girl working in the same Ministry. One day as he is passing her in an office corridor she passes him a scrap of paper with the words "I love you". They succeed in spending a day together and make love in the open. From that time they arrange meetings, usually in a room above a junk-shop, which he rents and this will be the third stage. Here they plan a conspiracy against the party and, believing on very little evidence that a fellow-member of their staff, O'Brien, is also a revolutionary, they agree to work with an Underground organization known as the Brotherhood. O'Brien who is nothing but a pillar of the existing order is merely entrapping them and they are imprisoned, beaten, tortured and subject to prolonged degradation until all resistance is burned out of them and they finally betray each other.

Orwell uses his hero's rebellion both to expose the society he describes and to demonstrate human nature defeated by such a society as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* makes a point about the modernized inquisitions of the totalitarian state The corrosion of the will through which human freedom is worn away has always fascinated Orwell; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* elaborates a theme which was touched on in *Burmese Days*.

Winston's vulnerability, his fear, his frailty, his weakness, his capacity for deceit, all emerge as inevitable in terms of the way the hero has to live, and at the same time, promises only failure if he should take any measures to counteract conformity. However Winston's function is crucial, not just as a focus of sympathy or as a major character furthering the plot but as a link with normality(normal human feeling, normal human behaviour) as he becomes increasingly aware of its loss. He comes to represent the individual citizen, and what he does and what happens to him matters to us because of what these things imply about the possibility of individual freedom in a totalitarian society.

Winston's instinctive rebellion or initiation in rebellion, his almost unconscious desire to discover the past by bringing to the surface dim memories of his

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mother, his childhood, what life was like before the revolution is an antisocial act, for it is an expression of individuality. It is a historical act, for it seeks to discover the past: And it is a sensual act, in the pleasure that the pen and notebook can provide.

His attempt at rediscovering his humanity ripples out from the moment when he first sets pen to paper. He wanders alone in the prole districts and in the savouring of the dirt and squalor finds a quality of human life that is both abhorrent and attractive. The life of the proles, "the swarming disregarded masses", is indescribably squalid but they have a degree of freedom which is unthinkable for Party members. There are no telescreens. The proles exist as they do not because the Party can't control them but because it can't be bothered.

As far as Winston is concerned, even walking on his own is an anti-social act, although to have shared his walks with one other person would have been even worse. A meaningful personal relationship which is not dominated by the Party is criminal. So is a taste for solitude, "ownlife" in Newspeak, which could indicate dangerous individualism. Winston commits both these crimes and with their commitment he becomes conscious that they constitute a political act. It is Winston who fully acknowledges the fact that sexual union has all the significance of a political act in a world where sexual repression has become an aim and a weapon of Ingsoc engineering. Every illicit relationship is a blow struck for self-expression. And the metaphor of aggression is apt."Their embrace had been a battle, the climax of a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act."[1]

But their relationship is vulnerable, freedom is illusory, pleasure cannot last and again it is Winston who realizes that escape and private satisfaction are not enough. Mr.Charrington's room is the attempt to achieve normality but the decision to use it is as much a political act as their love-making, and their fear and their knowledge of punishment undermines normality.

However, apart from its subversive suggestions as a centre of rebellion, their relationship is also important because it helps them, Winston particularly as he is trying to rediscover what humanity has lost. Thus, it favours the introduction of elements belonging to a genuine, real life. In Mr. Charrington's shop Winston finds such precious objects as the diary, the old print of St.Clement's church, and the glass paperweight with its air of belonging to an age quite different from the present one, its apparent uselessness and its absolute beauty.

Winston's lack of adjustment to the demands of Ingsoc is obvious but at the same time he is dominated by his surroundings. The power the Party has over him is not exercised just through the posters of Big Brother, or the telescreens or the Thought Police; it is something much deeper and more dangerous. It is a psychological power, a power that can, for instance, induce Winston to participate in the Two Minutes Hate with every fibre of his being in spite of his resistance to it. With this kind of power, the power to manipulate the worst in human nature(and that the violence is in human nature Orwell recognizes) the Party is surely undefeatable.

