

POLITICS IN NOVELS: UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE IN THE EAST AND THE WEST

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*Abstract: Ian McEwan's **Saturday** and Orhan Pamuk's **Snow**, the plots of which both revolve round violence, can make readers grasp how high politics and low violence are in fact connected in a play of the structural violence categories substituting the need categories with different prevalence in the east and the west.*

Keywords: politics, cultural violence, immobility, East, West.

Galtung speaks of direct, structural and cultural violence. In the novels we are discussing (Ian McEwan's **Saturday** and Orhan Pamuk's **Snow**) there are instances of the three types: the direct kind of violence which represents the peripeteia in **Saturday** and is a pervasive, chaotic presence in **Snow**; the structural type which is equally present in both novels as state politics: the war in Iraq in the recent history of **Saturday**, but mainly the existence of topdogs and underdogs - in Galtung's words - i.e. the existence of structural dominance, and the military coup in **Snow**; cultural violence is there as everything that justifies the use of it – from "the ubiquitous portrait of the leader"¹ to army or police violence to protect the interests of a certain group. Even threats of violence are violence, as it is the obligation of second-class citizens to use the cultural idiom of the dominant class. It is a battle that starts with deformed ideas on value: of the self and of the other. All threats to basic human needs constitute violence: survival needs, well-being needs, identity, meaning (negation: alienation), freedom needs. It is note-worthy that Galtung remarks an important inter-connection between the three types of violence, an obvious example being a war situation engendering violent behaviour amidst population, but also cultural violence – the hidden kind – triggering violent action. A violent structure is either directly, structurally or culturally so (which apparently safeguards from it), but it is a violent structure nonetheless. Cultural violence works with four strategies: *penetration* ("implanting the topdog inside the underdog"); *segmentation* ("giving the underdog only a very partial view of what goes on"); *marginalisation* ("keeping the underdogs on the outside") and *fragmentation* ("keeping the underdogs away from each other")². All these impede consciousness formation and mobilisation, Galtung says, which is an important point as we are going to remark immobility as a common state in both novels.

McEwan's character, Henry Perowne is a 20th century version of Mrs. Dalloway, a peripatetic character through London, running errands before a family party, equally privileged and in the same way clashing almost tragically with a deranged representative of a lower class. There are two pivotal episodes: one with Perowne watching a plane crash in flames from the window of his comfortable bedroom and doing nothing, not even waking his wife to tell her, as he senses the uselessness of all action and only acknowledges the reality of the fact when he sees it on the news. This unresponsiveness in terms of action puts under question the humanity of today's world since one of its good representatives is relieved that

¹Galtung, 291

²Galtung, 293

the plane crash is just an accident, „not an attack on our whole way of life”³. The narrator judges his stance, half-excusing it: „His crime was to stand in the safety of his bedroom, wrapped in a woolen dressing gown, without moving or making a sound, half dreaming as he watched people die.”⁴

The second episode is his meeting of Baxter, a low class, uneducated young man with a neuro disease, with whom he has a squabble in the street on the backdrop of a massive protest in the center of London. The overbearing irony of the episode, as the narrator remarks, is that their one-to-one confrontation happens with a peace march in the background. If the calamity he witnessed at night does not touch him, the personal encounter with the bully Baxter turns his life into something very fragile as Baxter stalks him and breaks into his house with two sidekicks. Everything he holds dear is on the verge of violent annihilation: his beautiful, intelligent wife, still sexually desirable, his two gifted children, a precocious jazz guitarist and a poetess, his father-in-law, a cultural legend: his perfect life, which encompasses all the select features of the 20th century culture, clashes with the squalor of Darwinian low-scale specimens.

Doctor Perowne seems to have it all, from natural gifts to social status, while Baxter has defective genes, a probable history of abuse, is unemployed, painfully self-conscious and spiteful. Perowne has happiness - the big motive of our culture - while Baxter is a tormented, rejected being; Perowne is validated as a person by being a great professional, Baxter is subject to gene irregularities and marginalisation in a caste-like system. This clash, though, humanises both parties: Baxter relents, is subdued, though temporary, when hearing Perowne’s daughter recite classic English poetry, which she performs naked, following Baxter’s gun threat; Perowne takes action and leaves his scared family behind when everything is over to operate on Baxter himself. Apparent peace comes from enactment of the role one has been assigned in society, here patient and doctor. Any disturbance of the networking of roles resembles a Hegelian upheaval. The unfairness of these roles - some inherently superior - stays. The spite, the hate, the violent impulses in the inferior specimens thus explained is understandable.

