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‘Awake! Oh You Young Men of England’

The Construction of National Identity in Orwell’s Essays and Novels

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Acknowledgements

Almost seventeen years ago, while I was lingering among the rows of a temporary book shop, a scarlet blurb captured my attention. It said: ‘The Real Story of Big Brother’! In my mind (as in those of most Italians) the words ‘Big Brother’ were inevitably linked to the popular TV program which that September was broadcast for the first time. I had no inkling of who George Orwell was or what the book was about. However, I was really fascinated by the unusual, extremely simple, title of the book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Orwell’s masterpiece has completely changed my perspective on and my perception of reality (the description of the ‘Two Minutes Hate’ was illuminating). Notwithstanding the profound impact the book had on me, it was only a starting point to later discover a great journalist and a passionate essayist, a writer who was capable of turning his personal experience (and deep love for his country) into powerful literary works.

I am most grateful to my supervisor, Professor Laura Tosi, for having allowed me to make this amazing discovery! I want also to warmly thank Professor Shaul Bassi for his availability as second reader. Moreover, I sincerely thank those whose critical advice, unstinting support and close friendship sustained me during the composition of my thesis, in particular, Paolo Segala, Erika Lorenzon and Michele Gargano. But my best thanks go to my family for the endless patience.

CHAPTER I: REPRESENTATIONS OF ENGLISHNESS

1.1 Trying to Delimit an Identity: Englishness or Britishness?

The labels are too small,
and therefore open to
contradiction.

Jenny Mecziems, 'Swift and Orwell: Utopia as Nightmare'

In his praiseworthy essay on national characters entitled 'The Lion and the Unicorn', published as a small volume in 1941, George Orwell openly confessed his perplexity about how to name his country:

We call our islands by no less than six different names, England, Britain, Great Britain, the British Isles, the United Kingdom and, in very exalted moments, Albion. Even the differences between north and south England loom large in our own eyes.¹

Far from being the whimsical or sarcastic remark of a pungent essayist, Orwell's statement was emblematic of a certain fuzziness regarding a wider discourse on national identities. Notwithstanding the awareness of the differences among 'the so-called races of Britain'², in the essay (and elsewhere) the author shifted continually (and without the utmost caution) from the words England and Britain, convinced that the 'nation is bound together by an invisible chain'³. He drew the conclusion that:

England [...] resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. [...]. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks. A family with the wrong members in

¹ Orwell, Sonia and Angus, Ian (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume 2: My Country Right or Left*, London, Penguin, 1970, p. 83. [Hereafter, cited in the text as CEJL by volume and page number.]

² CEJL 2, p. 83.

³ CEJL 2, p. 87.

control – that, perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing *England* in a phrase (My emphases).⁴

Due to the simplistic obliteration of distinctive peculiarities, Orwell's analysis can hardly be considered as a model by scholars. However, it has certainly been part of what Krishan Kumar calls 'a history and a culture resonant with ambiguities and conflicts'⁵, particularly because how to clearly distinguish 'English' from 'British' (and consequently 'Englishness' from 'Britishness') has always been a thorny point in the discussion on national identities.

Starting from an etymological point of view a preliminary distinction can be made. According to etymologists, the origins of the word *Britain* are very ancient. They probably go back to the Greeks, who in the fourth century BC referred to the inhabitants of the largest off-shore island in the western Europe, the Celts, as *Pretanoi*⁶, 'tattooed people', with the explicit reference to the Celtic custom of painting the body. After Britain had entered in their sphere of dominion, the Romans transformed the term *Pretanoi* into *Britanni*, while they coined the feminine word *Britannia* to indicate the place where the Celts lived.

Around the fifth century AD the Germanic tribes of the Angles and Saxons invaded the British islands. Both historical sources and archaeological remains suggest that

[a]lthough the Germanic invaders must at first have had little greater organization than isolated war bands, they quickly united into larger territorial groups under kings. [...] In the earliest days of the Anglo-Saxons, power appears to have rested in the south and east, specifically [...] under Aelle of Sussex, Ceawlin of Wessex, Aethelberht of Kent, and Raedwald of East Anglia.⁷

By the year 600 a vast portion of southern Britain was under the direct control of the Anglo-Saxons, while the zones ruled by the Celts had 'been reduced to a few distant corners of the west, such as Wales and Cornwall'⁸. The Anglo-Saxons

⁴ CEJL 2, p. 88.

⁵ Kumar, Krishan, *The Making of English National Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

⁶ See *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*.

⁷ Robinson, Orrin W., *Old English and Its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the Earliest Germanic Languages*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 137.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 137.

named the territories where they had established their kingdoms *Engla-land* and ignored the other parts of the islands.

During the Old English period the word *Britain* continued to be used in different forms but then it persisted only ‘as a historical term until about the time of Henry VIII and Edward VI, when it came again into practical politics in connexion with the efforts to unite England and Scotland’ (OED)⁹.

A first significant result was achieved in 1603 when the Crowns of the two kingdoms were united and the Stuart king James VI of Scotland, an ‘energetic proselytizer of the “British” idea’¹⁰, became James I of England and Scotland. A century later, in 1707, the Act of Union created the ‘one united kingdom by the name of Great Britain’, with one Parliament, one law and one system of trade. The Act marked a significant watershed in the creation of a national ‘bond’ and brought a conspicuous success of the word *Britain* as an all-embracing identity. From that moment on the term not only was used as a shorthand for ‘Great Britain’ but also appeared, together with its Latin ancestor, in formal and informal celebrations of the kingdom. In 1740 the anglicized Scottish poet James Thomson composed probably the best known and most evocative of these eulogies:

When Britain first, at Heaven’s command
Arose from out the azure main,
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sang this strain:
‘Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
‘Britons never will be slaves.’

The nations, not so blest as thee,
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall;
While thou shalt flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all.
‘Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
‘Britons never will be slaves.’

[...]

(Thomson and Mallet, *Alfred*, 1740)

⁹ Quoted in Kumar, Krishan, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

Even if the above-cited encomium celebrated Britain's divine origins and its superiority over its rivals rather than extolling national unity, it was representative of the relatively long period that began with the Treaty of Union. Although over a century and a half from the passing of the Act the fissures and profound differences among the states of the kingdom were not completely composed, thanks to this acquired cohesiveness, Great Britain succeeded in putting down domestic insurrections and countering foreign invasions. Furthermore, as Linda Colley states in the introduction to her pioneering book *Briton*,

there developed in this period both a language of Britishness and a widespread though never uncontested or exclusive belief that the unit called Britain constituted, [...], an umbrella, a shelter under which various groupings and identities could plausibly and advantageously congregate. Great Britain became a workmanlike nation of sorts, albeit one that encompassed other, smaller nations¹¹.

Colley affirms that this 'sense of common identity' was not the result of

the integration and homogenisation of disparate cultures. Instead, Britishness was superimposed over an array of international differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other.¹²

What Colley had in mind when she used the word *Other* was obviously not an unspecified or general category. On the contrary, she identified two precise subjects, Catholicism and France, as the second term of the polarity between the *Self* and the *Other*. Undoubtedly, the prolonged confrontation, or better, the open hostility with France, a Catholic power, and the threat it represented to Britain's internal stability and commercial supremacy forced the different states of the kingdom to unite in order to face the common enemy. Conflicts such as the Nine Years War (1689 – 97), the War of Spanish Succession (1702 – 13), the War of Austrian Succession (1739-48) or the Seven Years War (1756 – 63) cemented a sense of inclusion among the different parts of the kingdom. However, they did not completely abandon their peculiarities in the name of a unifying 'Britishness'. The *Otherness* Britain had to

¹¹ Colley, Linda, [1992] *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707 – 1837*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005, pp. xi – xii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

confront was not only constituted by a powerful external enemy but also by a forceful internal element: England.

Unlike Wales and Scotland, England had long possessed not only a highly centralized bureaucracy, a codified system of law, and one principle language, but also, thanks to its geographical conformation, a more advanced system of communications. As the most populated and strongest state in the British Isles, it was rather predictable that *England* would become a synecdoche for the entire archipelago. Undoubtedly, it is in Shakespeare's unrivalled verses that the highest expression of this metonymy can be found:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptre isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in a silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.
(*Richard II*, Act 2, Scene 1)¹³

Far from the noble tone of *Richard II* were Daniel Defoe's words when about a century later he described (in sharp contrast with Saxonism) what was 'that het'rogeneous thing, an *Englishman*':

In eager rapes, and furious lust begot,

¹³ It has to be noticed that in a less well-known play, *Cymbeline*, represented for the first time in 1610, Shakespeare inserted an equally rousing paeon to Britain: 'Remember, sir, my liege, / The kings, your ancestors, together with / The natural bravery of your isle, which stands / At Neptune's park, ribbed and paled in / With banks unscalable, and roaring waters, / With sands that will not bear your enemies' boats, / But suck them up to th' topmast. A kind of conquest / Caesar made here, but made not here his brag / Of 'came and saw and overcame.' With shame - / The first that ever touched him - he was carried / From off our coast, twice beaten; and his shipping, / Poor ignorant baubles, on our terrible seas / Like eggshells moved upon their surges, cracked / As easily 'gainst our rocks; for joy whereof / The famed Cassibelan, who was once at point - / O giglot fortune! - to master Caesar's sword, / Made Lud's town with rejoicing fires bright, And Britons strut with courage.' (Shakespeare, *Cymbeline, King of Britain*, Act 3, Scene 1). Even though the echoes of John of Gaunt's words are distinct, the encomium clearly shows the presence of a 'British' issue in Shakespeare's plays too.

Betwixt a painted Briton and a Scot:
Whose gend'ring offspring quickly learnt to bow,
And yoke their heifers to the Roman plough:
From whence a mongrel half-bred race there came,
With neither name nor nation, speech or fame.
In whose hot veins new mixtures quickly ran,
Infused betwixt a Saxon and a Dane.
While their rank daughters, to their parents just,
Received all nations with promiscuous lust.
This nauseous brood directly did contain
The well-extracted blood of Englishmen.
(Daniel Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman*, 1701)

Even if, on one hand, Defoe's stinging satire can be analysed as a scornful mockery of the ideology of a pure English 'race', on the other hand it demonstrates unshakeable self-confidence in ridiculing one's origins in this way. The author's acute awareness of the leading role played by the English can be detected among these piercing verses.

Many native and foreign writers have analysed the English people also in consideration of its predominance both in the context of the British Isles and on the international scene. One of the most valuable contributions to this huge corpus of study was the book *English Traits* by the American intellectual Ralph Waldo Emerson. The volume was published in 1856 after the writer had visited England twice in 1833 and again in 1847. It is a truth universally acknowledged that often the better analyses are provided by those who see the matter from the outside! Emerson shares Defoe's idea of 'mixed origin' as '[e]very thing English is a fusion of distant and antagonistic elements'¹⁴ and he proposes a very suggestive image of the English character:

[t]he English derive their pedigree from such a range of nationalities, that there needs sea-room and land-room to unfold the varieties of talent and character. Perhaps the ocean serves as a galvanic battery to distribute acids at one pole, and alkalies at the other. So England tends to accumulate her liberals in America, and her conservatives at London.¹⁵

¹⁴ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *English Traits*, London and New York, Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2011, p. 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39.

Nonetheless, the most important aspect in Emerson's work is a precise spatial delimitation of Englishness:

what we think of when we talk of English traits really narrows itself to a small district. It excludes Ireland, and Scotland, and Wales, and reduces itself at last to London, that is, to those who come and go thither. [...] As you go north into the manufacturing and agricultural districts, and to the population that never travels, as you go into Yorkshire, as you enter Scotland, the world's Englishman is no longer found.¹⁶

Emerson's book and more recent studies are invaluable to understand the stimulus that has been fundamental in the formation both of Britishness and Englishness: the presence of near and far neighbours, the essential basis for a continuing and revealing comparison. As Krishan Kumar underlines, '[d]ifferent groups at different times have provided, as foils, a striking array of self-images of the English whose only constant feature is English superiority'¹⁷. Undoubtedly the original core of English identity was primarily formed through the confrontation with the other peoples that inhabited the British Isles, over the centuries frequently described with no flattering adjectives. However, these encounters with other ethnicities and the acquired supremacy over them did not leave the English unchanged.

English distinctiveness did not fade completely away with the Acts of Union with Scotland in 1707¹⁸ and with Ireland in 1801. Nevertheless, these two pivotal events and, above all, the creation of an elephantine empire, which summoned the different peoples of Britain and Ireland to govern and defend it, prompted the development of a new British identity. In agreement with Linda Colley, Paul Langford states in his comprehensive book *Englishness Identified*:

¹⁶ As Emerson points out: 'In Scotland, there is a rapid loss of all grandeur of mien and manners; a provincial eagerness and acuteness appear; the poverty of the country makes itself remarked, and a coarseness of manners; and, among the intellectual is the insanity of dialects. In Ireland, are the same climate and soil as in England, but less food, no right relation to the land, political dependence, small tenantry, and an inferior or misplaced race'. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, op. cit., pp. 39 – 40.

¹⁷ Krishan, Kumar, op. cit., p. 62.

¹⁸ It is worth noticing that one of the most important provisions of the Act of Union of 1707 was the abolition of internal customs duties and trade barriers. 'The movement in goods between different parts of Great Britain was accompanied by an incessant movement of people. England and Scotland, [...], experienced a much faster rate of urban growth in the eighteenth century than did any other part of Europe' (Colley, Linda, op. cit., p. 39). This freedom of movement, the fast process of urbanisation, followed by an exceptional economic growth, were certainly crucial factors for the future development of the empire.

[m]uch of the success of Britishness derived from the way in which it offered a layer of identity compatible with potentially conflicting loyalties. Numerous Scots took advantage of a formula which left them national self-respect while participating in the commercial and professional possibilities of an empire whose metropolis was London, not Edinburgh. So too, did many Irish, including some Catholics. And for the Welsh, the Ancient Britons, it was even easier to slip into thinking of English ways as British.¹⁹

Britishness, as an inclusive identity, was more closely linked with political and institutional forms like the monarchy, the empire, and with their rites and celebrations. However, it should not be forgotten that as England has always been the leading power of the kingdom, so Englishness has permanently constituted the defining core of Britishness.

Quite different is the approach of Robert Young in his stimulating book *The Idea of English Ethnicity*. In his engaging study on English identity the author advances the theory that during the nineteenth century Englishness assumed its most distinctive and ultimate feature, that is, it ceased to be the national identity of the people living in England to become a ‘diasporic identity’:

[...] by the end of the nineteenth century Englishness was defined less as a set of internal cultural characteristics attached to a particular place, than as a transportable set of values which could be transplanted, translated and recreated anywhere on the globe, embodying the institutions and social values of Anglo-Saxon culture: language, literature, law, liberty, justice, order, morality and Protestant Anglican religion. [...] Englishness was transformed into an ethnicity unlike any other; because it was no single ethnicity but an amalgamation of many, it became a cosmopolitan ethnicity that comprised the transcendence of individual ethnicity or nation, just as ‘English’ was used as a general category that designated more than particularity of the people and culture of the territory of England.²⁰

Though an appreciable contribution to the debate about English national identity, Young’s book misses an important point: from the eighteenth to the twentieth century there was no Englishness as such, as it was so interwoven with Britishness that it was hardly possible to tell them apart. To consider Englishness and Britishness as two separate monolithic unities or, worse, not to consider the latter

¹⁹ Langford, Paul, *Englishness Identified, Manners and Character 1650 – 1850*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 13.

²⁰ Young, Robert J. C., *The Idea of English Ethnicity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 232 – 3.

means to neglect that they were both parts of a larger fluid entity whose borders were located at the other end of the world. Certainly the 'English were [...] conscious that Britain and the empire were their creations'²¹. However, with a clever gambit, instead of continually stressing their overwhelming superiority through the assertion of their national identity, they obliterated much of their distinctiveness to safeguard the unity they had achieved with a great deal of effort. For almost three centuries Englishness was a matter of delicate equilibrium between the maintenance of a strong self-conscious national identity and the promotion of an advantageous union with other equally self-conscious but less powerful identities.

²¹ Krishan, Kumar, op. cit., p. 179.

1.2 The English and the Others

A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greek recognized, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*.

Martin Heidegger, 'Building, dwelling, thinking'¹

As previously noticed, to delineate the precise contours of a concept is sometimes problematic, as limits, inclusions or exclusions are not always easy to establish. Sometimes through accurate analyses these contours become clearly discernible, sometimes they remain quite confused also because of their mutability.

In this respect, Robin Cohen's book *Frontiers of Identity*, published in 1994, is very stimulating. Even though the focus of his engaging analysis is the creation of a British identity, it is worth mentioning his work because he introduces an original perspective that can be used to analyse the construction of an English identity as well. In his in-depth study he starts from the shared assumption that 'a complex national and social identity is continuously constructed and reshaped in its (often antipathetic) interaction with outsiders, strangers, foreigners and aliens – the "others"². In the fluid contiguity between the nucleus of a national identity and the other subjects that have come into play, different boundaries or 'frontiers' are placed. These boundaries 'can be crossed at several points of access and linkage, but [...] also may constitute a formidable barrier to integration and the development of a pluralist society'³. According to Cohen, the difficulty in neatly delimiting the boundaries of a British identity derives from the fact that in the constant confrontation with the others British boundaries are not incessantly redrawn, rather, they become quite indistinct. As Cohen asserts, '[t]his indeterminacy can be thought of as a series of blurred, opaque or "fuzzy" frontiers surrounding the very fabrication and the subsequent recasting of the core identity'⁴.

