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Winston's Desires, Orwell's Politics

John Bowen

Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there was still privacy, love, and friendship.

– George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

IT IS DIFFICULT TO CHOOSE A FAVOURITE PASSAGE from Geoff Wall's work, but if pressed, I would plump for a single paragraph from near the end of his compelling life of Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert is in his mid-fifties and feeling good, having just finished his late masterpiece 'A Simple Heart', and started to create 'Hérodias', the final story of *Trois Contes*. After years of gloom, he feels a new access of strength, telling his niece that during the day he can be found 'swimming playfully around the wooded islands in the river like some splendidly lithe sea-god in a renaissance tapestry' and at night retiring to his study 'working the language like some old alchemist heating precious metals at his secret forge'.¹ Then, in a moment of fine biographical daring, Geoff adds:

I would happily relinquish Flaubert there, in the full splendour of his achievement, sporting himself in the river Seine with the heat of the August sun on his back and pictures of gilded temples still forming in his mind.²

But however much he wants to leave him at this idyllic moment, he can't. A 'stern biographical convention requires us to see it through to the very day of the funeral, to the moment when we must lay down the corpulent personage whom we have carried so lightly in our imaginations'.³ Flaubert and his biographer each move into another element here: Flaubert is balanced between life and inevitable death, his biographer poised between the obligation to the reader to finish the story and his desire to preserve this

¹ Geoffrey Wall, *Flaubert: A Life* (London 2001) p. 339.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

lovely image of Flaubert at play. Between sympathy and duty, material reality and imagination, lightness and weight, Geoff's writing, like Flaubert's body, floats gently, sporting and splendid.

Geoff is rightly best known for his two books about Flaubert and superb translations of his novels, but there is a strong thread of political commitment in his writing too, most notably in his seminal translation of Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* and his revealing selection of Jean-Paul Sartre's non-fictional prose, *Modern Times*.⁴ Geoff has not written about George Orwell but, like Sartre's, his work is essential to our understanding of the relationship between literature and politics in the twentieth century. Their respective intellectual formations and political trajectories could not have been more different, and the strong contrast between their writings is epitomised by Orwell's scathing 1948 review of Sartre's *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*. 'In spite of much cerebration', Sartre's book, in Orwell's account, 'contains little real discussion of the subject, and no factual evidence worth mentioning', its effect 'probably to make antisemitism slightly more prevalent than it was before'.⁵ As he told publisher Frederic Warburg: 'I think Sartre is a bag of wind and I am going to give him a good boot.'⁶ It is a characteristically brutal dismissal by Orwell, and close in tone to the book that he had then almost completed, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which is saturated with both real and fantasised violence between men.

Indeed, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* what politics there is, is entirely a matter for men, although the consequences of this are rarely considered, barely noticed, by the many men who have discussed the novel.⁷ It was written at a time when men dominated politics: what is there to say more? But this androcentrism is not an occasional or merely historic characteristic of the book, but essential and thematic, a dominating structure that influences and at times determines the nature of book's politico-fictional understanding and project. It is a novel about men and their relationships – their political relationships – as friends, enemies, brothers, and lovers, through various forms of confraternity, on the one hand, and what Jacques Derrida has called 'the canonical – that is, androcentric – structure of friendship' on

⁴ Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London 1978); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Modern Times: Selected Non-Fiction*, trans. Robin Buss, ed. Geoffrey Wall (London 2000).

⁵ George Orwell, review of Jean-Paul Sartre, *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, trans. Erik de Mauny, *Observer*, 7 Nov. 1948, in *The Complete Works of George Orwell: It Is What I Think, 1947–1948*, ed. Peter Davison (London 1997) pp. 464–5.

⁶ Letter to Frederic Warburg, 22 Oct. 1948, *ibid.*, p. 457.

⁷ The pioneering exception to this is Daphne Patai, *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology* (Amherst, Mass. 1984).

the other.⁸ As in the tradition that Derrida discusses, women in Orwell's novels are excluded from these structures of friendship and brotherhood through which political desire is understood and politics happens. Julia, almost the only significant woman character in the book, is free of the compulsory homosociality that structures Winston Smith's life, and the closeted eroticism and suffering that accompany it. She sleeps with whomever she wants, seems to have no women friends ('Always in the stink of women! How I hate women!'), and is indifferent to the ideologies of Oceania.⁹ In Winston's sexist formulation, she is a 'rebel from the waist down' (p. 122), who falls asleep when he reads aloud the revelatory secrets of Emmanuel Goldstein's opposition manifesto. Politics, or what substitutes for politics in the post-political world of the novel, is found in relations between men, constituted by desire, violence, and knowledge, given or withheld, simultaneously closeted and ubiquitous, both intimate and public. These relations take the form of eroticised, ambivalent 'friendship', on the one hand, and of brotherhood on the other.

