

The Paradox of Freedom in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "Shooting an Elephant" in Light of Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy

Pătrașcu Elena Otilia

Phd Student, "1 Decembrie 1918", University of Alba Iulia

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*Corresponding Author: Pătrașcu Elena Otilia

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Abstract

Original Research Article

George Orwell's name has come to be associated with complete loss of freedom and human abjection in totalitarian societies. An in-depth reading of his works is, however, likely to bring the asymmetrical power relationships within a compass which charts an unstable imbalance between the man in power and the subject. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the anatomy of freedom, taken to the extremes of human self-abjection and annihilation, does not exclude the commonly ignored case of the female protagonist, Julia, whose scar from forehead to the temples stands proof of her moral resistance to the end choosing torture over betrayal. Her body with thickened waist and broadened feet looks like a shapeless stone monument of resilience. On the contrary, in "Shooting an Elephant", it is the stand-in of imperial power, the police officer, who is acting against his will and in compliance with what the colonial subjects expect from him. Power relations in Orwell are too complex to be forced into ready-made schemes of interpretations or to be solved automatically in the transition from bourgeois or liberal democracy to the state of individual rights. Hannah Arendt's calculus of the potential of freedom inherent in each birth, in each new beginning, and the chances of its realization through the individuals' active participation in a network of social interactions which is largely outside their control seems to be the reading grill which allows Orwell's vision of freedom to come meaningfully through.

Keywords: Orwell, Arendt, Freedom, Human Rights, Political Socialization, Language and Power.

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INTRODUCTION

The postwar era, for a long time divided between eastern totalitarianisms and western liberalism, has seen the emergence of several theories on the nature of freedom in the individual's relationships to the power system and social others. In 1958 Isaiah Berlin launched his famous theory of positive and negative freedom in "Two Concepts of Liberty", reprinted in *Four Essays* ten years later (Berlin 1969). His approach still relies on notions of individual choice, freedom of will, and participatory identitarian status through notions of class, wealth, political affiliation, etc. with references to the classics of philosophy – Mill, Kant, Hegel. Not far from Lenin's definition of freedom as understood necessity in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), Berlin advises restriction of personal freedom for the sake of ensuring happiness for others.

The linguistic turn, the deconstructionist revolution of the 60s, and the rise of pragmatics effected a radical change in the discourse of humanities, including the construction of models of social interrelationships. They ranged from Pierre Bourdieu's deterministic view of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) – according to which individuals appear to be unconsciously influenced by the lifestyles of the social group where they belong – to the optimistic pragmatist model of the I of discourse, building one's own world through positions in conversational exchanges (Simpson and Mayr, 2009).

Orwell's picture of the network of power may be said to have foreshadowed these developments in the same way Hannah Arendt did, as the awareness of birth as source of determinism through the individual's throw into an already constituted society with limited choices is compensated by the potential inherent in any new birth to work as an impurity

which, as in Philip Anderson's quantum model, can work as an attractor and change the system. This is the picture of a humanity whose resources reside in action which Hannah

Arendt proposed to a post traumatic age thorough the publication of her book, *The Human Condition* in 1958.

1. Born to Bondage/ Freedom.

You will enter the world where death by fear and explosion
Is waited; longed for by many; by all dreamed.
You will enter the world where various poverty
Makes thin the imagination and the bone.
You will enter the world where birth is walled about,
Where years are walled journeys, death a walled-in act.

Muriel Rukeyser

In the *Poetry Magazine* (April 2025), one can read the following about the Muriel Rukeyser, an American poetess of late modernity: "Since she aligned her creative capacities so closely with the current events of her day, a number of reviewers have said that the history of the United States over several decades can be culled from Rukeyser's poetry." She responded as poet and journalist to the twentieth century catastrophes, from the Hawks Nest Tunnel dead to the Spanish Civil War, the two world wars, the Vietnam War or the dictatorship in South Korea in the '70s. Her *Nine Poems* (1984) amount to a vision on life addressed to a human being from a moment preceding birth (the first is entitled "To an unborn child). The child is not going to follow an autonomous path in life, to be in control of its destiny; it is history that has already laid out a design and fixed norms and landmarks.

In Rukeyser's mid-century poem beginning like a sermon, "You will enter the world," there is an apprehension about the human condition being a prison, opening at birth and closing at death – a Heideggerian life towards death. Society as a prison is also Orwell's mega-metaphor, although he was not influenced by existentialism. A demonic history had summed up the human plight plagued by totalitarian societies, wars and tortures as a walled in mode of existence. Lack of freedom was feared even more than loss of life.