Borrowing Cohen's words and analytical approach to the matter, it is possible to discern different 'fuzzy and impalpable frontiers' also in the study of English national identity.

¹ Quoted in Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 1.

² Cohen, Robin, *Frontiers of Identity: The British and the Others*, London and New York, Longman, 1994, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

1.2.1 The Celtic Fringe

The fact of a hegemony does not alter the fact of a plurality, any more than the history of a frontier amounts to denial that there is history beyond the advancing frontier.

J. G. A. Pocock, 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject'

The first and fuzziest boundary is certainly the one that 'separates' the English from the 'Celtic fringe', that is, the Welsh, Irish and Scots. What seems to clearly emerge from early historical sources is the fact that for a quite long period the English and their Celtic neighbours shared very similar social and economic organisations. As John Gillingham states in his excellent book *The English in the Twelfth Century*, it was during the tenth, eleventh and early twelfth centuries that

profound European economic, social, military and cultural developments affected the south-east of Britain, a wealthy region close to centres of learning, much more rapidly and intensively than they did a remote upland fringe. By the twelfth century this development meant that they had grown sufficiently far apart for the differences between them to be visible to contemporaries.⁵

An event that represents a major landmark in establishing English apartness was the Battle of the Standard (1138), described by contemporaries and then by historians as a struggle between two different cultures. Despite their great army, the Scots were defeated because of the complete inefficiency of their equipment against the more advanced English one. According to Gillingham,

[a] fully equipped man in mail armour would be carrying some 40 pounds of expensive iron. The English economy was able to cope with the mass-production of armour and ammunition (i.e. arrowheads) and thus the English were able to mow down the inadequately armoured Irish, Welsh and native Scots.⁶

While unrivalled military supremacy explains why the English became the expansionist power in the context of the British Isles, their ideology of conquest can be partially understood through their perception of the Celtic peoples as backward

⁵ Gillingham, John, *The English in the Twelfth Century, Imperialism, National Identity and Political Values*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2008, pp. 17-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

and barbarous⁷. The words of the twelfth-century English intellectual Gerald are emblematic to illustrate how the Celtic neighbours were commonly seen:

[t]he Irish [...] have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral farming. For while mankind usually progresses from woods to the fields to settlements and communities of citizens, this Irish people scorns work on the land, has little use for money making towns and despise the rights and privileges of the civil life.⁸

The duty of the English was therefore to undertake a ‘civilizing mission’, as they were prompted in the papal bull *Laudabiliter*, issued in 1155 to Henry II. Between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries English kings not only succeeded in imposing their rule or, at least, influence over the entire island of Britain, but they also laid a sound foundation for the future incorporation of Ireland.

Probably because of their contiguity, the first to meet the English expansionist force and those who were completely assimilated by the English were the Welsh. Descendants of the old inhabitants of Britain, they were scattered into separate groups (Welsh, Cornish, Breton) in a restricted area of the isle. The Welsh tried to preserve the name of Britons, or *Cymru/Cymry*, a term that signified ‘people of the same region’ and could be equally used for the land. However, to the English and then to themselves they became *Welsh* and their land Wales (*Wallia*), two words that came from a generic Germanic term for anything *foreign* (*Wealh* in the Anglo-Saxon form). In spite of their well-delimited identity, the Welsh were never able to bring about a long-lasting political unity:

[t]here were certainly attempts at establishing a united kingdom of Wales, the last and most important coming in the mid-thirteenth century when by the agreement of the Welsh barons Llywelyn ap Gruffudd assumed the title of prince of Wales, *princeps Wallie* (1258), and had it confirmed by treaty with the English in 1267, thus becoming the first Prince of Wales to be ‘legal in English eyes’.⁹

⁷ Some prejudices seem too deep-rooted to be eradicated. For this reason, the words of Gordon Comstock, the main character in George Orwell’s book *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, are quite revealing! Gordon thinks of a man who looks at the window of the bookshop where he is an assistant: ‘[a] bad face he had, [...]. Pale, heavy, downy, with bad contours. Welsh, by the look of him – Nonconformist, anyway. [...] At home, president of the local Purity League or Seaside Vigilance Committee [...], and now up in town on the razzle.’ Orwell, George, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 5-6.

⁸ Gerald, *History of Topography*, quoted in Gillingham, John, op. cit., p. 13.

⁹ Kumar, Krishan, op. cit., p. 68.

The unification was not destined to last as Welsh princelings and rich people did not accept to be ruled by one of them. For this reason, they became easy prey for English expansionist ambitions. In 1284 the Statute of Rhuddlan imposed the English law and institutions on Wales, in particular on Llywellyn principality which became ‘a testing-ground for the future King of England, a place to practice and learn the skills of royal rule’¹⁰. What seems most ironic is the fact that although the Welsh provided a dynasty of English monarchs, the Tudors, they were incapable of establishing their own monarchy. With the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1543 the process of ‘anglicization’ of Wales was practically completed. Only through the Welsh language and literature were the Welsh reminded of their apartness as a people.

Quite different was the ‘conquest’ of Ireland as the Irish national consciousness has always constituted a major obstacle for the Irish to be ‘anglicized’. Even though, like the Welsh, the Irish did not manage to resist the English expansionist force, they were never fully absorbed in the English orbit. Incursions into Ireland began very early and after having invaded the isle, in 1171 Henry II established his supremacy over most of the Irish kings. Six years later the ‘lordship of Ireland’ was firmly in the hands of Henry’s son, John. When he became king of England in 1199, the fusion between the lordship of Ireland and the kingdom of England was achieved. Only in 1541 did Henry VIII declare Ireland a separate realm. Consequently, the English monarch became the head of two distinct kingdoms.

Irish resistance was never completely overcome. As a matter of fact, in the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries various insurrections were launched, as the one that broke out after a terrible potato famine. In the eyes of the Irish the greed of English landlords had been the primary cause of the innumerable deaths and mass immigration that had followed the famine.

In the heated confrontations between the Irish and English religious matters have always played a crucial role. As Cohen points out:

[a]n important barrier between the two nations – and one that prevented a Scots-type union – was the long hostility of the English Crown, and (after Henry VIII) of the newly-established Anglican Church, to Catholicism. Here was the taproot of the English perception of the Irish as troublesome dissenters.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 73.

¹¹ Cohen, Robin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

The Republic of Ireland, the ‘south’, achieved independence in 1921, while to the ‘north’ was recognized the right to give it up. Consequently,

six of the nine counties of the old Ulster province (mainly Protestant in religious affinity) exercised this right in 1925. Northern Ireland, with its own parliament, was then bolted on to the UK, but in a characteristically nebulous way.¹²

If the Welsh and Irish were incapable of resisting the English expansionist force, at first sight what happened to the Scots seems markedly different. The independence of Scotland was maintained through a series of battles that took place between 1296 and 1371. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, thanks to this impregnable position of independent kingdom, Scottish monarchs entered into treaties with foreign states that were often anti-English. Moreover, the Scots had their recognized Church, their parliament and system of law, while Scottish writers revived the prose *Brut*¹³ to shape a national history that could be richer and nobler than the English one.

The process of ‘anglicization’, which appears so evident for the Welsh and Irish, was not less inexorable for the Scots. From the eleventh to the fourteenth century Scottish monarchs were Norman, while their institutions and laws closely followed the English model. Not insignificant was the fact that the language spoken at court, by writers and by many people was mainly or a variant of English. As Krishan Kumar observes,

Scotland may have appeared, in its own eyes, to have escaped the fate of the Welsh and the Irish. But it was an illusion. Scotland was as decisively anglicized as these others: more so, in fact, as the Scottish elite steadfastly refused to admit it and so the Scots did not create a strong counter-identity as developed among the Welsh and Irish in reaction to English rule.¹⁴

Even if English *modus operandi* towards the Scots seemed different in comparison with the aggressive attitude adopted towards the other peoples of the Celtic fringe,

¹² Ibid., p.11.

¹³ The prose *Brut* is the first printed English history. Written in the fourteenth century by an anonymous scholar, it relates the events from the foundation of Britain by Brutus to the coronation of Edward I in 1272.

¹⁴ Kumar, Krishan, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

the result was the gradual imposition and successive complete hegemony of the English model over the British territories.

1.2.2 The Dominions

The distinction between the ‘motherland’ and the so-called ‘Dominions’ can be regarded as another ‘fuzzy’ frontier. Official acts were indispensable to delimit the extent of the *dominion status*, even though they occasionally left open pivotal issues, such as the role of the Crown or the neutrality of some dominions when the others were at war.

In 1931 the Statute of Westminster established the equality of Britain and ‘the Dominion of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia, the Dominion of New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, the Irish Free State and Newfoundland’¹⁵. The Statute enacted some decisions taken at the British Imperial Conferences in 1926 and 1930. In particular the Balfour Declaration (Imperial Conference) of 1926 had asserted that the Dominions would have to be considered as

*autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. [...] The tendency towards equality of status was both right and inevitable. [...] Every self-governing member of the Empire is now the master of its destiny. In fact, if not always in form, it is subject to no compulsion whatever*¹⁶.

Admittedly, the above-cited extract represented a considerable step forward in the recognition of national identities, of ‘otherness’. However, the premise had

¹⁵ In particular, the fourth article of the Statute affirms that ‘[n]o Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom passed after the commencement of this Act shall extend, or be deemed to extend, to a Dominion as part of the law of that Dominion, unless it is expressly declared in that Act that that Dominion has requested, and consented to, the enactment thereof’. *The Statute of Westminster, 1931*, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1931/4/pdfs/ukpga_19310004_en.pdf.

¹⁶ Section II of the Balfour Declaration, entitled ‘Status of Great Britain and the Dominions’, starts as follows: ‘The Committee are of the opinion that nothing would be gained by attempting to lay down a Constitution for the British Empire. Its widely scattered parts have very different characteristics, very different histories, and are at very different stages of evolution; while, considered as a whole, it defies classification and bears no real resemblance to any other political organisation which now exists or has ever yet been tried. There is, however, on most important element in it which, from a strictly constitutional point of view, has now, as regards all vital matters, reached its full development – we refer to the group of self-governing communities composed of Great Britain and the Dominions’. www.foundingdocs.gov.au/resources/transcripts/cth11_doc_1926.pdf.

not been so 'enlightened'. The plantation economies, which were boosted by mercantile capitalism, were the starting point of the British expansion oversea. This type of economy was based on the exploitation of slave labour, a practice considered morally acceptable because of the presumed inferiority of the enslaved races. Nevertheless, the flow of British migrants was not towards the plantation colonies, but rather to the United States and the so-called 'colonies of settlement', i.e., New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Rhodesia and South Africa. The reasons why British governments did not usually hinder the inflow of British subjects towards the colonies were both social and political. It had not passed unnoticed that the transfer of people could help not only to combat poverty and the overpopulation of some areas but also to get rid of 'undesirable' subjects, such as criminals, vagrants, and beggars. Moreover, it could serve as an effective means to further English interests oversea.

What most of the above-mentioned countries had in common was primarily the brutal and unequal treatment that the natives suffered. In fact, in each state 'the British migrants were ultimately numerous enough or powerful enough to assert, or try to assert, independence from the motherland and hegemony over the indigenous people'¹⁷. In all the dominions native people were kept away from power, while English identity became widely dominant. This means that local languages, culture, and institutions were almost completely supplanted by the English language, the Anglican church, the English system of law and institutions, and even by English sporting activities.

The bond between the mother country and the dominions was strengthened by

ties of kinship, economic interdependence and preferential trade arrangements, by sports, by visits and tourism, and by the solidarity wrought by the sharing of arms in two world wars and other encounters like the Korean conflict. [...] Young men and women from the British diaspora abroad still often spend a rite de passage year in England.¹⁸

However, since then the dominions have represented a problematic 'other', especially in the post-colonial discourse on national identities, because they have

¹⁷ Cohen, Robin, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

constantly put into question the univocal definition of English (and British) identity as a white identity. To understand the paramount importance of this racial connotation it is worth mentioning two distinct turning points in the law of British subjecthood. Firstly, The British Nationality Act of 1948 established the status of ‘citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies’¹⁹. Secondly, the Nationality Act of 1981 broke completely with the centuries-old tradition of *jus soli* (the law of the land), a cardinal principle that granted every person born in the British territories British citizenship. For the first time in the history of English law the tenet of *jus sanguinis* (the law of the blood) was introduced. Consequently, children born in the United Kingdom of non-British parents do not automatically take British nationality and citizenship. In the already complex debate on national identities another quite ‘foggy’ frontier was established.

1.2.3 The Commonwealth

In a comprehensive analysis of English national identity, the profound implications with the British Empire and its ‘kindred’, the Commonwealth, can not be neglected. As the Empire will be treated at length in the third chapter, here the discussion will be mainly focused on the Commonwealth, now a union of 53 states, counting a population of over two billion people²⁰.

Obviously, the origins of the ‘modern’ Commonwealth are closely linked with the establishing and expansion of the British Empire. The union of the states that were directly and indirectly ruled by Britain constituted the ‘British Commonwealth’, while a common allegiance to the Crown was the *sine qua non* for

¹⁹ The status is established in the fourth article of the Act: ‘Subject to the provisions of this section, every person born within the United Kingdom and Colonies after commencement of this Act shall be a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies by birth’. Another important principle is formulated in the first article: ‘(1) Every person who under this Act is a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies or who under any enactment for the time being in force in any country mentioned in subsection (3) of this section is a citizen of that country shall by virtue of that citizenship have the status of a British subject. (2) Any person having the status aforesaid may be known either as a British subject or as a Commonwealth citizen; and accordingly, in this Act and in any other enactment or instrument whatever, whether passed or made before or after the commencement of this Act, the expression “British subject” and the expression “Commonwealth citizen” shall have the same meaning. (3) The following are the countries hereinbefore referred to, that is to say, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Newfoundland, India, Pakistan, Southern Rhodesia and Ceylon.’ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1948/56/pdfs/ukpga_19480056_en.pdf

²⁰ The reported data are taken from the ‘Home’ of the official website of the Commonwealth: www.thecommonwealth.org.

the Commonwealth relationship. A major turning point was marked by the London Declaration of 1949. Through this Act India succeeded in remaining a full member of the Commonwealth despite its firm intention not to insert the Crown in her Constitution. Moreover, the association of states ceased to be called ‘the British Commonwealth’ and assumed the name of ‘the Commonwealth of Nations’.

According to the preamble of the Charter of the Commonwealth, an Act that was officially signed by Queen Elizabeth II on the Commonwealth Day on 11th March 2013

the Commonwealth is a voluntary association of independent and equal sovereign states, each responsible for its own policies, consulting and co-operating in the common interests of our peoples and in the promotion of international understanding and world peace, [...] the special strength of the Commonwealth lies in the combination of our diversity and our shared inheritance in language, culture and the rule of law; and bond together by shared history and tradition; by respect for all states and peoples; by shared values and principles and by concern for the vulnerable.²¹

The Act points out one of the core principles of the Commonwealth, that is, to have (at least on paper) an ‘inclusive’ identity. Moreover, the second subparagraph of the fourth article states that ‘[w]e [the people of the Commonwealth] accept that diversity and understanding the richness of our multiple identities are fundamental to the Commonwealth’s principles and approach’²².

It is quite interesting (and, in a certain way, ironic) that the Commonwealth theme²³ for 2016 was an ‘Inclusive Commonwealth’. As explained in the official page of the 2016 theme, ‘everyone is equal and deserves to be treated fairly whether they are rich or poor, without regard to their race, age, gender, belief or other identity. The Commonwealth builds a better world by including and respecting everybody and the richness of their personalities’²⁴. This emphasised inclusiveness towards the *Other* seems in marked contrast not only with recent historical events but also with

²¹ *The Charter of the Commonwealth*,

www.thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/page/documents/CharteroftheCommonwealth.pdf.

²² Ibid.

²³ Every year a different theme is chosen by the organs of the Commonwealth. This theme ‘informs events organised by governments, schools, community groups and individuals to celebrate Commonwealth Day, and helps to guide activities by Commonwealth organisations throughout the year’. www.thecommonwealth.org/inclusivecommonwealth.

²⁴ Ibid.

the ‘fuzziness’ of the English law that formally established six different categories regarding citizenship: British citizenship, British Overseas Territories citizen, British overseas citizen, British subject, British national (overseas), British protected person. Some ties with the Imperial past are very difficult to sever.

1.2.4 The Atlantic bond

On the global as on the archipelagic and Atlantic stages, [...], we may continue our projection of ‘British history’ as a conflict between, and creation of, societies and cultures.

J. G. A. Pocock, ‘British History: A Plea for a New Subject’

The cultural and institutional hegemony England exerted on its Celtic neighbours did not spare the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1606 an important act, the First Charter of Virginia, granted British subjects the right

to make Habitation, Plantation, and to deduce a colony of sundry of our People into that part of America commonly called VIRGINIA, and other parts and Territories in America, either appertaining unto us, or which are not now actually possessed by any Christian Prince or People, situate, lying, and being all along the Sea Coasts, between four and thirty Degrees of Northerly Latitude from the Equinoctial Line, and five and forty Degrees of the same Latitude, [...].²⁵

Furthermore, in one of the most relevant provisions of the charter it was established that

all and every the Persons being our Subjects, which shall dwell and inhabit within any of the said several Colonies and Plantations, and every of their children, which shall happen to be born within any of the Limits and Precincts of the said several Colonies and Plantations, shall HAVE and enjoy all Liberties, Franchises, and Immunities, within any of our other Dominions, to all Intents and Purposes, as if they had been abiding and born, within this our Realm of England.²⁶

²⁵ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/va01.asp

²⁶ Ibid.

