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Memory as the Apocalyptic Heart of Dystopia

The world is weary of the past,
Oh, might it die or rest at last!
(Shelley, 'The World's age begins anew')

1. My paper starts from Patrick Parrinder's assertion that "the destruction of cultural memory has been a defining feature of utopia. . . . Utopia reveals the artificial origins of culture, the fact that the cultures of nations and states are made and not given. . .". This statement fully exposes the very premise at the basis of utopia and, obviously, the new society which produced utopia. The premise is radically developed and incisively expressed by a *par excellence* Utopian such as Orwell's O'Brien when he unequivocally declares: "We make the laws of nature [...] we create human nature".¹

This statement raises fundamental issues such as the definition of human nature and its limits, utopia and power, history and utopia. It is evident enough that the view of history as fiction (that is as narrative and invention), so much debated in the last decades, could only derive from an awareness of the artificial nature of culture.

By the phrase "history as fiction" I don't mean to refer merely to the fact that, being almost always the result of the manipulations of power, history can be fairly defined as the autobiography of Power; I am also pointing to a further meaning, more obnoxious and dangerous for the survival of the utopian spirit, that is, that 'history as fiction' would be the only possible achievement of the historian's work.²

¹ G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [NEF] (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), pp. 266, 270. Further references are to this edition.

² M. J. Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 99: "History is the historian's experience. It is 'made' by nobody save the historian: to write history is the only way of making it"

By denying the possibility of reaching any “objective” historical truth and therefore presenting history as a totally artificial and arbitrary product, this sceptical stance, in effect destroys the basic function of history, which consists in providing a frame of reference for the present to define its own meaning by setting up a mutual relation between past and present³. As Jameson has repeatedly written in his well-known essay on the cultural logic of postmodernism⁴, the problem is not that, without the past, everything is reduced to an infinite present, but that, without the past, the very consciousness of the present as well as of any individual identity becomes impossible.

I am not going to dwell, however, on the issue of objectivity in history, which has become a commonplace at least since Edward Carr’s assessment in his Cambridge lectures in the 1960s⁵. What I intend to do is to show that this problematic and sceptical stance is a touchstone on which to set up a comparison between utopia and dystopia. My present argument, in other words, is that what constitutes the basic difference between the two kinds of imagination and genres is yet another view of the nature and function of historical and cultural memory.

While in utopia cultural memory is perceived as an obstacle to be removed, or at least deeply modified, in order to make the realization of utopia and the new canonisation possible, in dystopia memory and the past are felt as a safeguard and a defence against the utopia of Power or utopia in power.⁶ According to Elias Canetti, in fact, utopia is always the expression of

³ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford UP: 1956). E. H. Carr, *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures*, (1st publ. 1961) (Penguin, 1978), p. 56: “The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past”.

⁴ F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1st publ. 1984) (London and New York: Verso 1991).

⁵ E. Carr, *What is History?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-31. See also R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (Banta Publications, 2004).

⁶ Within the so-called “classical dystopia” a distinction should be made between true dystopia, or dystopia proper, (which, in Yeats’s phrase, can be defined as “the school of Morris”) and an ambiguous and somewhat contradictory dystopia which, by contrast, could be termed as “the school of Wells” and includes A. Huxley, Golding, Sheckley and many SF writers. While the school of Morris (including such writers as Oliphant, Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Orwell, Warner, Burdekin etc) believe that a way out does exist out of the nightmarish world produced/brought about by

a dream of power. Dystopia, on its part, has always reproached utopia for making itself out as the bourgeois version of myth, which cannot be since it is clearly a contradiction in terms. As an individualistic and rational version of myth, utopia deadly betrays it through a series of deceitful transpositions (time for space, reason for faith, mental for emotional) and especially through the presumptuous supposition of being entitled to interfere with and prevaricate the order of nature, thus bringing about constraint and pain.