James Gilligan (2003) sees shame as the root of violence in people with a lower status; not money or something else, but the counterattack to what they perceive as disrespect. The violent act guarantees that respect is gained, maintained, warranted. A lot of the people who resort to violence, Gilligan notes, say that they felt dead long before the act of violence took place. This death of the self is the result of mortification (common root for death and shame), which in its turn springs from lack of love, abandonment, abuse, rejection, failure. Violent actions are meant to ward off the feeling of inferiority and shame and replace them with pride and attention. The basic causal structure would be rejection- shame-anger, both on a personal and social level. Aggressiveness is channeled by shame and made into an instrument of obtaining what is lacking. On the other hand, Perowne’s aggressiveness is manifest in the squash game with a friend, where they deploy warlike strategies and barbaric energy.

Politics permeates everything in the novel. The recollection of courting his wife is punctuated by the mention of the Falklands invasion and Galtieri, at the dinner table they talk about Iraq and Al-Qaeda, while his cooking goes like this, in a symphony of vegetables and news: „In a second bowl, he puts the clams and mussels. Both bowls go into the fridge, with dinner plates as lids. An establishing shot shows the United Nations building in New York, and next, Colin Powell getting into a black limousine...He runs the cold tap over the leaves. An officer, barely in his twenties, is standing outside his tent pointing with a stick at a map on

³McEwan, 39

⁴McEwan, 22

an easel.”⁵ History as a whole happens sporadically on TV and he is intermittently aware that he does not think independently. His son is said to have had his initiation „in front of the TV, before the dissolving towers”⁶.

In **Why Some Politicians Are More Dangerous than Others**, James Gilligan finds the relationship between politics and aggressiveness to be more specific, straightforward and thus more appalling. Even the motto to the book by R. W. Emerson is fittingly chosen to sustain his thesis: “In analysing history, do not be too profound, for often the causes are quite simple.” For what he professes is that the rates of homicide and suicide (violence towards the self) which tend to increase and decrease together - pointing at a wave of violence in general - do so in relation with the political party in power at a given period in the US. Noticing that three of the epidemics of lethal violence corresponded with the presidential election cycle, he started working with patients with this thesis in mind. First he identified shame as the proximal cause of violence. He observes: “The shame driven person...sees revenge as not only permitted, but even required, for the failure to revenge yourself on someone who has harmed you (or a member of your family or cultural group) deprives you of ‘honor’”⁷

After years of clinical observation and thorough statistical work he came to the conclusion - simply - that violence increased when the Republicans held power and decreased with the Democrats. This, of course, means in fact social and economic policies, unemployment rates, protection of the dominant class. Unemployment means poverty, shame, frustration. Social inequality is further deepened by the protection of the interests of the higher classes and manipulation of middle and lower classes into discord to hide it. He notes that researchers in Australia and UK have found that suicide rates increased significantly throughout the 20th century when conservative political parties were in power, and decreased under liberal governments; and that the unemployment rate correlated with the political parties and the suicide rate. The gist of the study is that the immediate psychological motive of violent behaviour is the exposure to overwhelming shame and humiliation “of being disrespected, rejected, held in contempt and regarded as worthless, of no value to the others, ‘redundant’.”⁸ Among the many stressors, one of the most common and powerful is the experience of being fired or suffering a severe loss of socio-economic status.

The Hegelian dynamic is apparently hard to apply to Orhan Pamuk’s novel because of local specificity; besides one cannot apply the same research instruments to this highly poetic novel. More like the terrorist war these days which perplexes European powers because it works by generating chaos, not by the rules of the wargame Europeans know and control, the functioning principles in the political saturated world Pamuk’s characters inhabit seem to be governed by chaos rather than clear exchange.

A Turkish poet immigrated to Germany is summoned to write a piece on an epidemic of virgin suicides. He comes to the God forsaken town of Kars with the distaste of the lonely but unregretful prodigal son and the desire to marry beautiful Ipek. Ka is this dervish-like character – in his own words - that is monk-like, not part of the world, but also a medium, somebody whose existence is used by others (by contrast Perowne persuades himself that he is no element in a greater scheme). The town with its history manifest in the crumbling ruins of former handsome Armenian or Russian buildings is quite a primitive place as seen by Ka the poet, but with a political importance that seems overrated. The political thinking is

⁵McEwan, 178

⁶ McEwan, 32

⁷Gilligan 2011, ch 4, loc 1376

⁸Gilligan 2011, ch7, loc 2055

rudimentary, the propaganda grotesque, yet there are pure characters whom the narrator treats respectfully, even lovingly.