Thus, in the two simple words 'friend' and 'brother', much of Orwell's tangled understanding of politics and its relation to desire and social being is compacted. Political choices in the novel are between two ideas or fantasies of brothers and brotherhood: Big Brother, who embodies the totalised power of the state, and 'the Brotherhood', which opposes it. Politics consists of two fratricidal fraternities, of the most hyperbolic state terror, on the one hand, and of an equally cruel counter-terror which hopes to overthrow it on the other. The latter consists of activists both sexual and violent, 'prepared to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases' and 'throw sulphuric acid in a child's face' (p. 135). There is little sociability or human affection in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but what there is characteristically takes the form of loved male faces and bodies. The State is embodied or personified in the 'ruggedly handsome' (p. 3) Big Brother, just as the Inner Party is by O'Brien. O'Brien, to whom Winston 'felt deeply drawn', will eventually torture him to the point of extinction, at which point Winston 'had never loved him so deeply' (p. 196). This is done to make him 'love Big Brother' (p. 219). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a story about politics and the love of men.

Critical discussions of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by journalists, historians, and political theorists alike are often highly polarised and deeply repetitive. The question that I want to pursue – that of *political desire*, in particular the ways

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London 1997).

⁹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. John Bowen (Oxford 2021) p. 102. All references are to this edition and are given in the text.

in which male desires are mobilised and recruited to serve political ends within and beyond this text – rarely figures in criticism of the novel. This gives it the power to disturb some sedimented critical divisions and orthodoxies.¹⁰ Orwell is particularly interested in the question of male friendship and male brotherhood, what we can call, to borrow the title of Derrida's 1993 study, the 'politics of friendship' of the book. Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, together with *Specters of Marx*, forms his most sustained and original contribution to, and deconstruction of, political thought.¹¹ It explores the relationship between the politics of the many and the friendship of the few, the very few, male friends in a tradition of thought from Plato and Aristotle, through Cicero and Montaigne, to Carl Schmitt and beyond. Arresting time, such friendships transmit an ideal of perfect friendship to posterity and come to be remembered as ideal and exemplary. The relation between the claims of friendship, on the one hand, and, on the other, our political obligation to the many countless others whom we do not know, is for Derrida both an essential structure of and deep disturbance within political thought in the West. This relationship, and the trouble that ensues from it, has a particular relevance for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which depicts a world of compulsory homosocial desire between members of the Party, and the exclusion from all political activity and social power of the 'swarming disregarded masses, 85 per cent. of the population of Oceania' (p. 55). As Winston's friend Syme (but '[p]erhaps "friend" was not exactly the right word', p. 39) puts it, 'The proles are not human beings' (p. 42). The only two 'political' powers within Oceania are the Party, embodied in the figure of Big Brother, and the mysterious 'Brotherhood' led by Emmanuel Goldstein. Winston's relationship to both is mediated through the possibility and hope of male friendship with the enigmatic figure of O'Brien, who is a member of the Inner Party but who also inducts Winston and Julia into the Brotherhood, a single character who incarnates the two radically antithetical brotherhoods of the story. For Winston, 'it was ... impossible to be sure whether O'Brien was a friend or an enemy' (p. 21); he epitomises the intimate, ambivalent binding of politics and friendship in the story, in which, in Derrida's words, 'the two concepts (friend/enemy) ... intersect and ceaselessly change places'.¹²

What, then, is the relation of homosocial, homoerotic, and closeted desires between men to the apparent cancellation of political hope and

¹⁰ On the substantial secondary literature on the novel, see John Rodden, *George Orwell: The Politics of Literary Reputation* (London 2017), and Dorian Lynskey, *The Ministry of Truth: A Biography of George Orwell's 1984* (London 2019).

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London 1993).