The mere existence of the Thought Police suggests that thinking may be regarded as dangerous. Winston is first lured into exposing his thoughts, then he is cured of them. That he has been acting rebelliously the Party has clearly known for a long time. He is arrested when he knows that he is thinking rebelliously and with deliberate purpose. He is taught how to "think right in Party terms", and therein lies his defeat and the terrible pessimism of the book. It is not just that he fails politically that

[1] George Orwell, *1984*, Penguin Books, Martin Secker&Warburg Ltd., London,1990,p.87

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matters(there is nothing of the true revolutionary or leader in his make up) but even more that he loses every vestige of his personality that contained genuine humanity.

Orwell places the origin of totalitarianism in human nature. His apocalyptic view of the future originates from such vice as human frailty.O'Brien succeeds in destroying Winston Smith by exploiting two of the latter's fatal weaknesses. Smith's rebellion against the Party is based on typical Christian- humanist views. The trouble is that he is hardly in a position to make his stand on the strength of these beliefs. All he can rely on are a number of nostalgic memories and feelings of physical and mental discomfort. What they really amount to becomes apparent when he promises O'Brien that he is prepared to throw sulphuric acid in a child's face if that would weaken the power of the Party. By making such a promise he proves himself to be no better than the people he has sworn to fight, thus totally destroying Smith's claim to moral superiority.

Smith's second weakness, of a psychological nature, is his mortal fear of rats. Although he has withstood months of brainwashing and torture, he courageously refuses to give up his love for Julia, feeling that as long as he is able to do this he has retained his basic humanity. When, however, he is exposed to two enormous half-starved rats which are about to devour his head, he breaks down and, screaming like an animal, transfers the punishment to Julia. By betraying Julia he destroys his essential self, becomes an empty shell to be filled with whatever the Party thinks fit. Before Winston is threatened with the rat torture he hasn't been completely broken, mentally or physically. It is only in the end that he has learned to believe, by means of doublethink, that two and two can make five, that the past is whatever the Party says it was and may at any moment change, without changing of course, because it must always have been whatever the Party at any moments says it was, and so on. No longer a rebel against the Party which tolerates no personal or private feelings, when Winston betrays Julia, he is "cured" and all his love is directed towards Big Brother. Julia has been through similar tortures, with the same result, and when she and Winston meet again by chance they have no feeling at all for one another. Each of them has learned in the torture chamber that"all you care about is yourself."

One of the points that Orwell is trying to make is that what destroys Winston is brutality and degradation, and if the essential humanity of a man, his decent instincts and feelings are destroyed, then he is nothing. At the end of the book Winston is alive but he is nothing. He has been forced to deny everything he might ever have valued. Physically he is a wreck, but it is his mental degradation that is the Party's crucial achievement .This is the most somber aspect of the book, the ease with which human nature can be dominated by brute power. Within this society, people are easily influenced, conditioned all the time, subjected all the time to pressures through constant brainwashing by advertisements, propaganda and official education.

The process of breaking Winston down is the necessary demonstration of the possibilities of power. Orwell shows us that the will, the mind and the body can all be destroyed without destroying life itself, and he has to show us also that the victim in fact co-operates with his persecutors, that the degradation is, in a sense, voluntary. Orwell had clearly partially based this on what he knew of the operation of the Moscow Trials, through which Stalin conducted his purges. The collaboration between victim and persecutor had been documented in several places and Koestler had based his memorable *Darkness at Noon,* which impressed Orwell, on this. Winston wants to do what O'Brien demands. He sees O'Brien as an almost fatherly protector, someone with Winston's welfare at heart, and he yearns to be able genuinely to do the right thing. He

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virtually asks for his final dose of treatment in Room 101, in his reminder to O'Brien that so far he has escaped it, that he has not betrayed Julia.

In terms of the reduction of Winston's personality and the dramatic tension of the narrative, the penultimate stage of Winston's treatment is a more effective climax than the episode of the rats(Winston's ultimate fear). Yet, it is the betrayal of Julia, of another human being with whom Winston had established an extra-Ingsoc relationship that is crucial.

Ultimately the message of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not political in the narrow sense. It does not uphold or refute a particular body of ideas. It is antiauthoritarian, anti-elite, against the concentration of power, against any tendency that might work against a creative, stimulating atmosphere in which the individual can flourish.

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