Indeed, dystopia's notion of human nature is not so ductile, malleable and undefined as that of utopia. The two notions of human nature appear to be rooted, in fact, in different views of the Mind-Body relationship. While in utopia the relationship between the Mind and the Body is hierarchical, in dystopia it is equal, if not openly inverted. After all, utopia is the product of Reason, that is the Mind, whose powers were clearly defined by Milton's Satan in the beginning of the bourgeois era:

The mind is its own place, and in itself

Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.⁷

The Mind refuses to acknowledge any limits, particularly the limits of physical reality, which is primarily represented by the human body.

"The sin against the body" is the charge waged against the Mind and civilisation by "the first dystopia of the 20th cent."⁸, E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops": "centuries of wrong against the muscles and the nerves, and those five portals by which we can alone apprehend".⁹

the development of bourgeois ideology, the school of Wells can see no alternative to the /present/ actual/ course of history. According to the author of *A Modern Utopia* (1905), we can only better our inevitable human condition in so far as we can emancipate ourselves from the past, which does not contain Morris' healthy human animal, but only the ancestral brute. (See my *Nostalgia e mito nella distopia inglese*, Ravenna, Longo, 1998).

⁷ J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (1667), I, ll. 254-256.

⁸ M. Hillegas, *H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁹ E. M. Forster, "The Machine Stops", (1909) in *Collected Short Stories* (Penguin, 1982), p. 145. All further references (in brackets in the text) are to this edition.

Man is the measure....Man's feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable and desirable and strong...(125)

Man is the measure, but certainly *man* is not the same as *mind*; man is a man as long as he lives “by the essence that is his soul and the essence, equally divine, that is his body”(145).¹⁰

The body is essential in defining the human measure, being the repository of a ‘measure’ left there by collective memory, which is primarily rooted in biological reality.

In dystopia, cultural memory draws on the biological and unconscious collective memory through instinct (which is something more than “habit become instinct” as in Orwell’s Oceania) and dream (which gives access to memory and subversion). Within the dystopian dimension, collective memory cannot be the product of a “stipulation” (in Sontag’s terminology); it is instead a vital function linking humans to the heart of ontological reality. It may be modified or cancelled within one or some individual minds (as happens to Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), but a single episode cannot erase it. Dystopian sensibility and consciousness clearly distinguish between “history” as the autobiography of Power, on the one hand, and “collective memory” as the repository of (the) *true* history (of mankind), on the other. In point of fact, it is against the unconquerable collective memory that Power wages its endless struggle in the vain attempt to reduce individuals to “empty shells”¹¹ to be filled with its own “memory”.

2. I will now illustrate these introductory remarks with a few significant examples showing a constant feature in dystopian fiction: that is, the juxtaposition of two “memories” – the false and counterfeited memory worked out by Power (and Civilisation) on the one hand, and the true and authentic memory, the basic *sine qua non* to human life, on the other.

¹⁰ I just recall similar denunciations by great 20th cent. writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Yeats, Auden, who, like Forster, were influenced by William Morris’s “non utopian utopia” (A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (1952), London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1978, p. 200)

¹¹ *NEF*, p. 203.

The first example comes from a dystopian story written in 1884 by Margaret Oliphant and entitled “The Land of Darkness”¹². It shows that utopias (which, as we know, once realized, become dystopias) develop and flourish from the absence of memory in a cultural environment pervaded by a basic, though un-confessed, fear of the past (like the late Victorian evolutionist context). Oliphant tells of a journey through a nether world, apparently very similar to Dante’s *Inferno*, in fact a vision of the future of Victorian society. Here the main principles of individualism, progress and profit have been developed as to produce places which anticipate the best known dystopias of the 20th cent., both literary and historical. Suffice it to mention *the city of tyrants* (where *We* and *Nineteen Eight-Four* are anticipated) or *the city of the evening lights* (foreshadowing the spirit of *Brave New World*), *the huge workshops* (which provide the archetypal setting of SF clockwork worlds) or *the lawless streets, the mines* and the lazar-houses, which are the same as in our megalopolis.