¹² Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 72.

possibility in the book, which is encapsulated by O'Brien's 'picture of the future ... of a boot stamping on a human face – for ever' (p. 208)? Less explicitly 'political' than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell's earlier novels establish characteristic patterns of male desire and sociability. They are full of loners, solitary men whose friendships come to naught. Flory, the unhappy imperial policeman in *Burmese Days* (1934), has a number of acquaintances whom he dislikes, while his friendship with Dr Veraswami is made impossible in the racist and imperial social structure they inhabit, and leads to catastrophe. We can see a similar pattern in *Coming Up for Air* (1939) and *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936). In each book, there is an intimately frustrating world of compulsory homosociality, in which a solitary unhappy man tries to break out from intolerable conditions, and fails to do so. The striking exception is *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), Orwell's most politically affirmative text, where, in the midst of civil war, the idea and practice of comradeship unite intimate friendship with mass political action. It opens with Orwell's encounter with a fellow-soldier,

a tough-looking youth of twenty-five or six ... It was the face of a man who would commit murder and throw away his life for a friend ... I have seldom seen anyone – any man, I mean – to whom I have taken such an immediate liking.¹³

'Queer', Orwell continues, 'the affection you can feel for a stranger! It was as though his spirit and mine had momentarily succeeded in bridging the gulf of language and tradition and meeting in utter intimacy.'¹⁴ At the opening of the novel, a near-telepathic understanding lights up between the spirits of two men, strangers to each other, that speaks of the 'utter intimacy' of an exemplary and ideal friendship affirmed to the point of death.

This characteristic male solitude, interspersed with the hope of ideal male friendship, is often accompanied by sexual violence towards women. Sexual assaults on women are a repeated motif in Orwell's early fiction. *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) for example, the very first book he wrote, begins and ends with rape. The second chapter consists of a self-contained episode, narrated by Charlie, who is, like Orwell himself, 'a youth of family and education who had run away from home and lived on occasional remittances'.¹⁵ The chapter acts as a kind of frame or entrance-way into the book, and in it Charlie promises to tell 'what is the true meaning of love'.¹⁶ He then describes a brutal rape that he carried out, which

¹³ *Homage to Catalonia*, ed. Lisa Mullen (Oxford 2021) p. 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Down and Out in Paris and London*, ed. John Brannigan (Oxford 2021) p. 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

represents for him 'the supreme happiness, the highest and most refined emotion to which human beings can attain' and which made the day on which it occurred 'the happiest day of my life'.¹⁷ The link between male sexuality and violence returns at the end of the book, where Orwell reflects on the sexual frustrations of tramps:

A tramp ... is a celibate from the moment when he takes to the road. He is absolutely without hope of getting a wife, a mistress, or any kind of woman except – very rarely, when he can raise a few shillings – a prostitute. It is obvious what the results of this must be: homosexuality, for instance, and occasional rape cases.¹⁸

The brutal sexism and homophobia of these remarks epitomise Orwell's characteristic understanding of masculinity, and the profound role it plays in his writing. Underlying this passage and the text more generally is a structure in which male desire is seen as triangulated by prostitution, rape, and same-sex desire. Founded on deeply toxic assumptions about both women and gay men, it demonstrates how firmly male violence, frustration, and predation shape the book's unconscious or disavowed narrative frame or arc.

Sexual assault plays an even more important role in Orwell's first novel, *A Clergyman's Daughter*, the story of which hinges on the rape of its central character, Dorothy Hare, by Warburton. Although the novel was censored, the nature of the attack which leads to Dorothy's flight is clear: he

beg[a]n making love to her, violently, outrageously, even brutally ... Dorothy was horrified almost out of her wits, though not too horrified to resist. She escaped from him and took refuge on the other side of the sofa, white, shaking, and almost in tears ... 'Oh, but how could you be such a brute?'¹⁹

In *Burmese Days* we glimpse the 'huge square bed' of the villainous magistrate U Po Kyin, 'with carved teak posts, like a catafalque, on which he had committed many and many a rape'.²⁰ Determined to destroy Flory's friend Dr Veraswami, he accuses him of 'inciting the natives to abduct and rape the European women'.²¹ The political charge of this is made clear by Orwell in a characteristically brutal and racist way: for U Po Kyin's auditor

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁹ *A Clergyman's Daughter*, ed. Peter Davidson (London 2000) p. 41.

²⁰ *Burmese Days*, ed. Rosinka Chaudhuri (Oxford 2021) p. 110.

²¹ Ibid., p. 112.