Similarly to what had happened in Wales and Ireland a few centuries earlier, in North America the deeds of the English settlers were initially justified with the ideology of the ‘civilizing mission’²⁷. Actually, not only were native people deprived of their rights and identities in the name of a presumed superior civilization, but also, they were forced to leave the land they had peacefully inhabited for thousands of years to make room to the increasing flow of British (and European) newcomers.

Once they arrived in the New World, what kind of bond did settlers maintain with the motherland? According to Robin Cohen, ‘many scholars have rightly questioned the extent to which the newcomers were able or willing to discard their prior ethnic identities’, however ‘the ideology of Americanisation was [...] powerful enough for the immigrants to assert a collective citizenship’²⁸. Despite the considerable multiplicity that composes this ‘collective identity’, it was profoundly shaped following the imprint of the English model. The language (notwithstanding the differences of American English), the system of law and education, and the great importance of being a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) to reach the top of the social ladder are compelling evidence of the durability of the English legacy. As George Orwell writes in his engaging and perceptive essay ‘The English People’, the English ‘have special links with the other English-speakers overseas’²⁹. Consequently, in the definition of the respective identities a not so far ‘kinship’ joins many North Americans with the English, or, as Cohen wittily states, ‘a fuzzy frontier somewhere between a self-hood and other-hood’³⁰ continues to *unite* the two different national identities.

1.2.5 The European orbit

In ENGLAND everything is the other way round. On Sundays on the Continent even the poorest person puts on his best suit, [...], and at the same time the life of the country becomes

²⁷ At the beginning of the Charter of Virginia English settlers are assigned ‘so noble a Work, which may, by the Providence of Almighty God, hereafter tend to the Glory of his Divine Majesty, in propagating of Christian Religion to such People, as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true Knowledge and Worship of God, and may in time bring the Infidels and Savages, living in those parts, to human Civility, and to a settled and quiet Government. Ibid.

²⁸ Cohen, Robin, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁹ CEJL 3, p. 54.

³⁰ Cohen, Robin, op. cit., p.28.

gay and cheerful; in England even the richest peer or motor-manufacturer dresses in some peculiar rags, does not shave, and the country becomes dull and dreary.

George Mikes, *How to be an Alien*³¹

As seen so far, the encounter and confrontation with different agent largely contributed to the development of English national identity. In addition to those already examined, another primary agent played a relevant role in this process of creation and shaping: ‘the Continent’. England and Europe have always exercised a magnetic power on each other, but a constant mutual incomprehension seems to be the prevailing characteristic of their uneasy relationship. In his compelling booklet issued for the overseas forces stationed in England during World War II, Thomas Burke states that ‘[t]he English have for centuries been a puzzle to the people of other countries’³². According to him, this puzzlement is partly due to the ‘peculiarity’ of the English, which also derives from being ‘a compound of the characteristics of many other peoples’³³. He adds that

[n]one of [the invaders] really “conquered” England. [...] England absorbed them and made them part of itself, so that to-day the English are a little of everything of western Europe, and the characteristics of the various races may be seen in the faces and structure of the people to this day. In the south-western county of Cornwall you find the shorter descendants of Iberians. In the south-east you find the stocky Roman type; in the east and north-east the tall, fair Scandinavian, and in other districts the sturdy Norman type.³⁴

Even if this simplistic ‘ethnic’ considerations can hardly be meant as a rigorous scientific analysis, they illustrate the still detectable connection that exists between England and Europe.

³¹ In his hilarious book the Hungarian author George Mikes synthesises some aspect of the British Way of Life. It is worth quoting what he writes about ‘the National Passion’: ‘QUEUEING is the national passion of an otherwise dispassionate race. The English are rather shy about it, and deny that they adore it. On the Continent, if people are waiting at a bus-stop they loiter around in a seemingly vague fashion. When the bus arrives they make a dash for it; most of them leave by the bus and a lucky minority is taken away by an elegant black ambulance car. An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one.’ Mikes, George, *How to be a Brit*, London, Penguin, 2015, p. 44.

³² Burke, Thomas, [1944] *The English and their Country: For Overseas Forces*, London, Imperial War Museums, 2016, p. 5.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

This connection with the other European peoples did not prevent the English from adopting the ‘hostile’ attitude described by George Orwell in his brilliant essay on Dickens, published in 1940:

[t]ill very recently nearly all English children were brought up to despise the southern European races, and history as taught in schools was mainly a list of battles won by England. [...] Those were the days [Dickens’ day] when the English built up their legend of themselves as ‘sturdy islanders’ and ‘stubborn hearts of oak’ and when it was accepted as a kind of scientific fact that one Englishman was the equal of three foreigners.³⁵

Undoubtedly, the peculiar geographical position has shaped the English mentality. To be ‘set in a silver sea’ meant not only to be relatively protected from foreign invasions, but also to have unquestionable, not arbitrary, boundaries. According to Elias Canetti, this unequivocal delimitation led England to be the nation that ‘wenig laute Worte über sich macht und doch zweifellos noch immer das stabilste Nationalgefühl zeigt, das die Erde heute kennt’³⁶. Moreover, being surrounded by the sea, ‘[d]er Engländer sieht sich als *Kapitän* mit einer kleinen Gruppe von Menschen auf einem Schiff, *ringsum und unter ihm das Meer*. Er ist beinahe allein, selbst als Kapitän von der Mannschaft in vielem isoliert’³⁷. The spatial isolation, this physical separation from the rest of the Continent, became also a cultural (and in some way ideological) distinctiveness from the other European nations. The characteristic English attitude that derives from this ‘separation’ is vividly depicted by George Orwell in his brilliant essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’:

[d]uring the war of 1914-18 the English working class³⁸ were in contact with foreigners to an extent that is rarely possible. The sole result was that they brought back a hatred of all Europeans, except the Germans, whose courage they admired. In four years on French soil

³⁵ CEJL 1, p. 473.

³⁶ Canetti, Elias, *Masse und Macht*, Hamburg, Claassen, 1960, p. 193.

³⁷ Ibid. ‘It is advisable to begin with a nation which, though it does not make much public parade of its identity, yet undoubtedly retains the most stable national feeling in the world today: with England. Everyone knows what the sea means to an Englishman; what is not sufficiently known is the precise form of the connection between his relationship to the sea and his famous individualism. The Englishman sees himself as a captain on board a ship with a small group of people, the sea around and beneath him. He is almost alone; as captain he is many ways isolated even from his crew.’ Translation in: www.asounder.org/resources/canetti_crowdsandpower.pdf.

³⁸ In the essay Orwell introduces an interesting class distinction: ‘the famous “insularity” and “xenophobia” of the English is far stronger in the working class than in the bourgeoisie. In all countries the poor are more national than the rich’. CEJL 2, p. 85.

they did not even acquire a liking for wine. The insularity of the English, their refusal to take foreigners seriously, is a folly that has to be paid for very heavily from time to time. But it plays its part in the English mystique³⁹.

In the light of the recent historical events George Orwell's words seem to be more topical than ever. The writer was perfectly conscious of how problematic the relationship between England and 'the Continent' was, but all the same he was profoundly convinced that '[the English] must stop despising foreigners. They are Europeans and ought to be aware of it'⁴⁰. It is not difficult to imagine which reaction he would have had, if he had seen the results of the vote for Brexit!

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ CEJL 3, p. 54.

1.3 Gathering up the Threads

I assume that a close relation exists between literature and history, and I think that this relation is particularly close in time of crisis, when public and private lives, the world of action and the world of imagination, interpenetrate.

Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation*

After the long general view on the development of an English national identity, an apt question must be asked: How is all this relevant to Orwell's writings? Before turning to the analysis of Orwell's essays and novels a brief gloss is necessary to disclose the reasons of some inclusions in the previous pages, which at first could not be so obvious.

In his compelling autobiographical article 'Why I Write', composed in 1946, the author states that '[a writer's] subject-matter will be determined by the age he lives in – at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary ages like our own'¹. From the huge corpus of Orwell's writings some distinctive features clearly emerge: together with the originality of his style, 'as if he was talking to the reader, examining his thoughts in conversation'², the primary and burning interest for what was going on in the eventful years he lived in³. The beginning of the engaging essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn' is undoubtedly emblematic of the fluid contiguity between Orwell's literary production and the historical period he was witnessing:

As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity against me as an individual, nor I against them. They are 'only doing their duty', as the saying goes⁴.

¹ CEJL 1, p. 25.

² CEJL 1, p. 16.

³ In the review of Bertrand Russell's book *Power: A New Social Analysis*, published in January 1939, Orwell depicted his age using a concept which ten years later would have become one of the leitmotifs of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As the writer affirms: '[Mr Russell] sees clearly enough that the essential problem of today is "the taming of power" and that no system except democracy can be trusted to save us from unspeakable horrors. Also that democracy has very little meaning without approximate economic equality and an educational system tending to promote tolerance and tough-mindedness. But unfortunately he does not tell us how we are to set about getting these things; he merely utters what amounts to a pious hope that the present state of things will not endure. [...] Underlying this is the idea that common sense always wins in the end. And yet the peculiar horror of the present moment is that we cannot be sure that is so. It is quite possible that we are descending into an age in which *two and two will make five* when the Leader says so' [my emphasis]. CEJL 1, pp. 413-4.

⁴ CEJL 2, p. 74.

In an age of dramatic upsets, even Orwell's beloved England was affected by sweeping changes. Those changes prompted the author to analyse his country in detail, because it was fundamental to fathom first 'what England is, before guessing what part England *can play* in the huge events that are happening'⁵. The writer is firmly convinced of the peculiarity of the English civilization, which

is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840?⁶

Then he adds

[i]n whatever shape England emerges from war it will be deeply tinged with the characteristics that I have spoken earlier. [...] The gentleness, the hypocrisy, the thoughtlessness, the reverence for law and the hatred of uniforms will remain, along with the suet puddings and the misty skies. [...] The Stock Exchange will be pulled down, [...], the Eton and Harrow match will be forgotten, but England will be England, an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past, and, like all living things, having the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same.⁷

To understand the nation George Orwell carefully surveyed it is useful to take into account a continuity, an historical narration that seems to have no caesuras. So, to find the core of the English national characters the author described, it was important to look in the distance at the origins of the English self-awareness.

England was certainly not a monolithic entity that the writer studied separately from the rest. Naturally, it was also through the comparison with the so-called *Others* that he could point out a markedly English characteristic, its apartness:

as western peoples go, the English are very highly differentiated. [...] When you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing a

⁵ CEJL 2, p. 76.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ CEJL 2, p.99.

different air. Even in the first few minutes dozens of small things conspire to give you this feeling. The beer is bitterer, [...], the grass is greener, the advertisements are more blatant. The crowds in the big towns, with their mild knobby faces, their bad teeth and gentle manners, are different from a European crowd.⁸

This distinctiveness did not mean that the country could stand alone. Orwell was conscious of the great importance of the relationship with the *Others* not only from the shaping and maintenance of the self-identity, but even for the survival of the country he knew. As he states in his essay ‘The English People’, written in 1944,

if Britain is to survive as what is called a ‘great’ nation, [...], one must take certain things as assured. One must assume that Britain will remain on good terms with [...] Europe, will keep its special links with America and the Dominions, and will solve the problem of India in some amicable way. [...] If the savage international struggle of the last twenty years continues, there will only be room in the world for two or three great powers, and in the long run Britain will not be one of them. [...] In a world of power politics the English would ultimately dwindle to a satellite people.⁹

To write about national identity means to face a kaleidoscopic complexity. For this reason, an introductory part, however not exhaustive, was necessary. In the following chapters we will hear ‘the sound of a personal voice, an individual talking [...] of the things that concerns him on many different levels’¹⁰, in particular of the country Orwell loved, his own.

⁸ CEJL 2, p. 75.

⁹ CEJL 3, p. 47.

¹⁰ CEJL 1, p. 16

CHAPTER II

BUILDING THE ENGLISH CHARACTER: EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE

2.1 The Tradition of School Story

The Virgil soon slipped unheeded to the ground, and Anne, [...], was far away in a delicious world where a certain schoolteacher was doing a wonderful work, shaping the destinies of future statesmen, and inspiring youthful minds and hearts with high and lofty ambitions.

L. M. Montgomery, *Anne of Avonlea*

In the first half of the nineteenth century a sweeping change was brought about in the English educational field: instead of educating children at home, parents began to send them away to school. Actually, this change involved especially boys belonging to the middle and upper classes, as ‘since there were no schools provided by the state, the formal educational institutions then in existence were too expensive for the working class’¹. This substantial change was a direct consequence of the socio-economic developments connected with the *laissez-faire* system. Not only did a considerable increase in the wealth of the middle class occur, but also a greater upward mobility was encouraged. For this reason,

[m]any successful businessmen claimed the position of gentlemen, if not for themselves, at least for their sons-in-law. One crucial step in achieving this claim was to ensure that their children were properly, that is conventionally educated, and in the case of English, [...], boys this meant attending a public school.²

Moreover, with the expansion of the Empire, the proper training of soldiers, bureaucrats, and professionals, that would have had to administer and defend it, became fundamental.

The importance that education began to assume is also demonstrated by a series of Acts Parliament passed between 1870 and 1893. In particular, the 1870 Elementary Education Act brought into force compulsory education in England and Wales for all children between the ages of five and 13. Furthermore, while ‘voluntary

¹ Musgrave, P. W., *From Brown to Bunter: The Life and Death of the School Story*, London, Boston and Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 42.

² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

schools were allowed to carry on unchanged, the act established public elementary schools available for all the children residing in districts for which the provision of efficient and suitable elementary education was not otherwise made'³.

It was in this period of great changes, in which education and schooling were perceived as weighty matters (with the consequent great emphasis on didacticism), that the minor genre of the school story received a great impulse.

Even if the origins of this genre date back to a very early age, it was from the fifteenth century that in England a relatively great number of school texts, 'from which spoken Latin or polite English was to be learned'⁴, was produced. These *colloquia scholastica* were 'often composed of dialogues between a master and a pupil, or between fellow schoolboys'⁵. Probably in the second decade of the seventeenth century a late example of these schoolbooks, *Pueriles Confabulationes: or Children's Dialogues* came out. It is worth mentioning this text as it already presented some defining characteristics of the school story: 'it is set almost entirely in school; takes the relationship between the scholars and their teachers as its primary focus; and it contains attitudes and adventures which are unique to school life'⁶. Undoubtedly, one of the most important aspects of school life was to form friendships, a process that was the core of a crucial theme of the genre, that is,

socialisation, or, to borrow a term from psychoanalysis, individuation. This, according to Carl Jung, is the way in which the wholeness of the self is established by integrating the individual psyche and the collective unconscious of the community, or at least its collective identity. School settings clearly offer a perfect opportunity to depict children learning to balance their sense of self and of community, to mature by integrating themselves into society'⁷.

Not only the balance between individual and group, but also the connection between the 'obedience of childhood and independence of adulthood'⁸, were at the heart of the school story genre. Moreover, in the traditional early examples of the genre,

³ In www.perfar.eu/policies/elementary-education-act-1870.

⁴ Grenby, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

actual lessons or preparatory study were seldom described, even though ‘academic work forms a ground base to the other more salient experiences involved in friendships and enmities and in games and other school activities’⁹.

Surely these features were central parts in the works that are now considered as early classics of the school story genre: *The Crofton Boys*, written by Harriet Martineau in 1841, *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* by Thomas Hughes (1857), *Eric, or Little by Little, a Tale of Roslyn School* by F. W. Farrar (1858), and *The Fifth Form at St. Dominic’s* by Talbot Baines Reed (firstly appeared as a series in the weekly *Boy’s Own Paper* in the years 1881-82)¹⁰. While in *Tom Brown* and *Eric* ‘two different but competing models of the way in which a Christian gentleman should be educated’ were established, ‘a reconciliation occurred in the more secular model found in Reed’s stories’¹¹.

Kipling’s *Stalky and Co.*, which appeared in 1899, was a later classic of the school story genre. The book exercised a great influence on the genre, which started to contain a more critical note. Despite the possible different interpretations of Kipling’s work, in this book the author especially points out ‘what seemed to him to be the lessons of the times for the public schools, the main source of future leaders for Britain and the Empire at that time’¹².

In the span between 1860s and 1880s an interesting phenomenon occurred: the considerable increase in the appearance of inexpensive periodicals. These publications, revealingly called ‘Penny Dreadfuls’, often included a school story, shaped on the model of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*. However, in these school stories there was no room for Hughes’ didacticism, while they often contained the narration of cruel acts, of bullying and flogging. In order to oppose the widespread popularity of these periodicals, whose influence on young people was considered extremely negative, in 1879 the Religious Tract Society began to publish the *Boy’s Own Paper* (*BOP*), a weekly magazine. Its enormous success was partly due to the absence of explicit religious connotations, but above all to its editors’ capability for choosing established writers that could attract a wide readership. Leading authors such as

⁹ Musgrave, P. W., op. cit., p. 59.

¹⁰ Two of the stories contained in Maria Edgeworth’s *Parents’ Assistant*, published in 1796, are about schools. In the one entitled ‘Eton Montem’ the epitomes of the Etonian types are represented, while in ‘The Barring Out’, considered by some scholars as the first English school story, a rebellion of pupils against masters is narrated.