The two factions are not privileged classes and lower classes, Democrats and Republicans, but still a more violent version of a similar structure: religious fundamentalists and liberal republicans, followers of Atatürk; Kurdish separatists too. Confusion is the impression one gets, in stark contrast with the clean lines of the world in the Western novel (epitomised by the inaudible engine of the surgeon's new convertible red Mercedes). The liberals in power force girls to take off their headscarf at school or they face expulsion. Many girls cannot compromise or stand the shame of a bare head in a context in which they have worn it all their lives and commit suicide. The title of the play that is meant to trigger the revolution captures the confusion in a mockingly simple antinomical pair: *My Fatherland or My Headscarf*, which reeks of propaganda jargon.

There are similarities between the political contexts in the two novels: one cannot escape politics, even though they want to keep themselves free and unattached: their thinking and acts are already altered by it. Television is the history provider of the day. Inaction, the incapacity of significant motion is valid in both contexts. In the Turkish novel, heavy snow increases the isolation both geographically and personally. Ka deceives himself that he can just write poems, as the past, love, the snow inspires him in an unprecedented way.

The relationship between the east and the west is a matter of troubled gaze. Ka speaks of how he perceives the inhabitants of the country he is an immigrant in: „The important thing was not what I thought of him, but what I thought *he* might be thinking about *me*. I'd try to see through his eyes and imagine what he might be thinking about my appearance, my clothes, the way I moved, my history, where I had just been and where I was going, who I was. It made me feel terrible, but it became a habit. I grew used to feeling degraded and I came to understand how my brothers felt.”⁹ And this is how Ka sees the Other (a German family), serious and responsible about the mundane rather than with a vision on life and after-life that incapacitates action and happiness: „Maybe this is why they were happy. For them, life was a serious business to be dealt with responsibly. It wasn't a dead-end struggle or a painful ordeal the way it is here. But their gravity of purpose permeated every aspect of their lives. Just as the moons and fishes and suchlike on their curtains helped lift their spirits.”¹⁰ While he acknowledges the Other's un-spiritual, slightly ridiculous spirit-lifter, Ka's understanding of the world he left behind is that it is at a dead-end because of a destructive non-involvement in the present, maybe characteristic of all religious nations. As with the headscarf – a piece of cloth after all, which does not justify killings and revolution - the focus seems on transcendental significances that in a way impede significant, clarifying action. The radical character Blue considers Westerners naive representatives of evil.

God is seen as a provider of goods in a political structure: if God does not exist, do all the poor of the world suffer for nothing, is there no compensation for their suffering? The same weigh on the next world leads to a tendency to wallow in political immobility. Immobility is also explained by fear for one's life (paralleled in McEwan's novel as fear for one's comfort): “Those of us who were sitting at the back knew that something terrible had happened, but we were afraid that if we moved from our seats to get a better look, the terror would find us, so we just sat there watching, without making a sound.”¹¹ As in the Western novel, things happen on TV. The revolution is not in the street, but literally on stage – a transparent excuse for the subsequent military coup. The simulacrum type of experience

⁹Pamuk, 75

¹⁰Pamuk, 237

¹¹Pamuk, 162

(Baudrillard's simulacra) is further subject to *mis-en-abime* as the play is broadcast and then on again as a repeat. Action is out of place in these circumstances, so people with political agendas or free, amoral agents as Baxter can catch one off guard easily. Violence is used as a way of politically manipulating immobile people in the East, while in McEwan's novel it just happens as residue of a former, subconscious, truer in fact type of humanity.

The endings of the two novels are in accordance with the respective visions: the Western novel has a happy ending which includes reconciliation with a refreshed, more complete self; Pamuk's character gets entangled in the political confusion, betrays and is assassinated in Germany, after years, yet another anonymous immigrant dead for obscure political reasons. Ka says: „Life's not about principles, it's about happiness” and this seems to be the essential difference between the two worlds and here is his betrayal. Only it is clear that the truth is on neither side: between the immobility of the westerner afraid not to dent his perfect life and the easterners set on flaunting easy happiness, violence is a political instrument, a residual, but natural part of life and a challenge to immobility.

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