Mrs Lackerstein, 'the words "sedition," "Nationalism," "rebellion," "Home Rule," conveyed one thing and one only, and that was a picture of herself being raped by a procession of jet-black coolies with rolling white eyeballs'.²²

Nineteen Eighty-Four in one way seems to conform to this characteristic pattern of Orwell's fiction, of vulnerable, idealised male friendship, on the one hand, and sexual assaults on women on the other, both of which carry a strong political charge. Winston Smith is similarly solitary, similarly isolated from the 'proles' whom he both idealises ('*If there is hope ... it lies in the proles*', p. 55) and despises: '*typical prole reaction*' (p. 9). He works alongside mainly men whom he does not like. Only two real relationships seem to break from the disgruntled resentment that is his dominant feeling: with Julia and with O'Brien. The former is underpinned by sexual violence. When he sees Julia,

Vivid, beautiful hallucinations flashed through his mind. He would flog her to death with a rubber truncheon. He would tie her naked to a stake and shoot her full of arrows like Saint Sebastian. He would ravish her and cut her throat at the moment of climax. (pp. 13–14)

Later he tells her 'I wanted to rape you and then murder you afterwards' (p. 95). By contrast, his idealising male friendship with O'Brien endures, indeed intensifies, throughout the book, and becomes the motor of its plot. As with the Spanish soldier at the beginning of *Homage to Catalonia*, their relationship begins with a near-telepathic moment of intimate male understanding:

their eyes met, and for as long as it took to happen Winston knew – yes, he *knew*! – that O'Brien was thinking the same thing as himself. An unmistakable message had passed. It was as though their two minds had opened and the thoughts were flowing from one into the other through their eyes. 'I am with you,' O'Brien seemed to be saying to him ... 'don't worry, I am on your side!' (p. 15)

The friendship is both perfect and the means of Winston's destruction. It culminates in his torture by O'Brien, which reaches its climax in the betrayal of Julia in Room 101. By contrast, Winston never betrays O'Brien or loses his love and admiration for him, despite all the terrible things that he does to his body and mind.

Orwell's placing of intimate male friendship at the core of the political vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is deeply consonant with the lengthy Western tradition that Derrida explores. But its relationship to that tradition is an essentially

²² Ibid.

negative one. Whereas Orwell's contemporary E. M. Forster, for example, posed a simple opposition between 'betraying my country and betraying my friend', Orwell has a much more disturbed and ambivalent sense of male friendship, and its relation to political responsibility, where betrayal is everywhere.²³ Winston and O'Brien's friendship is the worst imaginable. Accompanied throughout by 'inquisitorial curiosity, the scopophilic drive, and epistemophilia', it drives the plot of a deeply paranoid novel in which the will to know, intrinsically violent in its workings, is constantly incited and frustrated in both its readers and characters.²⁴ Winston is absolutely ordinary, unexceptional in almost every way, yet his relationship with O'Brien, who promises to make him 'perfect' (p. 189), lives on in the modern political imagination as the exemplary negation of political hope and possibility. At the novel's core is this mutually chosen, constant, steadfast, caring, select couple, Winston and O'Brien, set against both the numberless hordes of Eastasia or Eurasia, and the nameless proles of Oceania. Their lives, desires, minds, and bodies are intertwined through torture and telepathy, an intimate cruelty and care that is carried to the limit in Room 101. It is simultaneously a relationship, a social structure, and a politics that together entail the betrayal and excision of women, of the woman, of Julia, and which are always on the brink of madness, male madness. Doublethink is a controlled insanity, rational irrationality. As Emmanuel Goldstein's *Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* puts it: 'If human equality is to be for ever averted – if the High, as we have called them, are to keep their places permanently – then the prevailing mental condition must be controlled insanity' (p. 168).

As O'Brien says to Winston,

'Do you remember writing in your diary,' he said, 'that it did not matter whether I was a friend or an enemy, since I was at least a person who understood you and could be talked to? You were right. I enjoy talking to you. Your mind appeals to me. It resembles my own mind except that you happen to be insane.' (p. 201)

Whereas, for Carl Schmitt, the distinction between friend and enemy is the essential foundation of political thought, in the post-political world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, friendship is indistinguishable from enmity.²⁵

²³ E. M. Forster, 'What I Believe' (London 1939) p. 8.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Justices', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Provocations to Reading: J. Hillis Miller and the Democracy to Come*, ed. Barbara Cohen and Dragan Kujundzic (New York 2005) p. 238.

²⁵ 'The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.' Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (London 2007) p. 26.