We get precisely this picture in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Part One, Section 2), where there are no children but only monstrous military bodies of slaves supporting the anti-human system and suppressing innocence, family, love, education as *Bildung*, formation, individuation:

With those children, he thought, that wretched woman must lead a life of terror. Another year, two years, and they would be watching her night and day for symptoms of unorthodoxy. Nearly all children nowadays were horrible. What was worst of all was that by means of such organizations as the Spies they were systematically turned into ungovernable little savages, and yet this produced in them no tendency whatever to rebel against

the discipline of the Party. On the contrary, they adored the Party and everything connected with it. The songs, the processions, the banners, the hiking, the drilling with dummy rifles, the yelling of slogans, the worship of Big Brother—it was all a sort of glorious game to them. All their ferocity was turned outwards, against the enemies of the State, against foreigners, traitors, saboteurs, thought-criminals. It was almost normal for people over thirty to be frightened of their own children. And with good reason, for hardly a week passed in which *The Times* did not carry a paragraph describing how some eavesdropping little sneak—'child hero' was the phrase generally used—had overheard some compromising remark and denounced its parents to the Thought Police.

Humans are born to the Being Watched, Being Spied social condition through the suppression of the family. Winston's image of his being raised to the brim of a well while his mother and sister are sinking in the abyss is a metaphor of being born, but in the reverse. While giving birth multiplies the mother's body, here it is its sacrifice, its suppression that ushers the child into the surrogate family of Big Brother. Winston feels that his life had been bought at the cost of his kin and biological progenitors. Orwell allegorizes a political theory which in Arendt's words absolutizes the social dimension of being born. Partum from the mother's body does not lead into an indifferent environment. Birth is a process conditioned on the pre-existing patterns of social relationships and possibilities of acting with others:

[...] Natality is not infinity in the abstract. There is no way for natality to realize itself outside of the polis. [...] Natality, paradoxically, is the generation of beings without grounds, framed through contingent laws, societies, and collectivities. There are no new beginnings without the frames corresponding to the walls of the polis. What we see, then, in the concept of

nality is a freedom made possible through laws of political negotiation. (Sjoholm 2015, 36).

2. Colonization of the Self

Arendt's historical survey is a very enlightening one in respect to the changing equation of freedom and power. In pre-modern times, the rules of the household were established by the head of the family. In modern times, the family decayed and, with the rise of society, of social groups, the equals and non-equals were distinguished among themselves through status, through title. The one-man, monarchical rule, has been replaced with no-man rule, while effective action has descended to behaviour: "social beings and unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior, so that those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal." (Arendt 1958, 42). One may choose freedom but at the expense of socially accepted normality, with state and government turned to pure administration.

The rise of mass society, on the contrary, only indicates that the various social groups have suffered the same absorption into one society that the family units had suffered earlier; with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength

Orwell understood the anonymous character of the exertion of power in modern societies. The set of values and taboos subsumed by Jacques Lacan under the generic name of Law of the Father is seen to be acting both ways.

The oppression of those in power in the interwar totalitarian societies created schizoid personalities. Meeting Winston in prison, Parsons addresses him grammatically, but he uses language pragmatically, trying to ingratiate himself with his oppressors, as he knows he is being overheard. He praises his daughter for having reported on him for Thoughtcrime or Crimethink in sleep, and thanks the system for arresting him in order to prevent him from committing other political crimes.

While it is understandable why the ruling Ingsoc Party should empty out the private self replacing it with a brainwashed slave, the subjection to a system of power which has grown anonymous and invisible was more difficult to detect. Nevertheless, In "Shooting and Elephant", Orwell probes into those "unanimously followed certain patterns of behaviour", which Arendt, ahead of Foucault, discovered at the heart of modern societies management.

In his short story, "Shooting an Elephant," it is the man in command, the governor, that is bound to the law of the land. He will not do what he feels inclined to – to spare the elephant – but, instead, he behaves the way he knows he is expected to. Arendt coins a phrase, the "space of appearance", for the site on which freedom is restricted according to a system of power operating above the actants.

Arendt makes an interesting distinction between strength – which is detained by a person in isolation – and

power "which springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse." Strength is a measurable personality trait or quality, whereas power is a potential for action that exists in between individuals. Both colonizers and the colonized in the story obey the law of what must be done. The social contract demands that the police officer in Burma should kill the elephant which has taken several lives, and the officer, although reluctant and in the position of power, has to meet with their expectations. It is the crowd of natives that makes the protagonist into a hunter. He is sent into a downward spiral of alienation from his true self and desires: "I had no intention of shooting the elephant – I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary – and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you. hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels, feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels."

The protagonist of "Shooting and Elephant" thinks of the scene in terms of deontic modality: what should/ ought to/ must be done, what will inevitably be done, what may be avoided, etc., and, although he is a police officer, the irony is that it is not he who enforces the obligations. Word density shows that the scene of shooting the elephant is more a matter of his perception (looking, watching) of the crowd's expectations of his actions rather than of his own act of will.

As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant – it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery – and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of "must" was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home.