¹¹ Musgrave, P. W., op. cit., p. 166.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

Jules Verne, R. M. Ballantyne, Conan Doyle, and W. H. G. Kingston all contributed to the *BOP*.

Following the expectations of its readers, the paper included school stories too, in particular those of Talbot Baines Reed. His *The Fifth Form at St. Dominic's*, which appeared serialized in the *BOP* before becoming a book, is now considered a classic. Reed used some elements taken from Hughes' and Farrar's books, but then he set his own framework, now fundamental for the definition of the genre.

The wide circulation and success of *BOP* led to the subsequent publication of a great number of similar periodicals, in which the school story continued to constitute a central part. The considerable popularity that these publications still had in the 1930s prompted George Orwell to write a pungent essay, entitled 'Boys' Weeklies'. Given that the apparent triviality of the topic could be misleading, the author immediately discloses what he considers as a valuable source of information about the English: 'the contents of [small newsagent's] shop is the best available indication of what the mass of the English people really feels and thinks. Certainly nothing half so revealing exists in documentary form'¹³.

The writer chooses to start his analysis from two popular magazines, the *Gem* (1907 – 39) and *Magnet* (1908 – 40), which both carried

every week a fifteen- or twenty-thousand word school story, complete in itself, but usually more or less connected with the story of the week before. [...] The stories are stories of what purports to be public-school life, and the schools (Greyfriars in the *Magnet* and St Jim's in the *Gem*) are represented as ancient and fashionable foundations of the type of Eton or Winchester.¹⁴

Orwell is certain that 'the main origin of these papers is *Stalky and Co.*'¹⁵ and then continues with the description of the formulaic ambience of the stories:

the supposed 'glamour' of public-school life is played for all it is worth. There is all the usual paraphernalia – lock-up, roll-call, house matches, fagging, prefects, cosy teas round the study fire, etc. etc. – and constant reference to the 'old school', the 'old grey stones' (both schools were founded in the early sixteenth century), the 'team spirit' of the 'Greyfriars men'.

¹³ CEJL 1, p. 505.

¹⁴ CEJL 1, p. 506.

¹⁵ CEJL 1, p. 510.

As for the snob-appeal, it is completely shameless. Each school has a titled boy or two whose titles are constantly thrust in the reader's face.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the subsequent statement of the writer that 'the school story is a thing peculiar to England'¹⁷ shows a certain inaccuracy as in German, American, and Russian literature some notable examples of this genre can be found too. However, it seems undeniable that the canon of the school story, 'narratives in which the school features almost as a character itself, and in which children fit happily into their school, each helping to form the character of the other'¹⁸, is deeply connected with the English cultural background. The author justifies his statement through what he considers as a distinctively English character:

in England *education is mainly a matter of status*. The most definite dividing line between the petite bourgeoisie and the working class is that the former pay for their education, and within the bourgeoisie there is another unbridgeable gulf between the 'public' school and the 'private' school. It is quite clear that there are tens and scores of thousands of people to whom every detail of life at a 'posh' public school is wildly thrilling and romantic. They happen to be outside that mystic world of quadrangles and house-colours, but they yearn after it, [...], live mentally in it for hours at a stretch' (my emphasis)¹⁹.

According to Orwell, these stories were 'a perfectly deliberate incitement to wealth-fantasy'²⁰ and for this reason their readership was predominantly composed by children belonging to lower-middle and working classes, rather than by those who were really sent to the expensive public schools depicted in these periodicals.

The school stories published in the above-cited weeklies were a sort of mirror of the English social class system in so far as they represented a set of recognisable conventions connected with high social status. However, a realistic picture of the complex social system or of the phenomena linked with it was completely absent: '[t]he working classes enter into the *Gem* and *Magnet* as comics or semi-villains (race-course touts etc.). As for class-friction, trade unionism, strikes, slumps, unemployment, Fascism and civil war – not a mention'²¹. This was probably due to

¹⁶ CEJL 1, p. 511.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Grenby, M. O., op. cit., p. 87.

¹⁹ CEJL 1, pp. 511-2.

²⁰ CEJL 1, p. 511.

²¹ CEJL 1, p. 517.

the *conservative* political assumptions that, according to the writer, were at the base of the two periodicals and of their school stories: together with the fun provided by foreigners, the conviction that ‘nothing ever changes’²². Far from being petty considerations, they were directly connected with the particular idea of patriotism that Orwell considered as a characteristic trait of a considerable part of the English people:

[the patriotism of the Gem and Magnet] has nothing whatever to do with power politics or ‘ideological’ warfare. It is more akin to family loyalty, and actually it gives one a valuable clue to the attitude of ordinary people, [...]. These people are patriotic to the middle of their bones, but they do not feel that what happens in foreign countries is any of their business. When England is in danger they rally to its defence as a matter of course, but in between times they are not interested. After all, England is always in the right and England always wins, so why worry? [...] Everything is safe, solid and unquestionable. Everything will be the same for ever and ever.²³

In this essay, published in 1940, Orwell used the long tradition of school stories, especially those contained in the popular periodicals for boys, as a starting point for a social analysis. Not only in ‘Boys’ Weeklies’, but also throughout his entire literary production the author examined a theme that he considered having the utmost importance (in the shaping of English national character too): education. In the following pages attention will focus on those works in which this prominent topic occupies a central part.

²² CEJL 1, p. 516.

²³ CEJL 1, p. 518.

2.2 The Nightmare of Education: ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’ and Other Writings

What a fearful thing it is, this incubus of ‘education’! It means that in order to send his son to the right kind of school (that is, a public school or an imitation of one) a middle-class man is obliged to live for years on end in a style that would be scorned by a jobbing plumber.

George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

At the age of eight George Orwell was ‘suddenly taken out of [his] warm nest and flung into a world of force and fraud and secrecy, like a gold-fish into a tank full of pike’¹. The author used this striking metaphor to describe his experience at St Cyprian’s, a preparatory school. This experience was recounted in one of his best-known essays, ‘Such, Such, Were the Joys’, whose first draft was probably composed in 1946. In the essay, whose themes and elements can be understood also in the light of the long English tradition of school stories, the writer depicted a class- and wealth-ridden microcosm that reflected the social English macrocosm. As Bernard Crick states in his authoritative biography of Orwell,

education was an investment as well as a mark of status. For colonial civil servants without either property or – in Richard Walmesley Blair’s case – family patronage, education was especially important, it was not just the ‘ladder of advancement’, it had to be climbed even to stay still in the same place. Entry to all the careers, [...] depended on having had ‘a good education’, [...]. It was ‘school’ that counted, [...]. To get boys into the ‘right school’ was the business of preparatory schools.²

When young Eric entered it in 1911, St Cyprian’s was a recently founded school. However, it already enjoyed an enviable reputation for getting its pupils into some of the most prominent public schools. The years of attendance at St Cyprian’s profoundly marked the author³, as the recurrence in his writings of episodes and considerations connected with schooling clearly points out.

¹ CEJL 4, pp. 399 – 400.

² Crick, Bernard, *George Orwell: A Life*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1980, p. 15.

³ In a letter dated 8th July 1938 to Cyril Connolly, one of Orwell’s lifelong friends, who in that period was writing a book about St Cyprian’s and Eton, the author writes: ‘I wonder how you can write abt St Cyprian’s. It’s all like an awful nightmare to me, & sometimes I think I can still taste the porridge (out of those pewter bowls, do you remember?). If you have written about Eton as I should think you might, you’d better watch out you don’t get horsewhipped on the steps of your club, if you belong to one...’. CEJL 1, p. 380.

Before collecting his memories in the virulent ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’, Orwell had inserted revealing passages about school also in two of his (less known) novels, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, published in 1936, and *Coming Up for Air*, which appeared shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. Particularly in the former, the narration of the school experience of the main character, Gordon Comstock, assumes an almost autobiographical note:

Even at the third-rate schools to which Gordon was sent nearly all the boys were richer than himself. They soon found out his poverty, of course, and gave him hell because of it. Probably the greatest cruelty one can inflict on a child is to send it to school among children richer than itself. A child conscious of poverty will suffer snobbish agonies such a grown-up person can scarcely even imagine. In those days, especially at his preparatory school, Gordon’s life had been one long conspiracy to keep his end up and pretend that his parents were richer than they were.⁴

In *Coming Up for Air*, George Bowling, the first-person narrator, depicts his education in a Grammar School very differently, as to underline, by contrast, what really meant to be educated in a public school:

When I’ve mixed with chaps from the upper classes, as I did during the war, I’ve been struck by the fact that they never really get over that frightful drilling they go through at public schools. Either it flattens them out into half-wits or they spend the rest of their lives kicking against it. It wasn’t so with boys of our class, the sons of shopkeepers and farmers. You went to the Grammar School and you stayed there till you were sixteen, just to show that you weren’t a prole, [...]. You’d no sentiments of loyalty, no goofy feeling about the old grey stones [...], and there was no Old Boys’ tie.⁵

In a letter dated 31st May 1947 the writer spoke about ‘a long autobiographical sketch’, which he considered ‘too libellous to print’⁶. That sketch was ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’. In the initial part of the essay, the author describes his preparatory school as

⁴ Orwell, George, [1936] *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 44.

⁵ Orwell, George, [1939] *Coming Up for Air*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 68.

⁶ Letter to F. J. Warburg in CEJL 4, p. 378.

an expensive and snobbish school which was in the process of becoming more snobbish, and, I imagine, more expensive. The public school with which it had special connexions was Harrow, but during my time an increasing proportion of the boys went on to Eton. Most of them were the children of rich parents, but on the whole they were the un-aristocratic rich, [...]. There were a few exotics among them – some South American boys, sons of Argentine beef barons, one or two Russians, and even a Siamese prince, or someone who was described as a prince.⁷

As the chief aim of the preparatory school was closely connected with the maintenance or achievement of a higher status, which entering a ‘good school’ guaranteed, lessons were not designed according to didactic or formative values. The author remembers how at St Cyprian’s learning ‘was frankly a preparation for a sort of confidence trick’⁸, since students were only expected to ‘learn exactly those things that would give an examiner the impression that you knew more than you did know, [...]. Subjects which lacked examination-value, [...], were almost completely neglected’⁹. It must be noticed that some years before writing the essay, Orwell had already expressed a trenchant judgement about the poor quality of teaching in schools:

[w]hen I was a small boy and was taught history – very badly, of course, as nearly everyone in England is – I used to think of history as a sort of long scroll with thick black lines ruled across it at intervals. Each of these lines marked the end of what was called a ‘period’, and you were given to understand that what came afterwards was completely different from what had gone before.¹⁰

One of the most striking aspects described in ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’ are the extremely unpleasant conditions, which were part of the code of St Cyprian’s. As Bernard Crick states,

[t]he code, of course, was an austere one and, to make matters worse, it was soon to be wartime. Hard conditions were accepted as part of “the building of character”, the official ideology through which even the oppressors themselves came to believe in the self-

⁷ CEJL 4, p. 384.

⁸ CEJL 4, p. 385.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ CEJL 2, p. 229.

sacrificing altruism of this most unlikely form of commercial enterprise – as did their pupils when they went out to govern the Empire or to “help the family” by taking a job in the City.¹¹

The picture Orwell took of St Cyprian’s was certainly not *in sepia*. On the contrary, the writer uses very vivid colours:

[i]t is curious, the degree – I will not say of actual hardship, but of squalor and neglect – that was taken for granted in the upper-class schools of that period. Almost as in the days of Thackeray, it seemed natural that a little boy of eight or ten should be a miserable, snotty-nosed creature, his face almost permanently dirty, [...], his bottom frequently blue with bruises. [...] Since [St Cyprian’s] was an expensive school, I took a social step upwards by attending it, and yet the standard of comfort was in every way far lower than in my own home, or, indeed, than it would have been in a prosperous working-class home. One only had a bath once a week, [...]. The food was not only bad, it was also insufficient.¹²

Despite the general miserable conditions, which ‘in term-time, [...], enforced a certain democracy’¹³, not all students were treated in the same way. As the writer points out, pupils were treated according to the social class they belonged to, so ‘rich boys had milk and biscuits in the middle of the morning, they were given riding lessons once or twice a week, [...], and above all they were never caned’¹⁴. Far from being classless, St Cyprian’s partly mirrored the class system of English society. According to Orwell,

there were three castes in the school. There was the minority with an aristocratic or millionaire background, there were the children of the ordinary suburban rich, who made up the bulk of the school, and there were a few underlings like myself, the sons of clergyman, Indian civil servants, struggling widows and the like. These poorer ones were discouraged from going in for ‘extra’ such as shooting and carpentry, and were humiliated over clothes and petty possessions.¹⁵

In the essay the author shows a keen awareness not only of his social position, but also of the underlying mechanisms regulating the social ladder. Moreover, he is

¹¹ Crick, Bernard, op. cit., p. 17.

¹² CEJL 4, p. 396.

¹³ CEJL 4, p. 409.

¹⁴ CEJL 4, p. 385.

¹⁵ CEJL 4, p. 389.

perfectly conscious of the impossibility of belonging to ‘the real top crust, the people in the country houses’¹⁶. As the author states,

it was clear that I could never find my way into that paradise, to which you did not really belong unless you were born into it. [...]. For people like me, the ambitious middle class, the examination-passers, only a bleak, laborious kind of success was possible. You clambered upwards on a ladder of scholarship into the Civil Service or the Indian Civil Service, or possibly you became a barrister. And if at any point you ‘slacked’ or ‘went off’ and missed one of the rungs in the ladder, you became ‘a little office boy at forty pounds a year’. But even if you climbed to the highest niche that was open to you, you could still only be an underling, a hanger-on of the people who really counted.¹⁷

Orwell goes on relating the snobbish swanking about possessions and holiday destinations, which seemed to be one of the distinctive marks of upper-class boys. Furthermore, the description of the third degree, which older students used to give new boys to understand their real social position, reveals how deep-rooted and rigid class distinctions were.

The most important lesson Orwell learned in his preparatory school had nothing to do with Latin or Greek. The experience at St Cyprian’s convinced the author that having some essential qualities was the exclusive prerogative of rich people. According to the writer,

[a]ll the different kinds of virtue seemed to be mysteriously interconnected and to belong to much the same people. It was not only money that mattered: there were also strength, beauty, charm, athleticism and something called ‘guts’ or ‘character’, which in reality meant the power to impose your will on others. I did not possess any of these qualities.¹⁸

Then the author adds that

[t]hat was the pattern of school life – a continuous triumph of the strong over the weak. Virtue consisted in winning: it consisted in being bigger, stronger, handsomer, richer, more popular, more elegant, more unscrupulous than other people – in dominating them, bullying them, making them suffer pain, making them look foolish, getting the better of them in every way. Life was hierarchical and whatever happened was right. There were the strong, who

¹⁶ CEJL 4, p. 408.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ CEJL 4, p. 411.

deserved to win and always did win, and there were the weak, who deserved to lose and always did lose, everlastingly.¹⁹

In the light of later knowledge, it can be stated that the lesson of St Cyprian's was really a formative one for the writer. It allowed him to gain a better insight into the society he lived in, where, as at school, it was fundamental to be 'knowledgeable about names and addresses' and 'swift to detect small differences in accents and manners and the cut of clothes'²⁰. Furthermore, the harrowing experience at St Cyprian's prompted Orwell to 'reject imperialism when he went to Burma and to side with the underdog, for ever afterwards, with empathy and understanding'²¹.

From 1917 to 1921 the writer was a King's Scholar at Eton. Even though the author did not compose any essays on his public school, from some references in his writings it emerges that the years of attendance at Eton were rather different from those at St Cyprian's (at least, in the author's perception). In the famous public school, the writer gained 'a breathing-space' and was 'relatively happy'²². However, the experience at Eton was certainly not a bed of roses. In his impressive book about the conditions of the lower classes in Northern England, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the author writes,

I suppose there is no place in the world where snobbery is quite so ever-present or where it is cultivated in such refined and subtle forms as in an English public school. Here at least one cannot say that English 'education' fails to do its job. You forget your Latin and Greek within a few months of leaving school – [...] – but your snobbishness, unless you persistently root it out like the bindweed it is, sticks by you till your grave. At school I was in a difficult position, for I was among boys who, for the most part, were much richer than myself, and I only went to an expensive public school because I happen to win a scholarship. [...] On the one hand it made me cling tighter than ever to my gentility; on the other hand it filled me with resentment against the boys whose parents were richer than mine and who took care to let me know it.²³

In an 'autobiographical note' written in 1942 for *Twentieth Century Authors*, Orwell sardonically states: 'I was educated at Eton, [...], but I did no work there and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ CEJL 4, p. 408.

²¹ Crick, Bernard, op. cit., p. 31.

²² CEJL 4, pp. 416 and 422.

²³ Orwell, George, [1937] *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London, Penguin, 2014, p. 128.

learned very little, and I don't feel that Eton has been much of a formative influence in my life'²⁴. It is still controversial whether Eton exercised a crucial influence on Orwell. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that he had a quite favourable opinion about it. As the author writes to a friend in December 1938, 'I've always held that the public schools aren't so bad, but people are wrecked by those filthy private schools long before they get to public school age'²⁵.