For Winston, friendship does not exist in Oceania: like tragedy, it 'belonged to the ancient time ... when there was still privacy, love, and friendship' (p. 25). Any possibility of friendship is quickly qualified or deleted: 'You did not have friends nowadays, you had comrades' (p. 39). The figure of the friend can only appear in radically contradictory ways; O'Brien is 'the tormentor, ... the protector, ... the inquisitor, ... the friend' (p. 189). Deeper than friendship is this torturing communion, in which 'it did not matter whether O'Brien was a friend or an enemy. In some sense that went deeper than friendship, they were intimates' (p. 196). '[P]itiless sympathy' like that which characterises O'Brien's treatment of Winston, his fellow-member of the Brotherhood, is, for Derrida, 'the most striking figure of war and death among brothers'.²⁶ In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as in Derrida's discussion of Nietzsche, 'The figure of the absolute enemy ... starts to resemble that of the absolute friend', and it does so most intensely during the scenes of Winston's interrogation.²⁷ In the endless questioning of the Ministry of Love, 'the friend and the enemy pass into one another through the figure of the brother', Big Brother.²⁸ It is an index and model of a future in which, as O'Brien puts it, 'there will be no wives and no friends' (p. 207). In some ways, therefore, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* resembles Melville's *Billy Budd* in Eve Sedgwick's seminal account, a book constituted by questions of 'knowledge and ignorance ... innocence and initiation ... secrecy and disclosure', whose understanding of politics and the state is inseparable from the topic of male friendship, erotic, closeted, and queer, 'both gay desires and the most rabid homophobia'.²⁹ But O'Brien's sense of the future as endlessly negative, destructive, and repetitive is even closer to the queer negativity of Lee Edelman's *No Future*: O'Brien, like Scrooge or Voldemort, 'a villain ... on whom to project the force of the death drive'.³⁰ How far that projection is also an affirmation by Orwell is less clear.

Although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is full of radical uncertainty, it has often been met by a hasty and knowing criticism, over-confident about what it knows about the book and the lessons we should draw from it. Such dogmatism is often allied to the belief that it should serve as a pedagogical book, the instrument of an exemplary pedagogy that can teach some necessary harsh lessons about the limits of human possibility and our political futures. Orwell's work, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular, has often

²⁶ Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 152.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

²⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif. 2008) p. 74.

³⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC 2004) p. 45.

seemed to mark an impasse for radical thought, a 'no through road' to social change and political action. Writers on the left have thus often been sceptical of, or hostile to, the book, and of the political purposes to which it has been put. The polemical, enforcing binaries of Cold War politics left a strong mark on Orwell studies, and have often confined or delimited understanding of his work. A book about confinement, its fate has often been not to liberate but restrict thought about political possibility, to reinforce familiar categories and oppositions, not unsettle them. A wide spectrum of figures from the left, both Marxist and non-Marxist, have united in their disparagement of the book. Christopher Norris, for example, introducing a collection of essays from 1984, thought it 'too much to hope that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ... will soon be consigned to the dusty annals of Cold-War propaganda', thus hoping that this book about the future, or lack of future, would itself have no future.³¹ Norris's view that the politics of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were irredeemably reactionary was widely held in this period: for Salman Rushdie 'the Orwell of ... *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is advocating ideas that can only be of service to our masters'.³² Similar judgements were made by leading literary theorists and thinkers in the United States: for Fredric Jameson, it was simply a 'counter-revolutionary' text, whereas Edward Said, responding to a question with boredom rather than hostility, confessed that he found it 'virtually impossible to say anything terribly illuminating or even interesting about' Orwell.³³

E. P. Thompson's essay 'Outside the Whale' (1960) is a critique both suggestive of and blind to the apparent cancellation of political and social hope in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, its seemingly nihilistic view of the future, its exemplary pedagogy of negation. Thompson's essay echoes the title of Orwell's 'Inside the Whale' (1940) in order wholeheartedly to reject its political vision. Orwell's essay, written as war was declared, asks whether political thought and action are still possible in the modern world. He explores this essentially meta-political topic though the political trajectories of his literary contemporaries, in particular the fiction of Henry Miller. Miller's underlying vision, Orwell argues, is a- or post-political: 'Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control

³¹ Christopher Norris, introduction to *Inside the Myth: Orwell: Views from the Left* (London 1984) p. 11.

³² Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale', *Granta*, 11 (1984) pp. 125–38: 135; <<https://granta.com/outside-the-whale/>>.