Well then, all these incarnations of basic aspects of the contemporary hell are scattered through “a great and desolate waste”(280), a great plain “without tracks” where, therefore, it is impossible to find one’s bearings. In order to underline the fact that the huge waste without tracks is to be intended as an allegory of the absence of memory in which utopias-dystopias thrive, the dark plain is scattered all through by allegorical representations of the past in the form of repulsive ruins, “dust-heaps” and “ashes” hiding “slimy things leaving their traces upon the flesh” (281).

Oliphant can perceive the impatience with, or rather the repulsion for the call of the past underlying her culture, since it chose to condemn itself to go “not back, but on, and on. To greater anguish, yes; but on: to fuller despair, to experiences more terrible: but on, and on, and on...”(280). In order to expose the sense of damnation and death pervading a culture determined to turn its back on the past, in the final paragraph, Oliphant calls on to the stage Satan from *Paradise Lost*. This is an incarnation of the wilful Mind, updated and disguised as the Victorian over-man: “the Master of all was one who

¹² M. Oliphant, “The Land of Darkness”, 1987, repr. in *A Beleaguered City and Other Stories* (Oxford: OUP, 1988). All references (in brackets in the text) are to this edition. See my entry in *The Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, ed. by V. Fortunati and R. Trousson (Paris: Champion, 2002).

never rested, nor seemed to feel weariness, nor pain, nor pleasure. He had everything in his hands. All who were there were his workmen, or his assistants, or his servants [...]. He was more than a prince among them – he was as a god”(281). He is capable of so great an high-tech enterprise as to re-build man and make “a new and stronger race of men” by which to dominate the world (282). In spite of his strong will and mental powers, Oliphant’s Satan greatly differs from the Victorian ideal as ‘explained’ by Wells’ Doctor Moreau¹³. Leaving aside any absurd hope of ever succeeding in equalling the Creator or building another Eden, this Satan quotes from Shakespeare and confesses his longing and nostalgia for “the way that leads back” (273): “...if one could find him again...[...] I who am his creature [...] and still his child [...] though so far, so far.” (284)

Like *News from Nowhere* a few years later, Oliphant’s great dystopian story ends with hope and faith, which are the irrational and vital dimension of myth, notwithstanding the fact that the Victorian pilgrim obstinately resumes his infernal, Satan-like journey: “On to the cities of the night! On, far away...from hope that is torment..”(285)

3. My second example, “The Machine Stops”, also expresses the same sense of damnation of a culture forced to go on and on in the name of the progress of the Mind, which is embodied here by the Machine and civilisation.¹⁴ But the progress of civilisation is not the progress of man; quite the opposite.¹⁵ In Forster’s story, it is the voices of the dead who incite Kuno, the rebel, spurring him through his rebellion against the Machine. The Machine has

¹³ See “Doctor Moreau Explains”, in H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), Penguin, pp. 106-112.

¹⁴ “The Machine Stops”, p. 125: “...that the Machine may progress, may progress, may progress.”

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 131: “Cannot you see, cannot all your lecturers see that. . . we are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine ? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. The Machine develops – but not on our lines. The Machine proceeds – but not to our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could do without us it would let us die”.

reduced humanity to an underground existence, far from sunlight and concrete experience, isolated inside self-sufficient individual cells, so that human intercourse has been reduced to an exchange of ideas. The body has been humiliated to the role of a receiver or a repeater, and deprived of his true function of distinguishing between “what is vision and what is true” (exactly as in Oliphant’s land of darkness).