It appears likewise certain that the author considered the 'reform of the educational system along democratic lines'²⁶ as a priority. In his well-known essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius', published in 1941, Orwell inserts a 'six-point programme', which 'aims quite frankly at turning this war into a revolutionary war and England into a Socialist democracy'²⁷. Point three of the programme is dedicated to education and particularly to the 'immediate steps that we could take towards a democratic educational system'²⁸. As the author argues,

[w]e could start by abolishing the autonomy of the public schools and the older universities and flooding them with State-aided pupils chosen simply on grounds of ability. At present, public-school education is partly a training in class prejudice and partly a sort of tax that the middle classes pay to the upper class in return for the right to enter certain professions. [...] The middle classes have begun to rebel against the expensiveness of education, and the war will bankrupt the majority of the public schools if it continues for another year or two. [...] But there is a danger that some of the older schools, which will be able to weather the financial storm longest, will survive in some form or another as festering centres of snobbery. As for the 10,000 'private' schools that England possesses, the vast majority of them deserve nothing except suppression. They are simply commercial undertakings, and in many cases their educational level is actually lower than that of the elementary schools. They merely exist because of a widespread idea that there is something disgraceful in being educated by the public authorities.²⁹

In the essay 'The English People', published some years later, the writer returned to the matter of a more democratic educational system. Orwell suggests that

²⁴ CEJL 2, p. 38.

²⁵ Letter to Cyril Connolly in CEJL 1, p. 401.

²⁶ CEJL 2, p. 119.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ CEJL 2, p. 121.

²⁹ CEJL 2, pp. 121-122.

[a] completely unified system of education is probably not desirable. Some adolescents benefit by higher education, others do not, there is need to differentiate between literary and technical education, and it is better that a few independent experimental schools should remain in existence. But it should be the rule, [...], for all children to attend the same schools up to the age of twelve or at least ten. After that age it becomes necessary to separate the more gifted children from the less gifted, but a uniform educational system for the early years would cut away one of the deepest roots of snobbery.³⁰

In 1948, in the review of a book on Eton for *The Observer*, he states:

Whatever may happen to the great public schools when our educational system is reorganised, it is almost impossible that Eton should survive in anything like its present form, because the training it offers was originally intended for a landowning aristocracy and had become an anachronism long before 1939. [...] It also has one great virtue [...] and that is a tolerant and civilized atmosphere which gives each boy a fair chance of developing his own individuality. The reason is perhaps that, being a very rich school, it can afford a large staff, which means that the masters are not overworked.³¹

St Cyprian's and Eton were not only two important stages in George Orwell's life. In their reiteration of social rules and conventions they also represented what the author perceived as a peculiarly English characteristic: marked class distinctions.

³⁰ CEJL 3, p. 51.

³¹ Cit. in Crick, Bernard, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

2.3 Preserving Identity: The Essays on the English Language

The culture of a nation exerts an influence on its language, and the language, on the other hand, is largely responsible for the nation.

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*

In *The Oxford English Dictionary* language is defined as the ‘whole body of words and of methods of combination of words used by a nation, people, or race; a tongue’. It is necessary to quote Ferdinand de Saussure to provide a more thorough definition of language. In the authoritative book *Course in General Linguistics*, based on the lectures de Saussure delivered at the University of Geneva at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is stated:

[l]anguage is a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts. It can be localized in the limited segment of the speaking-circuit where an auditory image becomes associated with a concept. It is the social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community.¹

As a writer, George Orwell did not analyse the English language from a merely scientific point of view, but rather from a cultural perspective. According to him, English was the expression of a civilization with precise characteristics. In the famous essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’, the author considers English as a sort of unifying democratic principle:

[s]o long as democracy exists, even in its very imperfect English form, totalitarianism is in deadly danger. The whole English-speaking world is haunted by the idea of human equality, and though it would be simply a lie to say that either we or the Americans have ever acted up to our professions, still, the *idea* is there, and it is capable of one day becoming a reality.²

Moreover, he affirms that ‘[w]ith all its sloth, hypocrisy and injustice, the English-speaking civilization is the only large obstacle in Hitler’s path’³.

¹ De Saussure, Ferdinand, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, New York, Philosophical Library, 1959, p. 14.

² CEJL 2, p. 130.

³ CEJL 2, p. 132.

In another famous essay, 'The English People', written in 1944 but published only in 1947, Orwell returned to the topic of language. The writer started his examination from two distinctive characteristics of the English language: the extensive vocabulary and simple grammar. Then the author approaches the matter in a more scholarly way:

[i]f it is not the largest in the world, the English vocabulary is certainly among the largest. English is really two languages, Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French, and during the last three centuries it has been reinforced on an enormous scale by new words deliberately created from Latin and Greek roots. But in addition the vocabulary is made much larger than it appears by the practice of turning one part of speech into another. [...] But English is also, and to an unnecessary extent, a borrowing language. It readily takes over any foreign words that seems to fill a need, often altering the meaning in doing so.⁴

Orwell's *linguistic* analysis is not lacking in interesting and acute statements. For example, he observes that English grammar and syntax tend to become simpler, while

[l]ong sentences with dependent clauses grow more and more unpopular, irregular but time-saving formation such as the 'American subjunctive' (*it is necessary that you go* instead of *it is necessary that you should go*) gain ground, and difficult rules, such as the difference between *shall* and *will*, or *that* and *which*, are more and more ignored.⁵

According to the writer, to have a simple grammar and syntax did not mean that to write or speak English was *a piece of cake*. On the contrary, it is

an art. There are no reliable rules: there is only the general principle that concrete words are better than abstract ones, and that the shortest way of saying anything is always the best. [...] Whoever writes English is involved in a struggle that never lets up even for a sentence. He is struggling against vagueness, against obscurity, against the lure of the decorative adjective, against the encroachment of Latin and Greek, and, above all, against the worn-out phrases and dead metaphors with which the language is cluttered up.⁶

⁴ CEJL 3, p. 40.

⁵ CEJL 3, p. 41.

⁶ CEJL 3, p. 42.

In Orwell's opinion, the above-cited 'struggle', which appears also as the peculiar feature of the author's creative process, constituted an apt means to oppose what was impairing the quality of the English language. According to Orwell, 'good English' had some enemies, but certainly 'standard English' was its most dangerous one. In the essay the writer underlines that

[t]his dreary dialect, the language of leading articles, White Papers, political speeches, and B.B.C. news bulletins, is undoubtedly spreading: it is spreading downwards in the social scale, and outwards into the spoken language. Its characteristic is its reliance on ready-made phrases – *in due course, take the earliest opportunity, warm appreciation, deepest regret, [...]* – which may once have been fresh and vivid, but have now become mere thought-saving devices, having the same relation to living English as a crutch has to a leg.⁷

Orwell's discourse on the English language was not limited to the cultural field, but rather it embraced also important aspects of the social context. The author did not fail to notice that, in the English society, language was deeply connected with class distinctions and divisions. Moreover, he considered this strong tie as the primary cause of the corruption of English. In the essay 'The English People' Orwell argues that the English class system was not only anachronistic, but also had a debasing effect on language. As a matter of fact,

'[e]ducated' English has grown anaemic because for long past it has not been reinvigorated from below. [...] language, at any rate, the English language, suffers when the educated classes lose touch with the manual workers. As things are at present, nearly every Englishman, whatever his origins, feels the working-class manner of speech, and even working-class idioms, to be inferior. Cockney, the most wide-spread dialect, is the most despised of all. Any word or usage that is supposedly cockney is looked on as vulgar, even when, as is sometimes the case, it is merely an archaism.⁸

According to Orwell, the deep class divisions of English society were also responsible for the dissemination of the American tongue, because the use of an American word prevented a person from crossing class distinctions. As the author points out,

⁷ CEJL 3, p. 43.

⁸ CEJL 3, pp. 43-44.

[f]rom the English point of view American words have no class label. [...] Even a very snobbish English person would probably not mind calling a policeman a *cop*, which is American, but he would object to calling him a *copper*, which is working-class English. To the working classes, on the other hand, the use of Americanisms is a way of escaping from cockney without adopting the B.B.C. dialect, which they instinctively dislike and cannot easily master.⁹

The writer saw in the American tongue, which ‘for all its attractiveness probably tends to impoverish the language in the long run’¹⁰, a potential enemy of ‘good English’. Moreover, American was threatening what Orwell considered as peculiar to his country, that was, the rich and poetic vocabulary for ‘natural objects’. As a matter of fact,

[i]f we really intended to model our language upon American we should have, for instance, to lump the ladybird, the daddy-long-legs, the saw-fly, the water-boatman, the cock-chafer, the cricket, the death-watch beetle and scores of other insects all together under the inexpressive name of *bug*. We should lose the poetic names of our wild flowers, and also, probably, our habit of giving names to every street, pub, field, lane, and hillock. In so far as American is adopted, that is the tendency. Those who take their language from the films, or from papers such as *Life* and *Time*, always prefer the slick time-saving word to the one with a history behind it.¹¹

Then, in his interesting consideration about accents, Orwell observes that

it is doubtful whether the American accent has the superiority which it is now fashionable to claim for it. The ‘educated’ English accent, a product of the last thirty years, is undoubtedly very bad and is likely to be abandoned, but the average English person probably speaks as clearly as the average American. [...] On the whole we are justified in regarding the American language with suspicion. We ought to be ready to borrow its best words, but we ought not to let it modify the actual structure of our language.¹²

To the author the issue of English has only one workable solution: the revitalization of language through the removal of the deep class separations. According to the writer,

⁹ CEJL 3, p. 44.

¹⁰ CEJL 3, p. 133.

¹¹ CEJL 3, p. 45.

¹² CEJL 3, p. 46.

[l]anguage ought to be the joint creation of poets and manual workers, and in modern England it is difficult for these two classes to meet. When they can do so again – as, in a different way, they could in the feudal past – English may show more clearly than at present its kinship with the language of Shakespeare and Defoe.¹³

Orwell's commitment to the regeneration of the English language was obviously more than a chauvinistic opposition to the influence of another tongue. Together with the reform of the education, it was a fundamental step to go beyond the traditionally sharp class distinctions, which were 'a constant drain on morale, in peace as well as in war'¹⁴. Moreover, the writer considered a regenerated language as an effective measure towards a more conscious national cohesiveness. In the essay the author remarks that '[t]he word "They", the universal feeling that "They" hold all the power and make all the decisions, [...], is a great handicap in England. In 1940 "They" showed a marked tendency to give place to "We", and it is time that it did permanently'¹⁵. For this reason, it is necessary to

remove the class labels from the English language. It is not desirable that all the local accents should disappear, but there should be a manner of speaking that is definitely national and is not merely (like the accent of the B.B.C. announcers) a copy of the mannerisms of the upper classes. This national accent – a modification of cockney, perhaps, or of one of the northern accents – should be taught as a matter of course to all children alike. After that they could, and in some parts of the country they probably would, revert to the local accent, but they should be able to speak standard English if they wished to. No one should be 'branded on the tongue'. It should be impossible, as it is in the United States and some European countries, to determine anyone's status from his accent.¹⁶

From the end of 1943 to the beginning of 1945, Orwell regularly wrote a weekly column, entitled 'As I Pleased', for *Tribune*. In the article appeared on 18th August 1944, the author writes in favour of the use of a 'simple' version of English, Basic English, alongside Standard English:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ CEJL 3, p. 50.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ CEJL 3, p. 51.

[o]ne argument for Basic English is that by existing side by side with Standard English it can act as a sort of corrective to the oratory of statesmen and publicists. High-sounding phrases, when translated into Basic, are often deflated in a surprising way. For example, I presented to a Basic expert the sentence, 'He little knew the fate that lay in store for him' – to be told that in Basic this would become 'He was far from certain what was going to happen'. It sounds decidedly less impressive, but it means the same. In Basic, I am told, you cannot make a meaningless statement without its being apparent that it is meaningless – which is quite enough to explain why so many schoolmasters, editors, politicians and literary critics object to it.¹⁷

Moreover, in the column published on 26th January 1945 the writer urges journalists to intervene in the fight against the decadence of the English language:

the degradation which is certainly happening to our language is a process which one cannot arrest by conscious action. But I would like to see the attempt made. And as a start I would like to see a few dozen journalists declare war on some obviously bad usage – for example, the disgusting verb 'to contact', or the American habit of tying an unnecessary preposition on to every verb – and see whether they could kill it by their concerted efforts.¹⁸

In the famous essay 'Politics and the English Language', published in 1946, Orwell examined again different themes, which he had already treated in some of his essays and articles. However, here he gave a more accurate synthesis of the conditions of the English language and of its implications with the political sphere. As usual, the author does not use circumlocution when, in the initial part of his writing, he states that

[o]ur civilization is decadent, and our language – so the argument runs – must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes. [...] [The English language] becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.¹⁹

¹⁷ CEJL 3, p. 244.

¹⁸ CEJL 3, pp. 371-2.

¹⁹ CEJL 4, pp. 156-7.

Orwell was certain that with conscious actions a person could not only interrupt this vicious circle, but also modify and improve English. According to the writer, '[m]odern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble'²⁰. In his careful analysis, Orwell specifies what he considers as bad practises, i.e., the use of 'worn-out metaphors which [...] are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves.'²¹ Likewise, the usage of elaborate phrasal construction instead of simpler one-word verbs, or words such as '*objective, categorial, effective, [...]*' employed 'to dress up simple statements and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements'²², must be avoided.

Far from being a merely stylistic whim, the eradication of these habits has the uttermost importance, because to fight against trite metaphors and empty elaborate constructions signified to oppose those subtle means used to anaesthetize 'a portion of one's brain'²³. The author was certain that the elimination of these bad practices would have resulted in a greater clarity of thoughts, 'a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers'²⁴.

In the essay Orwell underlined that the defence of 'good English' had nothing to do with an anachronistic fight against the inevitable evolution of the language. Rather, the author believed that the shared commitment to the regeneration of English could lead out of 'the present political chaos'²⁵. As the writer strongly stresses,

[i]f you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one

²⁰ CEJL 4, p. 157.

²¹ CEJL 4, p. 159.

²² CEJL 4, p. 160.

²³ CEJL 4, p. 167.

²⁴ CEJL 4, p. 157.

²⁵ CEJL 4, p. 169.

can even, [...], send some worn-out and useless phrase – [...] – into the dustbin where it belongs.²⁶

Orwell's defence of the English language resembled the passion and accuracy of a fine craftsman that patiently chisels his work. However, the author's considerations on language went far beyond the literary or artistic field. It was deeply connected with both the preservation of values, which were constituents of English identity, and the removal of some obstacles, which prevented the English from developing a more conscious sense of relatedness. Moreover, as the author lived in an age where 'there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics"'²⁷, also language assumed a political connotation. The writer's battle against the spread of some bad practices, such as the mechanical use of empty metaphors and meaningless expressions, was not the quixotic fight of a purist or the negligible tirade of a pedant. Orwell was perfectly aware that the lack of clarity and precision of the English language could not be considered a triviality, because remarks designed to blur the perception of reality or hide rather than uncover truth were extremely dangerous, especially in political speech and writing.

²⁶ CEJL 4, p. 170.

²⁷ CEJL 4, p. 167.

CHAPTER THREE

THE 'EXPANDED' IDENTITY: THE BRITISH EMPIRE

3.1 The Rise and Fall of the British Empire

India is the country, fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills, and more fields. [...] How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble. She knows of the whole world's trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls 'Come' through her hundred mouths, [...]. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal.

E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

It is not easy to describe the development of the British Empire, especially because among historians there is no agreement on when to establish the initial stages of such development. According to some scholars, the rule England established during the Middle Ages and the empire it created overseas from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries were intrinsically alike. Consequently, the empire constructed by the Anglo-Norman monarchs and not the North Atlantic empire of the eighteenth century should be considered as the 'First British (or rather, English) Empire'. As Krishan Kumar states,

[t]he conquest and colonization of Wales and Ireland, the attempted conquest and to good degree anglicization of Scotland, are seen as formally similar to the conquest and colonization of the overseas possessions in North America and the Caribbean, and later in India and the Far East. A stronger variant of this view would see in this 'first English Empire' not simply a similarity to later expressions of empire but the very source of them. The English, it is claimed, learned and practised their imperialism first with their neighbouring territories, the 'Celtic fringe'¹.

Notwithstanding the impressive parallels that can be detected between the medieval and the later imperial ventures, the English conquest of the near territories during the Middle Ages shows substantial differences from the empire that was established starting from the seventeenth century. Firstly, it is necessary to point

¹ Kumar, Krishan, op. cit., p. 82.

out that it was not complete, as Scotland, though radically anglicized, was never conquered. Secondly, what seems to emerge from early historical sources is that during the Middle Ages the English kings did not intentionally design expansionist schemes. Rather, the English conquest was often the consequence of ‘local initiative and local invitation. It was Welsh, Irish, and Scottish lords who in the first instance turned to England for assistance and support’². Furthermore,

[t]he nature of medieval English rule, [...] was more of a composite than unitary character, reflecting the unevenness of its spread, its dynastic quality and the existence of several political communities, such as those of Gascony and Ireland, with their own representative institutions.³

Another important difference between the medieval and later English empires is that, ‘despite the real degree of English conquest and colonization during the middle ages, the people of the British Isles did not come to regard themselves in the long run as colonizers and colonized’⁴. This was possible primarily because the English recognized the importance of being only one of the constituent parts of a greater entity, rather than assuming the leading role⁵.