³³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London 1981) pp. 202, 268. John Lukacs, Edward Said, and Gerald Graff, 'The Legacy of Orwell: A Discussion', *Salmagundi*, 70/71 (Spring/Summer 1986) pp. 121–8: 123.

it; simply accept it, endure it, record it'.³⁴ For Thompson, this is 'an apology for quietism ... which at bottom reveals itself as an assumption of original sin'.³⁵ Orwell, however, has a more troubled understanding of the negation of political possibility than Thompson's polemic allows, one that links political thought to what he calls, in a striking phrase from 'Inside the Whale', 'the *real-politik* of the inner mind'.³⁶ Realpolitik is the belief, in von Rochau's celebrated formulation, that that the law of the strong 'dominates life inside the state in the same way as the force of gravity dominates the physical world'; Orwell's phrase thinks of the 'inner mind' as a domain of absolute assertion, ungoverned by ethical criteria.³⁷ Reading Miller's work, writes Orwell, 'you feel the peculiar relief that comes not so much from understanding as from *being understood*. "He knows all about me", you feel; "he wrote this specially for me."³⁸

Once again, politics – or the end of, or escape from, politics – is founded on a quasi-telepathic understanding between men. In its wish for intimate mutual male understanding, Orwell's reading of Miller has an uncanny kinship not just to the meeting with the Spanish soldier in *Homage to Catalonia* but also to the relationship of O'Brien and Winston.³⁹ Miller, writes Orwell, is able to 'drag the *real-politik* of the inner mind into the open', just as O'Brien flays Winston's mind and body, cruelly releasing his deepest fears in the terror of Room 101.⁴⁰ There are three exemplary telepathies, politics, and politics of friendship here: radical comradeship and solidarity in Barcelona; indifference or escape from politics in Miller; intimate cruelty in the service of a totalitarian state in O'Brien and Winston. All are questions of male friendships, male bodies, and male desires.

What Salman Rushdie calls the 'tortuous roads' of Orwell's thinking about politics in 'Inside the Whale' take a queer turn when the discussion of Henry Miller is followed by a consideration of the poetry of A. E. Housman, the writer who for Orwell 'had the deepest hold upon the

³⁴ George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London 1962) p. 49.

³⁵ 'Outside the Whale', in E. P. Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy* (London 1960); revised version in E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978) pp. 1–53: 18.

³⁶ Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', p. 13.

³⁷ John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (Oxford 2016) p. 33.

³⁸ Orwell 'Inside the Whale', p. 12.

³⁹ '[T]his passage ... remarkably foreshadows Winston Smith's feelings about O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*': Patai, *The Orwell Mystique*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ Orwell 'Inside the Whale', p. 13.

thinking young' in 'the years during and immediately after' the First World War.⁴¹ Housman is the archetypal poet of closeted homoerotic yearning, and Orwell's description of his verse, in which 'the girl always dies or marries somebody else' relates an ecstatic male group repetition of his poems, in which

I and my contemporaries used to recite to ourselves, over and over, in
a kind of ecstasy of eroticised death,

With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.⁴²

'Whether', adds Orwell, 'Housman ever had the same appeal for girls I doubt. In his poems the woman's point of view is not considered, she is merely the nymph, the siren, the treacherous half-human creature who leads you a little distance and then gives you the slip.'⁴³ Orwell routes his thinking of the relation of politics and literature through Housman and Miller: a telepathic and ritualised bonding of men through novels of sexist sexual predation, poems of closeted desire, and ecstatic rituals of eroticised death.

Strikingly, these are also the ways that desire is figured in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: sexual violence towards women, epitomised by Winston's hallucinations of raping and torturing Julia; ecstatic ritualised bonding in the Two Minutes Hate; O'Brien torturing Winston while telling him how much he cares for him. In 'Inside the Whale' Orwell believed that he was witnessing 'the break-up of *laissez-faire* capitalism' to be followed by 'an age of totalitarian dictatorships' in which the 'autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence'.⁴⁴ This too is an anticipation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where Winston attempts to live 'outside the whale' until his existence is stamped out of him by O'Brien. The later critical tradition has largely de-eroticised, desexualised, and de-telepathized Orwell's understanding of political life and its essential link to structures of male desire and violence, despite their repeated presence across all his work. It has thus dislocated our understanding of a mainspring of his thinking, its politics of friendship,

⁴¹ Rushdie 'Outside the Whale', p. 131; Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', p. 20.

⁴² Orwell 'Inside the Whale', p. 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

brotherhood, and male desire. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is an agonised and often cruel exploration of the bindings of male desire to the power and force of the state, a negative exemplarity of what men do to each other and to others, a realpolitik which both is and is not that of the 'inner mind'.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The phrase 'inner mind' appears once in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in O'Brien's justification for torturing Winston: 'We do not destroy the heretic because he resists us: so long as he resists us we never destroy him. We convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him' (p. 198).

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