Then, the rebellion against the rule of the Machine will consist of recovering the full use of one’s body, that is, the human dimension, and, through it, the contact with the spirit of the past:

I seemed to hear the spirits of those dead workmen who had returned each evening to the starlight and to their wives, and all the generations who had lived in the open air called back to me, “You will do it yet, you are coming”[...] the spirits of the dead comforted me [...] and...as the dead were comforting me, so I was comforting the unborn. (126-7)

Dystopia does not conceive myth as a mental and abstract tale; myth is meant instead as *mythos*, that is, as “words that become acting and substance”. In fact Kuno’s enterprise, that is, his recovery of myth, materializes in the blood pouring out of his nose (while ascending the vomitory) which symbolizes life starting again. The contact with the past cannot be recovered through the screens and videos of the Machine but only through a direct experience of the body of the Earth, which is the repository holding “the measure” of life. Against the corruption of the Machine the only possible solution is to recover that essential “measure” by making myth heard again.

Oh, I have no remedy – or at least, only one – to tell men again and again that I have seen the hills of Wessex as Alfred saw them when he overthrew the Danes. (131)
...to me they [the hills] were living and the turf that covered them was a skin, under which their muscles rippled, and I felt that those hills had called with incalculable force to men in the past, and that men had loved them. Now they sleep – perhaps for ever. They commune with humanity in dreams. (131)

The spirit of place or *genius loci* suggested in the above passage is significantly the best embodiment of what in dystopia is meant both by myth and cultural memory. According to Lawrence Durrell’s definition, the spirit of

place is the living deposit of history, geography, arts, habits and customs, in sum of the various events of a place and its inhabitants, the outcome of the diachronic interplay of place and people.¹⁶ In the eyes of the well-known author of *The Alexandria Quartet* (and also of a less known work under the very suggestive title of *The Revolt of Aphrodite*) “the magnetic fields”¹⁷ of the spirit of place hold the only possible defence against the corruption of “the muddy island”, or “the English death” of “the Hegelian West”.¹⁸

It is by no chance that the best books in his large and varied production are those which succeed in expressing adequately the spirit of place, as is the case with the travel books about the islands of the Mediterranean.

It is a fact that the reading of Durrell’s “island books” irremediably conditions the visitor’s perception of the place. Only think of *Prospero’s Cell*,¹⁹ in which Odiseus and Nausicaa, Sycorax and St Crispin, Venice and Empress Sissie mix with olive-trees and oleanders, sea waves and rocks, wine and figs, etc. Here indeed literature and poetry come to be the adequate expression of the *genius loci*, that is, the voice of myth.

Rightly, as Parrinder reminded us, Plato banishes the poets (from his Republic). As testified by Orpheus’s myth, only the singing of poetry can bring the past back to life. In fact singing and music act through the so-called irrational dimension, which is the dimension in which our past lives.

(Going back to the Machine Age), if Kuno is the poet singing the apocalyptic discovery of the body and myth, the mouthpiece of the Machine is a renowned lecturer, precisely an historian who teaches the young generations how the past is to be treated or rather *produced* to suit the needs of the Machine:

Do not learn anything about this subject of mine – the French Revolution. Learn instead what I think that Enicharmon thought Urizen thought Gutch thought Chi-Bo-Sing thought Lafcadio Hearn thought Carlyle thought Mirabeau said about the French Revolution. Through the medium of these ten great minds the blood that was shed at Paris and the windows that were broken at Versailles will be

¹⁶ *Spirit of Place* (New York: Marlowe Co, 1969).

¹⁷ “Delphi”, in *Spirit of Place*, p. 275.

¹⁸ L. Durrell, *Constance, or Solitary practices* (London: Fabers, 1982), p. 288.