In his authoritative book, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, David Armitage underlines that ‘[t]he “concept” of the British Empire means the idea that an identifiable political community existed to which the term “empire” could be fittingly applied, and which was recognisably British, rather than, for example, Roman, French or English’⁶. As the historian observes,

the emergence of the concept of the ‘British Empire’ as a political community encompassing England and Wales, Scotland, Protestant Ireland, the British islands of the Caribbean and the mainland colonies of North America, was long drawn out, and only achieved by the late seventeenth century at the earliest. [...] Only in the first half of the eighteenth century, [...], did [the conceptual language of Britishness and the language of the ‘empire’] coincide to provide the conception of that larger community within which the Tree Kingdoms of Britain

² Ibid., p. 84.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵ In June 1944, in his weekly column for *Tribune*, Orwell himself pointed out that: ‘The British Empire was largely built up by Irishmen and Scotsmen, and our most obstinate nationalists and imperialists have frequently been Ulstermen’. [CEJL 3, p. 208]

⁶ Armitage, David, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 7.

and Ireland and the English-speaking islands, colonies, plantations and territories of the western hemisphere were all members – albeit, unequal members – of a single political body known as the ‘British Empire’.⁷

This cohesive supranational entity had distinctive characters that set it apart from both the empires of the past and the contemporary imperialist ventures of other European powers. First of all, the British Empire was thought to be almost exclusively Protestant, in spite of the very different forms of Protestantism that were present also in the Three Kingdoms. Another peculiarity was the overtly commercial nature of the empire. As a matter of fact,

[t]he attachment to commerce – and the means by which commerce connected the various parts of the Empire to one another – made the British Empire different from its predecessors or its rivals, most of which (it was believed) had been integrated by force, or had been operated more for reasons of power (often over subject peoples) than plenty.⁸

Moreover, considering the geographical position of its different parts, the British Empire had to be a maritime empire to successfully achieve its commercial purposes. All the above-mentioned characters, the Protestant confession, oceanic trade and supremacy over the seas, were fundamental to safeguard the liberty of the peoples who lived within the empire. According to Armitage, that liberty

found its institutional expression in Parliament, the law, property and rights, all of which were exported throughout the British Atlantic world. Such freedom also allowed the British, uniquely, to combine the classically incompatible ideals of liberty and empire. In sum, the British Empire was, above all and beyond all other such polities, Protestant, commercial, maritime and free.⁹

One of the events that marked a pivotal watershed in the history (and conception) of the British Empire was undoubtedly the Seven Years War (1756 – 63). With an overwhelming victory the British took Canada and most of their Indian, West African and West Indian colonies from the French. The British obtained Manila and Havana from the Spanish too. However, to win the war was, in a certain

⁷ Ibid., pp. 7 – 8.

⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹ Ibid.

way, like opening Pandora's box. The same cornerstones of the empire, such as the predominance of Protestantism, and its commercial nature, began to be unsteady. Firstly, there was the question of the inhabitants of Quebec who were French Catholic. Most importantly, the newly conquered vast portions of Asia were inhabited neither by Christian nor by white people. Moreover, as Linda Colley states in *Britons, Forging the Nation 1707 – 1837*,

[t]he military component of the pre-war empire had in practise been considerable, but it had none the less been popularly perceived as a trading empire, as the beneficent creation of a liberty-loving and commercial people, and thus quite different from the Roman and Spanish empires, bloodily and insecurely raised on conquest. The spoils of the Seven Years War made it far more difficult to sustain this flattering contrast between the failed empires of the past and the British empire of the present.¹⁰

The post-war years saw the emergence of mixed feelings in the British society: on one hand, greater expectations of increasing economic welfare, on the other, disorientation and worry for completely new and unsettling socio-political conditions.

Twenty years after the Peace of Paris, which concluded the Seven Years War, a new crucial event marked the history of the British Empire: with the Peace of Paris in 1783 Britain recognised the independence of the United States of America and turned its attention more decisively to the Indian and Pacific oceans. It must be noted that the 'American Revolution led to a widespread assumption that the rest of the colonies of British settlement would inevitably leave the parental fold when they reached maturity'¹¹. The necessary corollary of this assumption was that the British Empire had the demanding and noble task, given by Providence, of civilizing the far corners of the world. In 1837 the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aborigines declared that

[t]he British empire has been signally blessed by Providence; and her eminence, her strength, her wealth, her prosperity, her intellectual, her moral and her religious advantages are so many reasons for peculiar obedience to the laws of Him who guides the destiny of

¹⁰ Colley, Linda, op. cit., p. 102.

¹¹ Eldridge, C. C., *The Imperial Experience, From Carlyle to Forster*, Basingstoke and London, Macmillan, 1996, p. 25.

nations. There were given for some higher purpose than commercial prosperity and military renown. 'It is not to be doubted that this country has been invested with wealth and power, with arts and knowledge, with the sway of distant lands, and the mastery of restless waters, for some great and important purpose in the government of the world. Can we suppose otherwise than that it is our office to carry civilization and humanity, peace and good government, and, above all, the knowledge of the true God, to the uttermost ends of the earth?'¹²

As a blessed and chosen people, the British had not only the task, but rather, the duty to carry the 'White Man's Burden'¹³.

In 1924 the same ideology of the 'civilizing mission' reverberated through the pages of a penetrating critique of the British Empire, *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster. As Ronny Heaslop, one of the main characters of the novel and City Magistrate of Chandrapore, affirms in a heated discussion with his mother,

'We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly!' 'What do you mean?' 'What I say. We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them's my sentiments. India isn't a drawing-room.' 'Your sentiments are those of a god,' she said quietly, [...]. Trying to recover his temper, he said, 'India likes gods.' 'And Englishmen like posing as gods.' 'There's no point in all this. Here we are, and we're going to stop, and the country's got to put up with us, gods or no gods. [...] I am out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched country by force. I'm not a missionary or a Labour Member or a vague sentimental sympathetic literary man. I'm just a servant of the Government; [...]. We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do.'¹⁴

It was at the beginning of the twentieth century that the attitude, not only of the intelligentsia, towards the British Empire began to be increasingly critical. One of the primary causes of this momentous change was undoubtedly the Anglo-Boer War (1899 – 1902). Like no other event of that period, the violent armed conflict shattered the confidence that the English had had in the Empire. According to Krishan Kumar,

¹² 'Select Committee on Aborigines, 1936', *Reports from Committee*, quoted in Eldridge, C. C., op. cit., pp. 103-4.

¹³ This expression came from the extremely famous Rudyard Kipling's poem, 'The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands' (1899): Take up the White Man's burden— / Send forth the best ye breed— / Go bind your sons to exile / To serve your captives' need; / To wait in heavy harness, / On fluttered folk and wild— / Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child. [...]

¹⁴ Forster, E. M., *A Passage to India*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 69.

[t]he morally indefensible nature of the aims of the Boer War, the manner of its conduct, with the employment of the first ‘concentration camps’, the defeats by a much smaller, less well-equipped but braver and more idealistically inspired force – all these produced a growing revulsion among many thinkers and statemen.¹⁵

Three decades after the Boer War, with his highly distinctive voice, Orwell denounced what really happened behind the scenes of the Empire. Not always did a ‘civilizing mission’ result in a beneficial and civilizing effect on the colonized, but also on the colonizers.

¹⁵ Kumar, Krishan, op. cit., p. 198.

3.2 Wearing the White Man's Mask: Orwell's Essays on the Empire

We like to think of England as a democratic country, but our rule in India, for instance, is just as bad as German Fascism, though outwardly it may be less irritating. I do not see how one can oppose Fascism except by working for the overthrow of capitalism, starting, of course, in one's own country. If one collaborates with a capitalist-imperialistic government in a struggle 'against Fascism', i.e. against a rival imperialism, one is simply letting Fascism in by the back door.

George Orwell, *Letter to Geoffrey Gorer*, 15th September 1937

In a letter dated 15th November 1945, Orwell answered with a polite refusal to the Duchess of Atholl, who had invited him to speak for the League of European Freedom:

Certainly what is said on your platforms is more truthful than the lying propaganda to be found in most of the press, but I cannot associate myself with an essentially Conservative body which claims to defend democracy in Europe but has nothing to say about British imperialism. It seems to me that one can only denounce the crimes now being committed in Poland, Jugoslavia, etc. if one is equally insistent on ending Britain's unwanted rule in India.¹

The determined opposition against the British Empire was undoubtedly the result of the author's direct experience as Imperial Police officer in Burma, where he served, in different posts, from 1922 to 1927.

It was at the end of October 1922 that the writer left for Rangoon from Birkenhead. As Bernard Crick observes in Orwell's biography, 'there is no way of knowing what frame of mind he was in or quite what burden, if any, he thought he was carrying'². However, many years later in 'As I Please', his weekly column for *Tribune*, the writer recounted vivid memories of that voyage, during which he learned a valuable lesson about the empire, but also about British society. As Orwell told his readers, he travelled in a 'comfortable, even luxurious' ship, where meals 'were of that stupendous kind that steamship companies used to vie with one another in producing'³. According to the author,

¹ CEJL 4, p. 49.

² Crick, Bernard, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

³ CEJL 4, p. 307.

[t]he ships of this line were mostly manned by Indians, but apart from the officers and the stewards they carried four European quartermasters whose job was to take the wheel. [...] I was only twenty years old and very conscious of my parasitic status as a mere passenger, and I looked up to the quartermasters, especially the fair-haired one, as godlike beings on a par with the officers.⁴

One day something happened that shocked him profoundly. The writer came up from lunch early and distinguished

the fair-haired quartermaster, who was scurrying like a rat long the side of the desk-houses, with something partially concealed between his monstrous hands. [...] It was a pie dish containing a half-eaten baked custard pudding. At once glance I took in the situation – indeed, the man's air of guilt made it unmistakable. The pudding was a left-over from one of the passengers' tables. It had been illicitly given to him by a steward.⁵

The episode made the writer understand an important lesson:

It took me some time to see the incident in all its bearings: but do I seem to exaggerate when I say that this sudden revelation of the gap between function and reward – the revelation that a highly-skilled craftsman, who might literally hold our lives in his hands, was glad to steal scraps of food from our table – taught me more than I could have learned from half a dozen Socialist pamphlets?⁶

One of Orwell's first writings about the experience in Burma is the essay entitled 'A Hanging'. Published in August 1931, it is, as the title clearly suggests, the description of an execution. Although the author never explicitly mentions the 'British Empire', among the lines it is possible to read what the Empire really was: a cruel and unjust system, in which 'men can turn even violent death into routine and habit'⁷. Far from being a routine job, to Orwell the hanging has a radically different meaning:

[i]t 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,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ CEJL 4, p. 308.

⁷ Crick, Bernard, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

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. [...] 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.⁸

What happened after the execution is highly emblematic of the dehumanizing effect of the Empire:

The Eurasian boy walking beside me nodded towards the way we had come, with a knowing smile: ‘Do you know, sir, our friend (he meant the dead man), when he heard his appeal had been dismissed, he pissed on the floor of his cell. From fright. – Kindly take one of my cigarettes, sir. Do you not admire my new silver case, sir? From the boxwallah, two rupees eight annas. Classy European style.’ Several people laughed – at what, nobody seemed certain.⁹

In 1936 Orwell published another essay on the British Empire, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, probably one of his best-known writings¹⁰. Composed only two years after the publication of *Burmese Days*, the essay clearly showed how imperialism had become a cage also for the British colonizer.

The writer’s distinctive style is recognizable from the very beginning: ‘In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me’¹¹. Before narrating, in memorable pages, the episode that constitutes the central part of the essay, Orwell recounted how mixed and confused his sentiments were before that event:

at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing [...]. Theoretically – and secretly, of course – I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos – all

⁸ CEJL 1, pp. 68 – 69.

⁹ CEJL 1, p. 70.

¹⁰ It was also broadcast in BBC Home Service on 12th October 1948.

¹¹ CEJL 1, p. 265.

these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective.¹²

Then he adds

I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, [...]. All I knew was that I was struck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, *in saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate people; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism.¹³

When the author had to shoot a precious working elephant, which had gone 'must', only because the surrounding crowd of the Burmese expected him to do that, the truth was suddenly unveiled: the distinction between the colonizer and colonized had become extremely 'foggy'. The colonizer, the writer himself, had become a prisoner of the same mechanisms upon which the Empire was founded. As Orwell narrates, 'suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand will pressing me forward, irresistibly'¹⁴. The force of the sudden revelation is 'enlightening':

it was at this moment, [...], that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the 'native' and so in every crisis he has got to do what the 'native' expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. [...]. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing – no, that was impossible.

¹² CEJL 1, p. 266.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ CEJL 1, p. 269.

The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.¹⁵

The writer had to kill the elephant 'to avoid looking a fool'¹⁶, because he was perfectly aware that if leaders are laughed at, they lose their authority.

While in 'Shooting an Elephant' Orwell highlighted the importance of preserving 'the whole mystique of white dominion'¹⁷, in the essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn' he underlined how the issue of the British Empire was deeply connected also with the unfair class system of the English society. According to the writer,

the whole position of the moneyed class had long ceased to be justifiable. There they sat, at the centre of a vast empire and a world-wide financial network, drawing interest and profits and spending them – on what? It was fair to say that life within the British Empire was in many ways better than life outside it. Still, the Empire was underdeveloped, India slept in the Middle Ages, the Dominions lay empty, with foreigners jealously barred out, and even England was full of slums and unemployment. Only half a million people, the people in the country houses, definitely benefited from the existing system.¹⁸

However, the moneyed class was not alone in wanting to maintain the *status quo* in the Empire. As Orwell states in the essay on Rudyard Kipling, published in 1942, also other subjects did not want to dismantle a system that granted them important privileges:

[a]ll left-wing parties in the highly industrialized countries are at bottom a sham, because they make it their business to fight against something which they do not really wish to destroy. They have international aims, and at the same time they struggle to keep up a standard of life with which those aims are incompatible. We all live by robbing Asiatic coolies, and those of us who are 'enlightened' all maintain that those coolies ought to be set free; but our standard of living, and hence our 'enlightenment', demands that the robbery shall continue.¹⁹

¹⁵ CEJL 1, pp. 269-70.

¹⁶ CEJL 1, p. 272.

¹⁷ Crick, Bernard, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁸ CEJL 2, p. 89.

¹⁹ CEJL 2, p. 218.

Despite all its *dark corners*, the British Empire displayed a valuable quality: internal stability. In the essay ‘The English People’, the writer points out that

the whole British Empire, with all its crying abuses, its stagnation in one place and exploitation in another, at least has the merit of being internally peaceful. It has always been able to get along with a very small number of armed men, although it contains a quarter of the population of the earth. [...] The English are probably more capable than most peoples of making revolutionary changes without bloodshed.²⁰

In spite of the firm conviction that the British Empire was a despotic system, which had to be gradually dismantled, the author recognized the importance that it had had in the definition of English identity. However, the age the writer was living in was really different from the previous one. As he rightly observed in the essay ‘Inside the Whale’, published in 1940, also the English civilisation was assuming a new shape:

Who now could take it for granted to go through life in the ordinary middle-class way, as a soldier, a clergyman, a stockbroker, an Indian Civil Servant or what not? And how many of the values by which our grandfathers lived could now be taken seriously? Patriotism, religion, the Empire, the family, the sanctity of marriage, the Old School Tie, birth, breed, honour, discipline – [...]. But what do you achieve, after all, by getting rid of such primal things as patriotism and religion? You have not necessarily got rid of the need for something to believe in.²¹

Beside important essays and articles, Orwell wrote a searing book about the British Empire, the novel *Burmese Days*. Some years later, the writer returned to the matter of imperialism in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which is Orwell’s account of the living conditions of the working class in the industrial centres of Yorkshire and Lancashire. These works will be treated in the following pages.

²⁰ CEJL 3, p. 47.

²¹ CEJL 1, p. 564.

3.3 Uncovering the Truth about the Empire: *Burmese Days* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*

I served five years in the Indian Police. [...] I gave up that job, partly because it didn't suit me but mainly because I would not any longer be a servant of imperialism. I am against imperialism because I know something about it from the inside.

George Orwell, 'Pacifism and the War'

One of the most stinging critiques of the British Empire is undoubtedly *Burmese Days*. Published in 1934, it is the first of George Orwell's novels. Despite the great value of the book, the writer was not satisfied with it. As he wrote to his friend Brenda Salkeld, '[m]y novel about Burma made me spew when I saw it in print, & I would have rewritten large chunks of it, only that costs money and means delay as well'¹. Notwithstanding the trenchant opinion of its author, the book is not 'repulsive'! On the contrary, the novel is rich in memorable pages, which contain not only a devastating image of the British imperialism, but also the passionate depiction of a distant and fascinating civilization. In this perspective, also the descriptions of the luxuriant Burmese vegetation – 'gold mohur trees like vast umbrellas of blood-red bloom, frangipanis with creamy, stalkless flowers, purple bougainvillea, scarlet hibiscus and the pink Chinese rose, bilious-green crotons, feathery fronds of tamarind'² – are important, because, in a certain way, to grasp the essence of that landscape signified to comprehend a part of Burmese identity too. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* the writer states that

I find it that anything outrageously strange generally ends by fascinating me even when I abominate it. The landscapes of Burma, which, when I was among them, so appalled me as to assume the qualities of a nightmare, afterwards stayed so hauntingly in my mind that I was obliged to write a novel about them to get rid of them. (In all novels about the East the scenery is the real subject-matter.)³

The main character of *Burmese Days* is the timber merchant John Flory, while the central part of the novel is constituted by the election of a Burmese

¹ CEJL 1, p. 162.