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes-faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And 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 wills pressing me forward, irresistibly.

| 🔑 Keyword Density x1 x2 x3 | | ▼ |
|--|--------|---|
| elephant | 5 (4%) | |
| shoot | 4 (3%) | |
| all | 3 (2%) | |
| ought | 2 (2%) | |
| distance | 2 (2%) | |
| looked | 2 (2%) | |
| about | 2 (2%) | |
| least | 2 (2%) | |
| watch | 2 (2%) | |
| crowd | 2 (2%) | |

3. Language and Its Reality Effect

In the later half of the twentieth century suppression of language has been equated with suppression of freedom. In *Writing and Difference* (1978), Jacques Derrida speaks about the necessity of an archaeology of silence meant to uncover what the power system has excluded from language along history. Such an example was the prevalence of the discourse of reason in the eighteenth century which muted the language of madness:

But, first of all, is there a history of silence? Further, is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work?6 Would not the archaeology of silence be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the repetition, in the most irreducibly ambiguous meaning of the word, of the act perpetrated against madness-and be so at the very moment when this act is denounced? Without taking into account that all the signs which allegedly serve as indices of the origin of this silence and of this stifled speech, and as indices of everything that has made madness an interrupted and forbidden, that is, arrested, discourse-all these signs and documents are borrowed, without exception, from the juridical province of interdiction. (Derrida 1978, 35)

Another example of exclusion from logos is the colonial discourse in whose “ambivalence” Homi Bhabha identifies the strategy of avoiding what is politically inconvenient:

Almost the same but not white. the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered inter dicta: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them. The question of the representation of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority. The “desire” of mimicry, which is Freud’s striking feature that reveals so little but makes such a big difference, is not merely that impossibility of the Other which repeatedly resists signification. The desire of colonial mimicry - an interdictory desire -may not have an object, but it has strategic objectives which I shall call the metonymy of presence. (Bhabha 1984, 30)

Under dictatorship, reality is always present only metonymically, fragmented, with truth erased under a superimposed fiction woven by the ideological apparatus of the rulers. Orwell’s genius anticipated these philosophers of language practicing deconstruction and New Historicism. Whether in fiction (the Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) or in his essays on language, Orwell unravelled the manipulation of language as ideological operator. Beautifying reality was intended to fool the citizens, but sometimes the perpetrators themselves felt the need to suppress the gruesome facts of their doing. In his essay, “**Politics and the English Language,**” **Orwell defines his time as that which has become incommensurable**, impossible to be put into words: “In 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.”

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air,
the inhabitants driven out into the countryside,
the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire
with incendiary bullets

Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and
sent trudging along the roads with no more than they
can carry

People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot =
in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in
Arctic lumber camps

English professor defending Russian totalitarianism: =
‘I believe in killing off your opponents when you can
get good results by doing so’

The language of his time did no longer signify or refer; it was
paraphrase, hiding the truth *inter dicta*, silencing it altogether,
altering it in ambivalent discourse. Equations of unequal value
are cast into deceiving phrases:

= *pacification*

= *transfer of population*
rectification of frontiers

= *elimination of unreliable*
elements

= *While freely conceding*
that the Soviet régime exhibits
certain features which the
humanitarian may be inclined to
deplore, we must, I think, agree
that a certain curtailment of
the right to political opposition
is an unavoidable concomitant of
transitional periods, and that the
rigours which the Russian people
have been called upon to undergo
have been amply justified in the
sphere of concrete achievement.

George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene were critical of the modernists’ aloofness from reality and history (although recent revaluations have proved the contrary), but they shared in their belief in language as the supreme ontological order. Orwell found an analogy between the decay in the use of language – conventional, emptied out of meaning – and the decay of the political order. An improvement in language could bring about a change for the better in the historical world. The meliorist project could, therefore, start “at the verbal end.”

CONCLUSION:

The energy of Orwell’s defence of freedom is only equalled by the depth of his understanding of its conditioning and possibilities of realization. Everybody knows the priority of freedom among the human rights enshrined in the Universal Charter based upon Jefferson’s Constitution. The notion of freedom, however, has significantly changed its meaning after centuries of philosophical and sociological inquiry. Orwell was aware of the fact that freedom is more dependent on the kind of social relationships the individual shares rather on the traits of his personality. Although refuted by political philosopher Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt’s philosophy of freedom has greatly

contributed to the elucidation of the subject. Freedom is not a birth right but a birth dependent variable. It is the type of society the individual is born into that mediates his access to public life and offers opportunities for free realizations of their projects. Remarkable is also the depth of Orwell’s understanding of the hidden similarity between the master and subject positions in the colonial world after the emergence of the modern world when a common space of anonymous norms is shared by both. As Foucault has remarked, power is now nowhere and everywhere.

Original and insightful is also the remark that the exclusion from language, the archiving strategy, or paraphrasing do not serve only the deception of the masses but also the need of those in power to remove from language the mirror of the gruesome acts they perpetrate.

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