¹⁹ L. Durrell, *Prospero’s Cell* (New York: Marlowe & Co., 1996).

clarified to an idea which you may employ most profitably in your daily lives. But be sure that the intermediates be many and varied, for in history one authority exists to counteract another. Urizen must counteract the scepticism of Ho-Hung and Enicharmon, I must myself counteract their impetuosity of Gutch. You who listen to me are in a better position to judge about the French Revolution than I am. Your descendents will be even in a better position than you, for they will learn what you think. I think, and yet another intermediate will be added to the chain. And in time – his voice rose – there will come a generation that has got beyond facts, beyond impressions, a generation absolutely colourless, a generation «seraphically free From taint of personality», which will see the French Revolution not as it happened, nor as they would like it to have happened, but as it would have happened had it taken place in the days of the Machine. (135-6)

In Forster's view, here the manipulation or rather the production of history does not respond to the lust for power of a ruling elite like Orwell's inner party; instead, it is the obvious outcome of the "cultural logic" of the Machine, which Jameson calls Great Mechanism or more recently Latouche re-named Mega-machine²⁰, that is, the Market in the widest sense of the word²¹. Forster is already well aware that "the monster as a whole"(138) cannot be controlled by anyone in the world, while its control on everybody's

²⁰ S. Latouche, *La mégamachine* (Editions La Découverte, 1995).

²¹ F. Jameson, "The Market" in *op. cit.*, pp. 370-3. See my "Losing the sense of space: Forster's 'The Machine Stops' and Jameson's Third Machine Age' (in A. Sandison and R. Dingley, *Histories of the Future, Studies in Fact, Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Palgrave, 2000) p. 62: "This passage by one of the most influential lecturers of the Machine Age, repropose, in perfect Butler style, a version of the round table of utopians of the past Wells summons in *A Modern Utopia* in order to elaborate a new concept of utopia answering to the "invincible pressure" of the Machine (that is a *cinetic* utopia). The extract also includes an ironic illustration of man's mechanical nature and of its desirable development through the evolution of a generation that "reasons" like the machines, having accepted them as the next step in the evolutionary ladder of intelligence in the Universe. It is fairly clear how these and further themes, evident in the passage and characteristic of the intellectual debate at the turn of the century, may today be formulated as the crisis in historicity (Jameson, 25), the disappearance of the historical referent, the *derealization* of the surrounding world of every day reality, the disappearance of the individual subject (Jameson, 34, 16).

life grows tighter and tighter (just as Samuel Butler foresaw in his “Book of Machines”).

4. Forster’s greater long-sightedness than Orwell’s is certainly due to the different historical situations in which they wrote. Orwell writing about history in *Nineteen Eighty Four* was under the influence of Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed*, which dealt with contemporary historical events, and, consequently, his sight was blurred by everyday violence and hate. I do not mean, however, to dwell on Orwell’s treatment of this subject – the re-writing of history by Power. I just intend to emphasise his merit in evidencing what is certainly to be recognized as the main tool by which the re-writing of history is accomplished. Orwell in fact singles out *doublethink* as the foundation of “the system of lies on which our society is built”. His notion of doublethink draws on “the hypothetical language” and the “bi-mental” and “bilingual” behaviour earlier described by Butler and Abbot respectively in *Erewhon* and *Flatland*. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* doublethink and newspeak are the means to neutralize and destroy the collective and biological memory inscribed in the body. Let us, for example, remember the passage where, after long torturing Winston, O’Brien has him look at himself in a mirror and say: “What are you? A bag of filth [...] If you are human, that is humanity”. (273)

Well, there is no denying the fact that the critics of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* have not adequately highlighted the recurring and pervasive presence of myth and the “other” memory – the one depending on the epiphanic and testimonial function of the body. In vain will myth be derided or denied, by O’Brien and the Machine lecturers alike: it reveals itself as life going on in the *hic et nunc*. The “magnificent gesture” by Julia throwing her clothes away is an allegorical representation (recurring in dystopian literature) of the triumph of myth as a concrete and unconquerable reality.

With its grace and carelessness it seemed to annihilate a whole culture, a whole system of thought, as though Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police could all be swept into nothingness by a single splendid movement of the arm. That too was a gesture belonging to the ancient time (33)

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the presence of myth is insistent, varied and coherent. With “its bareness, its dinginess, its listlessness” (77), daily life in

Oceania is constantly calling back to myth. Not only is myth evoked in its classical version of the Golden country and symbolically summed up in the glass paper-weight²²; it is also actually realized in the *locus amoenus* of the countryside on the two lovers' first meeting, and later on it is updated in Mr Charrington's old room, described as "a world, a pocket of the past..." (152) and "paradise" (151). The room is in fact a "sanctuary" (158) where the body is celebrated through the pleasures of food, sex and repose.