² Orwell, George, [1934] *Burmese Days*, London, Penguin Books, 2014, p. 16.

³ Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., pp. 100-1.

member to the European Club. This election bore considerable relevance, because, as the third-person narrator explains at the very beginning,

when one looked at the Club – a dumpy one-storey wooden building – one looked at the real centre of the town. In any town in India the European Club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power, the Nirvana for which native officials and millionaires pine in vain. It was doubly so in this case, for it was the proud boast of Kyauktada Club that, almost alone of Clubs in Burma, it had never admitted an Oriental to membership.⁴

Obviously, the election of a ‘native’ encounters the firm opposition of one of the English members:

“Good God, what are we supposed to be doing in this country? If we aren’t going to rule, why the devil don’t we clear out? Here we are, supposed to be governing a set of damn black swine who’ve been slaves since the beginning of history, and instead of ruling them in the only way they understand, we go and treat them as equals”.⁵

Flory would be glad if his friend, Dr Veraswami, became the ‘native’ member of the club, but initially he has not the courage to propose his name. The inner reaction to the words, which are uttered in the club, however, gives the reader clear hints of Flory’s real sentiments:

“[...] Dull boozing witless porkers! Was it possible that they could go on week after week, year after year, repeating word for word the same evil-minded drivel, like a parody of a fifth-rate story in *Blackwood’s*? Would none of them *ever* think of anything new to say? Oh, what a place, what people! What a civilisation is this of ours – this godless civilisation founded on whisky, *Blackwood’s* and the ‘Bonzo’ pictures! God have mercy on us, for all of us are part of it”.⁶

Flory feels like a ‘cog’ of the imperial machine and it is only to Dr Veraswami that the main character is free to confess what he really thinks about the British Empire. In a paradoxical dialogue, in which the Burmese doctor strenuously defends the English, Flory uncovers the truth about their ‘civilising mission’:

⁴ Orwell, George, *Burmese Days*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

‘I don’t want the Burmans to drive us out of this country. God forbid! I’m here to make money, like everyone else. All I object to is the slimy white man’s burden humbug. The pukka sahib pose. It’s so boring. Even those bloody fools of the Club might be better company if we weren’t all of us living a lie the whole time. [...] the lie that we’re here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them. I suppose it’s a natural enough lie. But it corrupts us, it corrupts us in ways you can’t imagine. [...] We Anglo-Indians could be almost bearable if we’d only admit that we’re thieves and go on thieving without any humbug.’⁷

Flory replies to the doctor’s objections,

‘My dear doctor,’ said Flory, ‘how can you make out that we are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It’s so simple. The official holds the Burman down while the businessman goes to his pockets. [...] The British Empire is simply a device for giving trade monopolies to the English – or rather to gangs of Jews and Scotchmen.’⁸

How the Empire administered justice was a really important issue⁹. Some years after the publication of *Burmese Days*, Orwell returned to the matter in the review of Maurice Collis’ book *Trials in Burma* (1938), which ‘brings out with unusual clearness the dilemma that faces every official in an empire like our own’¹⁰. According to the writer,

[t]he truth is that every British magistrate in India is in a false position when he has to try a case in which European and native interest clash. In theory he is administering an impartial system of justice; in practise he is part of a huge machine which exists to protect British interests, and he has often got to choose between sacrificing his integrity and damaging his career.¹¹

In the discussion with Dr Veraswami, Flory points out that the Empire is not only a despotic system, used to protect British economic interests, but also a powerful instrument to impose an alien and hegemonic culture on the Burmese. In

⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

⁹ In the essay ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’, Orwell writes that ‘an all-important English trait’ is ‘the respect for the constitutionalism and legality, the belief in “the law” as something above the State and above the individual, something which is cruel and stupid, of course, but at any rate *incorruptible*.’ CEJL 2, p. 81-82.

¹⁰ CEJL 1, p. 340.

¹¹ CEJL 1, p. 341.

the main character's opinion, the English are not, as the doctor defined them, 'torchbearers upon the path of progress'¹², because

'[...], before we've finished we'll have wrecked the whole Burmese national culture. But we're not civilising them, we're only rubbing our dirt onto them. Where's it going to lead, this uprush of modern progress, as you call it? Just to our own dear old swinery of gramophones and billy-cock hats. Sometimes I think that in two hundred years all this -' he waved a foot towards the horizon - 'all this will be gone - forests, villages, monasteries, pagodas all vanished. And instead, pink villas fifty yards apart; [...]. And all the forests shaved flat - chewed into wood-pulp for the *News of the World*, or sawn up into gramophone cases.'¹³

The respect, which the writer felt for the Burmese culture, clearly emerges in a highly poetic passage of the novel, in which Flory tries to explain the meaning of a *pwe*, a traditional dance, to Elizabeth, a newly arrived English girl. The main character cannot help expressing genuine admiration for the impressive performance he is attending:

Just look at that girl's movements - look at [...] the way her arms twist from the elbow like a cobra rising to strike. It's grotesque, it's even ugly, with a sort of wilful ugliness. [...] And yet when you look closely, what art, what centuries of culture you can see behind it! Every movement that girl makes has been studied and handed down through innumerable generations. Whenever you look closely at the art of these Eastern people you can see that - a civilisation stretching back and back, practically the same, into times when we were dressed in woad. In some way that I can't define to you, the whole life and spirit of Burma is summed up in the way that girls twist her arms. When you see her you can see the rice-fields, the villages under the teak trees, the pagodas, the priest in their yellow robes, the buffaloes swimming in the rivers in the early morning, Thibaw's Palace -'¹⁴

But Elizabeth is not the person that can appreciate the beauty of a culture, which is so different from her own. Nor can she understand or accept what Flory thinks about the British Empire. Eventually, she will become a perfect *burra* memsahib, who organises parties and 'knows how to put the wives of subordinate officials in their

¹² Orwell, George, *Burmese Days*, op. cit., p. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

places'¹⁵. The only thing that Flory can do is to secretly feel¹⁶ a deep hatred for the despotic system he lives in. According to the main character, the despotism of the British Empire is 'benevolent'¹⁷, but it is likewise undeniable that the primary aim of the Empire is to exploit the Burmese and deprive them of valuable resources. Moreover, it is the British Army that permits this theft to continue:

There is a prevalent idea that the men at the 'outposts of the Empire' are at least able and hardworking. It is a delusion. Outside the scientific services – [...] – there is no particular need for a British official in India to do his job competently. [...] the real backbone of the despotism is not the officials but the Army. Given the Army, the officials and the businessmen can rub along safely enough even if they are fools. And most of them *are* fools. A dull, decent people, cherishing and fortifying their dullness behind a quarter of a million bayonets.¹⁸

To live in an oppressive system, which was responsible also for debasing human relations, meant that censorship was imposed even on the colonizer, who was 'condemned forever to dance the *danse du pukka sahib* for the edification of the lower races'¹⁹. As the author explains in a fundamental passage of the novel, the empire

is a stifling, stultifying world in which to live. It is a world in which every word and every thought is censored. In England it is hard even to imagine such an atmosphere. Everyone is free in England; we sell our soul in public and buy them back in private, among our friends. But even friendship can hardly exist when every white man is a cog in the wheels of despotism. Free speech is unthinkable. All other kinds of freedom are permitted. [...]; but you are not free to think for yourself. Your opinion on every subject of any conceivable importance is dictated for you by the pukka sahibs' code. [...] You are a creature of the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁶ In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the writer recounts an emblematic episode about secrecy: 'All over India there are Englishmen who secretly loathe the system of which they are part; and just occasionally, when they are quite certain of being in the right company, their hidden bitterness overflows. I remember a night I spent on a train with a man in the Educational Service, a stranger to myself whose name I never discovered. [...] Half an hour's cautious questioning decided each of us that the other was 'safe'; and then for hours, [...], we damned the British Empire – damned it from the inside, intelligently and intimately. It did us both good. But we had been speaking forbidden things, and in the haggard morning light when the train crawled into Mandalay, we parted as guilty as any adulterous couple.' Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 135.

¹⁷ Orwell, George, *Burmese Days*, op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

despotism, a pukka sahib, tied tighter than a monk or a savage by an unbreakable system of taboos.²⁰

Like the ‘gold mohur trees’, also the experience in Burma sent deep roots into George Orwell’s life. Three years after the publication of *Burmese Days*, the writer underlined how profound these roots were in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). In the second part of the book, in which Orwell vividly described the appalling conditions of the working classes in the gloomy industrial centres of Yorkshire and Lancashire, the writer included a long autobiographical passage. Some important considerations about the British Empire are contained in those pages.

Firstly, Orwell observes that, unlike what happens in England,

[i]n an ‘outpost of Empire’ like Burma the class-question appeared at first sight to have been shelved. There was no obvious class-friction here, because the all-important thing was not whether you had been to one of the right schools but whether your skin was technically white. As a matter of fact most of the white men in Burma were not of the type who in England would be called ‘gentlemen’, but except for the common soldiers and a few nondescripts they lived lives appropriate to ‘gentlemen’ – had servants, that is, and called their evening meal ‘dinner’ – and officially they were regarded as being all of the same class. They were ‘white men’, in contradistinction to the other and inferior class, the ‘native’.²¹

In the following pages, the author reiterates that the British control in India is not only benevolent, but ‘even necessary’²². However, from his experience as Imperial Police officer he has understood that

it is not possible to be part of such a system without recognising it as an unjustifiable tyranny. Even the thickest-skinned Anglo-Indian is aware of this. Every ‘native’ face he sees in the street brings home to him his monstrous intrusion. [...] The truth is that no modern man, in his heart of hearts, believes that it is right to invade a foreign country and hold the population down by force.²³

Serving five years as an officer of the British Empire did not result only in the outright rejection of imperialism. On the contrary, the experience in Burma

²⁰ Ibid., p. 69-70.

²¹ Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 132.

²² Ibid., p. 134.

²³ Ibid., p. 134-5.

prompted the writer to react against every kind of despotic system. Moreover, once he returned to England, Orwell felt it was his moral duty to side with the oppressed 'lower classes', which, like the Burmese, suffered misery and injustice:

[w]hen I came home on leave in 1927 I was already half determined to throw up my job, and one sniff of English air decided me. I was not going back to be a part of that evil despotism. [...] For five years I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me with a bad conscience. [...] I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. [...] I felt that I had to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. [...] It was in this way that my thought turned towards the English working class. [...] They were the symbolic victims of injustice, playing the same part in England as the Burmese played in Burma. In Burma the issue had been quite simple. The whites were up and the blacks were down, and therefore as a matter of course one's sympathy was with the blacks. I now realised that there was no need to go as far as Burma to find tyranny and exploitation.²⁴

The British Empire, which had been key in keeping peacefully together potentially antagonistic identities, i.e., the English, Scots, and Irish, had then turned into an elephantine despotic machine. In *Burmese Days* and (partly) in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell described the last stages of a 'dying' empire, unveiling what was hidden behind the empty expression *civilising mission*. On one hand, Orwell, who never adopted a starry-eyed attitude towards the Burmese, underlined that the empire was an unjust and grasping rule over foreign countries, used only to defend British interests and profits. On the other, the writer pointed out the corrupting effect on the British themselves of imposing a despotic rule, in which also racial and class prejudices assumed a considerable importance.

From the inside Orwell carried out a particularly acute analysis of the British Empire. When he returned to his beloved England, the writer examined a pillar of English identity, social classes, with the same acuteness.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 138-9.

CHAPTER FOUR

A STRONG PILLAR OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: SOCIAL CLASS

4.1 The Society from below: 'The Spike' and *Down and Out*

Overhead the chestnut branches were covered with blossom, and beyond that great woolly clouds floated almost motionless in a clear sky. Littered on the grass, we seemed dingy, urban riff-raff. We defiled the scene, like sardine-tines and paper bags on the seashore.

George Orwell, 'The Spike'

In October 1927 George Orwell made his first expeditions among tramps in London. The experience in Burma had left him 'with a bad conscience', with a sense of guilt, which he felt the need to expiate. As the writer himself would have explained ten years later in *The Road to Wigan Pier*,

I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants. [...] At that time failure seemed to me to be the only virtue. Every suspicion of self-advancement, even to 'succeed' in life to the extent of making a few hundreds a year, seemed to me spiritually ugly, a species of bullying.¹

Coming from a 'shabby-genteel'² family, the writer knew little about the conditions of the lower classes. Moreover, the writer had only a fuzzy image of poverty in that period. In Orwell's mind poverty was synonymous with cruel starvation, so he turned his attention to those who were more severely hit by this terrible condition: vagrants, beggars, offenders, and prostitutes. In the general opinion, those people were seen as 'the lowest of the low'³, and it was with them that Orwell wanted to get in touch. However, the first contact with the poor was not devoid of difficulties, because the writer had to conceal his real status and origins. As Orwell explains in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, that was not simple, given that

I cannot, for instance, disguise my accent, at any rate not for more than a very few minutes. I imagine – notice the frightful class-consciousness of the Englishman – that I should be

¹ Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 138.

² Ibid., p. 115.

³ Ibid., p. 139.

spotted as a 'gentleman' the moment I opened my mouth; so I had a hard luck story ready in case I should be questioned.⁴

In 1931 Orwell published his first important essay, 'The Spike', in which he vividly described a night spent in a hostel for homeless people, in Notting Hill. In the initial part of the essay, which was published using the real name of the author, the writer reports how *respectfully* he was treated by the rough Tramp Major, when he found out that the writer was a 'gentleman':

when he came to myself, he looked hard at me, and said: 'You are a gentleman?' 'I suppose so,' I said. He gave me another long look. 'Well, that's bloody bad luck, guv'nor,' he said, 'that's bloody bad luck, that is.' And thereafter he took it into his head to treat me with compassion, even with a kind of respect.⁵

In 'The Spike' Orwell described another significant fact, which pointed out how deeply class-consciousness and prejudices were rooted even among the homeless. In the 'boarding house' the writer met a young carpenter, who was dressed in a collar and tie. The young man kept away from the other tramps and was convinced that only the want of a set of tools prevented him from leaving the road and settling down. When Orwell deplored the fact that in the kitchen of the nearby workhouse a lot of food had been wasted, the young man had a surprising reaction. Not only did he see valid reasons to throw away still decent food, rather than give it to vagrants, but also he demonstrated utter contempt for them, revealing 'the pew-renter who sleeps in every English workman'⁶. As the young retorts,

'They have to do it', [...]. 'If they made these places too pleasant you'd have all the scum of the country flocking into them. It's only the bad food as keeps all that scum away. These tramps are too lazy to work, that's all that's wrong with them. [...]' 'You don't want to have any pity on these tramps – scum, they are. You don't want to judge them by the same standards as men like you and me. [...]' It was interesting to see how subtly he disassociated himself from his fellow tramps. He has been on the road six months, but in the sight of God, he seemed to imply, he was not a tramp. His body might be in the spike, but his spirit soared far away, in the pure aether of the middle classes.⁷

⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

⁵ CEJL 1, p. 59.

⁶ CEJL 1, p. 64.

⁷ Ibid.

The two episodes depicted in 'The Spike' were later inserted in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Orwell's first published book. The author finished the original version of the work, which was entitled *A Scullion's Diary*, in October 1930. This version, containing solely Orwell's experience in Paris, was rejected by some publishers both for its shortness and the presence of swearwords. Only after having been revised and expanded, the book was eventually published by Victor Gollancz in 1933. The author asked Leonard Moore, his literary agent, that the work should be published under a pseudonym, because he was 'not proud of it'⁸. Certainly, *Down and Out* is not faultless. In fact, in some parts of the book it seems that the author does not know exactly how to handle his material, like for example, when he reports the account of Charlie's abuse of a young prostitute. Nevertheless, the book is the blunt and praiseworthy reportage of a budding writer, who decided to willingly descend the social ladder and bring into the foreground a completely neglected part of English society.

Orwell's analysis of the lowest echelons of society was not carried out from an ivory tower. On the contrary, the writer plunged completely in that murky underworld, which most people pretended not to see. From his direct experience the author soon learned, for example, that the constant lack of food, a peculiar condition of the destitute, leads to a state of drab apathy:

[y]ou discover the boredom which is inseparable from poverty; the times when you have nothing to do and, being underfed, can interest yourself in nothing. [...] Only food could rouse you. You discover that a man who has gone even a week on bread and margarine is not a man any longer, only a belly with a few accessory organs.⁹

However, even in the darkest moments caused by severe deprivations, Orwell could not help perceiving a sense of relief and release from the anxieties and social obligations of ordinary life. Partly like his character Gordon Comstock, who, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, gives up a steady job to follow his literary aspirations and not to worship the money-god, Orwell chose to live among the poor also to flee from *respectable* kinds of social constriction. As the writer states at the beginning of

⁸ Letter to Leonard Moore, 26th April 1932, CEJL 1, p. 101.

⁹ Orwell, George, [1933] *Down and Out in Paris and London*, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 16.

Down and Out, 'when you are approaching poverty, [...] you also discover the great redeeming feature of [it]: the fact that it annihilates the future. Within certain limits, it is actually true that the less money you have, the less you worry'¹⁰.

The forgotten underworld, which Orwell discloses in his work, was populated not only by the poor, but also by a gallery of unconventional individuals, like Bozo, a good-hearted screever, who was very fond of astronomy. Far from using these characters as models of virtue, through these descriptions the writer wanted to eradicate some prejudices of the middle class, which considered vagrants, beggars, and prostitutes only as 'the scum of the society'. Moreover, in *Down and Out* Orwell repeatedly insisted on the humanity of the destitute, whose failings and bad actions were the direct consequence, and not the primary cause, of the way in which they lived. Most importantly, the author observes a peculiar feature of English tramps:

[d]eliberate, cynical parasitism, [...], is not in the English character. The English are a conscience-ridden race, with a strong sense of the sinfulness of poverty. One cannot imagine the average Englishman deliberately turning parasite, and this national character does not necessarily change because a man is thrown out of work. Indeed, if one remembers that a tramp is only an Englishman out of work, forced by law to live as a vagabond, then the tramp-monster vanishes.¹¹

Undoubtedly, to live in the same terrible conditions as the poor was not simple for the writer. He was a fastidious young man, who, even on the verge of starvation, threw away the milk in which a bed-bug had fallen into. However, the writer felt a sense of nostalgia for that period of his life, during which he was really happy. As he recalled some years later in *The Road to Wigan Pier*:

Here I was, among 'the lowest of the low', at the bedrock of the Western world! The class-bar was down, or seemed to be down. And down there in the squalid and, as a matter of fact, horribly boring sub-world of the tramp I had a feeling of release, of adventure, which seems absurd when I look back, but which was sufficiently vivid at the time.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 218.

¹² Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 142.

The class-bar was not actually down. The author himself was too conscious of his origins and class to feel real companionship with the tramps. After all, he was part of the 'lower-upper-middle class'¹³ and could not so easily abandon its conditioning. Nevertheless, Orwell succeeded in accurately describing a world, which was not only completely unknown to his readers, but also utterly different from the familiar and reassuring images of an England, where picturesque, cosy cottages were surrounded by lovely gardens, or the barges were towed placidly along the canals.

Some years after *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the writer showed the 'other' England in another impressive book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

¹³ Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 113.

4.2 The Reportage on the Working Class: *The Road to Wigan Pier*

It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that ‘It isn’t the same for them as it would be for us’, and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her – understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.

George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*

During the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, Northern England was the epitome of modernity, progress, industry, and urbanity. At the end of the 1920s, however, the picture changed dramatically, when even the most flourishing industrial districts were heavily hit by the international economic crisis.

In January 1936, the publisher Victor Gollancz asked George Orwell to document the conditions of workers and the unemployed in the industrial areas of Northern England. At the end of January, the writer left to see how the working class really lived in the industrial towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire. Orwell spent two months in the North, from the end of January till the end of March. During that period the writer got a precise idea of the conditions of the working class, as he went courageously down coal mines, lived in workers’ houses, and, when in Wigan, visited the Public Library to carry out research on public health and general conditions in the pits. In December 1936, Orwell sent the manuscript of the work to his publisher and in March of the following year *The Road to Wigan Pier* was published.

In the book the industrial towns are not ‘far away, a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth’s surface’¹. On the contrary, almost immediately Orwell plunges the reader into the gloomy ‘ugliness of industrialism’², guiding him through grey, polluted towns and barren fields, covered in slag-heaps:

[o]n the outskirts of the mining towns there are frightful landscapes where your horizon is ringed completely round by jagged grey mountains, and underfoot is mud and ashes and overhead the steel cables where tubs of dirt travel slowly across miles of country. Often the slag-heaps are on fire, and at night you can see the red rivulets of fire winding this way and

¹ Orwell, George, [1938] *Homage to Catalonia*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 197.

² Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 97.

that, and also the slow-moving blue flames of sulphur, which always seem on the point of expiring and always spring out again.³

The heart of the industrial world was under that dreadful scenery, down in the pit, where miners had to do a dehumanising job. As the writer could see at close quarters, in the narrow mine shafts workers had to crawl on all fours and then kneel down to shovel the coal, while the air they breathed was thick with coal dust. However, watching miners at work, Orwell could not help admiring their surprising agility and their powerful bodies, shaped by the unremitting toil. Through the experience in the coal-mine, the writer discovered a world, which not only his readers, but also he himself could have hardly pictured:

the miner can stand as the type of the manual worker, not only because his work is so exaggeratedly awful, but also because it is so vitally necessary and yet so remote from our experience, so invisible, as it were, that we are capable of forgetting it as we forget the blood in our veins. In a way it is even humiliating to watch coal-miners working. It raises in you a momentary doubt about your own status as an 'intellectual' and a superior person generally. For it is brought home to you, [...], that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. You and I and the editor of the *Times Lit. Supp.*, [...] – all of us *really* owe the comparable decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, [...], driving their shovels forwards with arms and belly muscles of steel.⁴

With his reportage on the real conditions of the working class in the northern industrial districts, Orwell unveiled those *awkward* realities, which normally were completely absent from the perception of the middle class, and even from the political discourse of the Left.

Despite the admiration and sympathy for workers, from the very first pages of *The Road to Wigan Pier* a distinct separation between them and the writer clearly emerges. Even when he compares his muscle pains, caused by inexperience, with the agility of the miners in the pit, Orwell underlines that, '[c]ertainly, it is not the same for *them* as it would be for *you or me* [my emphases]'⁵. The writer was perfectly aware of belonging to a different class and the two months spent among workers prompted him to ponder not only on the dreadful conditions of miners and the

³ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 30-31.

⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

unemployed, but also on his own social stratum. In the second part of the book, Orwell inserted some autobiographical pages, because, in his opinion, his autobiography had a kind of emblematic value. As the author states,

I was born into what you might describe as the lower-upper-middle class. The upper-middle class, which had its heyday in the 'eighties and 'nineties, with Kipling as its poet laureate, was a sort of mound of wreckage left behind when the tide of Victorian prosperity receded. Or perhaps it would be better to change the metaphor and describe it not as a mound but as a layer – the layer of society lying between £2,000 and £300 a year: my own family was not far from the bottom.⁶

Differences in income were certainly at the base of class divisions in English society. However, another element was equally decisive to discriminate between the upper and lower strata of the middle class: deep-rooted traditions, which, for the upper-middle class, were primarily connected with the military, official and professional fields, rather than the commercial. According to the writer, to be a member of the lower-upper-middle class means that

your gentility was almost purely theoretical. [...] Theoretically you knew all about servants and how to tip them, although in practice you had one or, at most, two resident servants. Theoretically you knew how to wear your clothes and how to order a dinner, although in practice you could never afford to go to a decent tailor or a decent restaurant. Theoretically you knew how to shoot and ride, although in practice you had no horses to ride and not an inch of ground to shoot over.⁷

Moreover, in his quite accurate *sociological* analysis, the author describes a particular attitude of the lower echelons of the middle class:

[i]n the kind of shabby-genteel family that I am talking about there is far more *consciousness* of poverty than in any working-class family above the level of the dole. Rent and clothes and school-bills are an unending nightmare, and every luxury, even a glass of beer, is an unwarrantable extravagance. Practically the whole family income goes in keeping up appearances.⁸

⁶ Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 113.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁸ *Ibid.*

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell recounted that he became aware of class distinctions at a very early age. When he was about six years old, he was not allowed to play with the plumber's children any longer, because they were 'common'. Moreover, he was taught to intensely dislike the lower classes, instilling the long-lasting prejudice that '*the lower classes smell*'⁹ into his young mind. The writer observed that, even though in the last decades class feeling had become less intense and external differences among classes less marked¹⁰, certain prejudices as well as the conviction that the working class had been spoiled by doles, pensions, and free education were still widespread.

In the book the author stated that, thanks to the experience among tramps and later among workers and the unemployed, he had overcome the prejudices against the lower classes, learned during his childhood. However, during the period spent in the industrial districts, the writer developed the consciousness of the unbridgeable gulf which divided him from the workers. Despite having lived two months with coal-miners, Orwell recognized that he was not 'one of them' and 'however much you like them, however interesting you find their conversation, there is always that accursed itch of class-difference'¹¹. As the writer explains,

[i]t is not a question of dislike or distaste, only of difference, but it is enough to make real intimacy impossible. Even with miners who described themselves as Communists I found that it needed tactful manoeuvring to prevent them from calling me 'sir'; [...]. I liked them and hoped they liked me; but I went among them as a foreigner, and both of us were aware of it. Whichever way you turn this curse of class-difference confronts you like a wall of stone. Or rather [...] 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.¹²

Orwell understood that it would have been arduous to obliterate class-distinctions, primarily because they were a constituent part of the personal background of every Englishman, therefore also of the author himself. According to the writer,

⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁰ In his well-known essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn', Orwell depicts a significant phenomenon, which occurred after the First World War: 'After 1918 there began to appear something that had never existed in England before: people of indeterminate social class. In 1910 every human being in these islands could be "placed" in an instant by his clothes, manners and accent. That is no longer the case. Above all, it is not the case in the new townships that have developed as a result of cheap motor cars and the southward shift of industry.' CEJL 2, p. 98.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 145.

¹² Ibid.

[t]he fact that has got to be faced is that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself. Here am I, a typical member of the middle class. It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class-distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions. All my notions – [...] – are essentially middle-class notions; my taste in books and food and clothes, my sense of honour, my table manners, my turns of speech, my accent, [...], are the products of a special kind of upbringing and a special niche about halfway up the social hierarchy.¹³

Despite his class consciousness, Orwell was also aware that some aspects of middle-class life could appear ‘sickly and debilitating’¹⁴, when seen from the working-class perspective. In order to underline his statement, the writer juxtaposes the image of a working-class interior, a picture redolent of the England Orwell was really fond of:

[i]n a working-class home – I am not talking at the moment of the unemployed, but of comparatively prosperous homes – you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find elsewhere. [...]. I have often been struck by the peculiar easy completeness, the perfect symmetry as it were, of a working-class interior at its best. Especially on winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirt-sleeves, sits in the rocking chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolls roasting himself on the rag mat – it is a good place to be in, provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently *of* it to be taken for granted.¹⁵

As Orwell affirmed in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, during the formative months spent in the industrial districts of northern England, he saw at close quarters what unemployment figures really meant. He could experience the hardship of coal-miners’ life and the indignity miners and unemployed often had to suffer. Nevertheless, the writer could also appreciate the decency and warmth of the working-class everyday life. Although living with vagrants and then among workers had proved fundamental to overcome his prejudices against the lower classes, Orwell recognized that class distinctions could not be erased so easily, especially in

¹³ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 107-8.

England, 'the most class-ridden country under the sun'¹⁶. The writer was perfectly aware that eliminating class prejudices did not necessarily produce a classless society.

¹⁶ CEJL 2, p. 87.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Patriotism has nothing to do with conservatism. It is devotion to something that is changing but is felt to be mystically the same.

George Orwell, 'My Country Right or Left'

It is particularly difficult to describe a writer like George Orwell without using antonyms. As a matter of fact, he recognized himself as a *man of the Left*, but some of his positions were more conservative than liberal. He was undoubtedly the result of middle-class upbringing; however, it was the decent, comfortable interiors of some working-class houses, rather than 'the crowds at Ascot and the Eton and Harrow match'¹, which reminded him that his age was not 'a bad one to live in'². Furthermore, the writer was an internationalist, who was convinced of the uttermost importance of remaining 'on good terms with Russia and Europe'³, but meanwhile felt a fervent fondness for his own country.

Focusing the attention on the writer's attitude towards *his* England, J. R. Hammond depicts Orwell as

a quintessentially *English* writer. This was a man who loved coal fires and English cooking, Victorian furniture and high tea, a man who delighted in the novels of Dickens, Wells and Gissing, who loved the countryside and the open air and appreciated the quirkiness of such institutions as the monarchy, public schools and the Church of England. He had an acute understanding of the character of English life; he understood its tolerance, its dislike of abstract theories, its insistence on fair play and its penchant for 'muddling through'.⁴

Throughout his entire literary production, Orwell wrote unrivalled pages, which were directly or indirectly connected with the assessment of 'Englishness'. The author was deeply interested in a wide spectrum of topics and composed some essays also on apparently trivial matters. He wrote, for example, a detailed essay on how to prepare a perfect cup of tea, while in another he spoke about his 'favourite

¹ Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 109.

² Ibid.

³ CEJL 3, p. 47.

⁴ Hammond, J. R., *A George Orwell Companion, A Guide to the Novels, Documentaries and Essays*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1985, p. 27.

public house, “The Moon under Water”⁵, actually an accurate description of the ideal pub:

its whole architecture and fittings are uncompromisingly Victorian. It has no glass-topped tables or other modern miseries, and, on the other hand, no sham roof-beams, ingle-nooks or plastic panels masquerading as oak. The grained woodwork, the ornamental mirrors behind the bars, the cast-iron fire places, the florid ceiling stained dark yellow by tobacco-smoke, the stuffed bull’s head over the mantelpiece – everything has the solid comfortable ugliness of the nineteenth century.⁶

Beside these descriptive writings, Orwell composed two famous long essays which included a careful analysis of the English national characters, i.e., ‘The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’, published in 1940, and ‘The English People’, written in 1944, but published only in 1947. At the beginning of ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ the writer wonders whether, in a country like England, there are characteristics which can assume a national value:

the vastness of England swallows you up, and you lose for a while your feeling that the whole nation has a single identifiable character. Are there really such things as nations? Are we not forty-six million individuals, all different? [...] The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pintable in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning – all these are not only fragments, but *characteristic* fragments, of the English scene. How can one make a pattern out of this muddle?⁷

Although Orwell recognized that it was difficult to select national peculiarities rigorously, he listed a series of attitudes, which he considered intrinsically English and allowed him to distinguish English civilisation from those of other nations. The writer started from the assumption that the English were not artistically endowed, and then he pointed out their dislike for abstract thought or philosophy, and their ‘world-famed hypocrisy’⁸. Moreover, according to Orwell, an often not adequately

⁵ CEJL 3, p. 63.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ CEJL 2, pp. 75-6.

⁸ CEJL 2, p. 77.

treated English characteristic was the passion for flowers⁹, which was directly connected with another distinctive trait: the fondness for hobbies and leisure activities, ‘the *privateness* of English life’¹⁰. Most importantly, in the writer’s opinion, the English were a law-abiding people, with a profound belief in justice:

[e]veryone believes in his heart that the law can be, ought to be, and, on the whole, will be impartially administered. The totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there is only power, has never taken root. [...] In England such concepts as justice, liberty and objective truth are still believed in. They may be illusions, but they are very powerful illusions.¹¹

Some of the themes treated in ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ were re-examined by Orwell some years later in the essay ‘The English People’. In this writing the author organised the matter more systematically, giving a title to each section. Once more, his starting point was to establish if an English character actually existed, and if an uninterrupted connection between the England of the past and the England of his days could be detected. According to Orwell, even if for a foreign observer this fluid continuity is almost impossible to discern, it is something that every Englishman could grasp:

[i]t is not easy to discover the connecting thread that runs through English life from the sixteenth century onwards, but all English people who bother about such subjects feel that it exists. They feel that they understand the institutions that have come to them out of the past – Parliament, for instance, or Sabbatarianism, or the subtle grading of the class system – with an inherited knowledge impossible to a foreigner.¹²

As the writer pointed out, one of the most distinctive characters of English identity was its class system, which was based not only on economic differences, but also on

⁹ Regarding this marked trait, it is worth quoting an emblematic passage, taken from Orwell’s weekly column for *Tribune* of 21st January 1944: ‘In the good days when nothing in Woolworth’s cost over sixpence, one of their best lines was their rose bushes. [...]. Their chief interest was that they were never, or very seldom, what they claimed to be on their labels. One that I bought for a Dorothy Perkins turned out to be a beautiful little white rose with a yellow heart, one of the finest ramblers I have ever seen. A polyantha rose labelled yellow turned out to be deep red. Another, bought for an Abertine, was like an Abertine, but more double, and gave astonishing masses of blossoms.’ CEJL 3, p. 103.

¹⁰ CEJL 2, p. 77.

¹¹ CEJL 2, p. 82.

¹² CEJL 3, p. 20.

an anachronistic caste-system¹³, kept alive by ‘romanticism and sheer snobbishness’¹⁴. In the essay Orwell stated that English society could be roughly divided into three classes, which he also labelled using old categories: the upper class, or bourgeoisie, the middle, or petty bourgeoisie, and the working, or proletariat. Even though after the First World War class distinctions had become *fuzzier*, the writer underlined how the contrast between the wealthy and the destitute was more blatant (and generally accepted) in England than in most nations.

In ‘The English People’, Orwell inserted another momentous element of English character: the English language. The author accurately described the salient characteristics of English and pondered on its decadence, which was linked, according to the author, to the anachronistic class system of the English society. However, it was in the famous essay ‘Politics and the English Language’ that Orwell fully explained his worries about the diffusion of what he called ‘bad habits’, i.e., the use of worn-out phrases, clichés and bromides. Language had become more and more opaque and was no longer an effective instrument to clearly express thoughts or communicate ideas. Moreover, Orwell underlined that, in the political field, this unclarity was used to hide the truth, rather than unveil it:

[i]n our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machined-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*.

How Orwell’s considerations are still topical clearly emerges from the above-cited passage. Almost the same empty expressions and vague concepts listed by the writer

¹³ In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the writer had defined the English class system as follows: ‘Roughly speaking it is a money-stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system; rather like a jerry-built modern bungalow haunted by medieval ghosts.’ Orwell, George, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 114.

¹⁴ CEJL 3, p. 34.

are used today in political discourses to conceal real facts, while the most biased opinions are masqueraded as accurate accounts of the reality.

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