And it is here, of course, in the old bedroom, that, by calling on to the collective unconscious and emotional memory, Orwell's writing can involve the reader so successfully as to "prolonger la ligne du corps dans la ligne de l'écriture"²³. It must be remarked however that the provocation and subversion of Orwell's writing depend not only on his constant emphasis on myth, but also on his showing it as connatural with everyday life: not as a lost Holy Grail to be recovered, but as something rooted in the immemorial past and yet living inside us to remind us of what, as humans, we have a right to (140).

Like Forster's story, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* dramatizes "the sin against the body" committed by our civilisation. The *proles*, as humanity's large body, represent a further embodiment of the unconquerable vitality of myth. To Orwell the features of myth are explicitly female: as in 19th cent. dystopian literature – from B. Lytton to Hudson, Jefferies, and Morris – peace, joy, serenity, confidence, comfort, physical pleasures, perfumes, tastes, sounds, colours, the attractions of the utopian place, all belong to the female and natural sphere – that is the sphere where feelings and emotions can offer a rest from the incessant male struggle for progress and power.

Thanks to their intellectual dullness, the *proles* have kept the principles of elemental morals, or *decency*. It is a prole woman who stands up against the spiteful destruction of the common feeling of humanity daily perpetrated by Oceania's culture of war (12). Furthermore, it is through the singing of a prole woman that myth is given a voice to win over the ugliness and nonsense of the Party's songs.

²² "It was though the surface of the glass had been the arch of the sky, enclosing a tiny world with its atmosphere complete... The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal" (148)

²³ J. F. Lyotard, "Glosse sur la resistance", *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), pp. 135-51.

With her big body deformed by lying-ins and hard working, this “Great Mother” is compared to Julia and, like Julia, to a rose, the recurring symbol of femininity. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is associated to the tiny bit of coral which gleams inside the paperweight, “fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal” (148). During the police raid, the glass paperweight will be smashed to pieces, but however confused and dramatic the moment, Mr Charrington’s sharp order to “pick up those pieces”(225) signals out “the tiny crinkle of pink like a sugar rosebud”(224), setting it at the centre of the scene.

What is the significance of that order? Does it mean that without myth peoples can neither live nor die, as Dostoevskji wrote in *The Devils*?²⁴ Or that the Party is going to use it again as a lure and a trap? In any case those fragments represent something irreplaceable which cannot be lost. Perhaps an answer may be found in a passage from an article on socialism (contemporary to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) in which Orwell expressed his faith in the fate of myth in our civilisation:

The ‘earthly paradise’ has never been realized, but as an idea it never seems to perish in spite of the ease with which it can be debunked by politicians of all colours [...] it leads back through Utopian dreamers like William Morris and mystical democrats like Walt Whitman, through Rousseau, through the English *diggers* and *levellers*, down through the peasants’ revolts in the Middle Ages, and back to the early Christian and the slaves’ rebellions of antiquity.²⁵

Clearly Orwell conceives the earthly paradise as a kind of ancestral instinct appearing throughout human history. But if it is so, what about competitiveness and aggressiveness as “natural” drives? Who is lying, then? (Culture or Myth?) It is exactly to this power to raise such fundamental questions that dystopian literature owes its critical destiny as catastrophic and paranoid, anyhow second-rate, literature.

²⁴ See F. Dostoevsky, “Stavrogin’s Dream”, in I. Howe ed. , *Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), p. 309.

²⁵ See “What is socialism?” *Manchester Evening News*, 31 Jan. 1946 (in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. by P. Davison, Secker & Warburg, 1986-1998, 20 vols, vol. 18, pp 60-3).