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George Orwell and Spike Milligan – Outsiders and Insiders of the British Empire

Abstract

What if the founding father of British radio comedy and the famous broadcaster and author of dystopian social criticism were brought together within one analysis? An aspect rarely considered when looking into the oeuvre of Spike Milligan is the sharp criticism of colonial rule present in his war memoirs. In a letter to his friend and fellow-humourist-to-be, Harry Secombe, there is a short, intriguing part that can be dated circa early 1943 which bears the designation: „S. S: Arcadia, Near Aden” and constitutes the first part of a series of five letters, all reminiscences about the North African coast. More often discussed and widely known is George Orwell's depiction of colonialism. A most thought-provoking exemplar of it being ‘Marrakech’, an essay first published in a collection entitled New Writing (1939). The correspondence and the short essay possess similar characteristics, so much so that their comparison seems to be a fertile ground for analysis. In my paper, I will venture to indicate that a colonial sensitivity similar in origin yet different in expression lies in the two writings whose authors happened to be both insider-born and outsider-bred subjects of the British Empire.

Keywords: colonialism; colonial sensitivity; George Orwell; Spike Milligan; Marrakech; Aden; outsider; insider; audience; narrator; WWII; British Empire; British; Britishness;

What if the founding father of British radio comedy and the famous broadcaster and author of dystopian social criticism were brought together within one analysis? An aspect rarely considered when looking into the oeuvre of Spike Milligan is the sharp criticism of colonial rule present in his war memoirs. In a letter to his friend and fellow-humourist-to-be, Harry Secombe, there is a short, intriguing part that can be dated circa early 1943 which bears the designation: „S. S: Arcadia, Near Aden” and constitutes the first part of a series of five

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1 Translator, Budapest – anna.koszeghy@gmail.com
2 Also known in his biographies as „Spike Milligna, the well-known typing error”.
3 The thrills of dating the letter will be addressed later.
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**The roots of the two authors**

They were born in British India: Terence Alan Milligan in Ahmednagar (1918), Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari (1903) and had the education of sons of officers of the Empire. Orwell’s father worked in the Opium Department of the Indian Civil Service, while Milligan’s was a bombardier of the British Royal Artillery posted to Poona in 1911. Thanks to this, Spike spent his childhood there and in Rangoon, capital of British Burma. „It was a beautiful childhood, I loved the gentle people“, he recalls.

First of all, let me bring forth some proof for an even more intricate connection between the two literary men than what their attitudes would initially suggest:

> I remember how the visitors used to come, and one in particular, Sergeant Blair. He used to come out on the bus every week or so, and would sit on our verandah. Father was a bit of an authority on roads and laws and customs by now and this Blair used to come quite often. He used to arrive on the bus from the town, and come walking up to our bungalow. ‘Hello, Milli,’ he’d call. ‘Are you there, Milli?’ I remember he always wore bush shirts, and he had very thin legs. I was always excited when he came and used to sit as close as I could listening to them talking, not wanting to be sent away. [...] He used to

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bring a big book of papers and, I think, his writings. My father would try to answer his questions and they talked about the police, and the army and India. I longed to join in, but knew I couldn’t.  

Quoted from Milligan’s first ever biography, this paragraph sheds light on the fact that a certain Sergeant Blair had often been a guest at the Milligan residence, and perhaps more relevantly to our topic, the young Spike was mesmerised by Blair’s writings, his views on India and opinions on authority. This latter intertwine is especially noteworthy as Blair served as police officer with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma from 1922–1927, and it is just as important to take note of the fact that he had resigned from this profession. As for the timeline, Spike’s family left India in 1933, which meant that Spike was at the ripe age of fifteen years old (at most) when being instilled by Orwellisms. Interestingly, the book Sergeant Blair had been working on at the time turned out to be *Burmese Days* and brought him acknowledgement as well as the penname George Orwell.

The first half of the poem, *India, India!* Milligan composed later, in maturity (though, according to his biographer Pauline Scudamore, „he never matured“) sheds light on a British colonialist upbringing where insider and outsider viewpoints are present and merged:

*India! India!*

*As a boy*
*I watched India through fresh Empirical eyes.  
Inside my young khaki head  
I grew not knowing any other world.*

*My father was a great warrior  
My mother was beautiful  
and never washed dishes,  
other people did that,  
I was only 4, I remember  
they cleaned my shoes,  
made my bed.  
‘Ither ow’  
‘Kom Kurrow…”*

Its careful wording would suggest untainted opinion, „fresh” eyes of a

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British person born in India. But this is false naivety. Despite the poem's childishness, he already has a „khaki head”, so any evidence he sees is perforce „Empirical”, however empirical. Thus, he is already an outsider.

**Backgrounds of the essays**

Following on from this line of similarity in thought, their immediate motive is also key: ‘Marrakech’ was composed during the spring of 1939 after Orwell journeyed south in the winter of 1938 for half a year, a pensive period of rest and recuperation, and started his novel *Coming Up for Air*. This essay became a sample for writing the novel. Milligan clarified his North African involvement in his diary some thirty years later: „I could never have afforded all this travel on my own. It had to be the hard way…”

Akin to *Aden*, ‘Marrakech’ consists of a series of disjointed passages, loosely related and highly personal experiences of the author wandering through the mystical Orient. Following Edward Said's theses in *Orientalism* as well as in *Culture and Imperialism*, British representations of colonial spaces and cultures are defined by a rhetoric of power, both physical and moral. I would argue that yet another parallel can be found in the two pieces: their writers act both as (insider) narrator and (outsider) audience. Strangely, insider-outsider positions are merged and intertwined in the colonial space, which creates hybridity, hybrid identity and hybrid positions.

More precisely, Orwell had been a chief social forecaster and broadcaster of interwar Morocco, whereas Milligan joined the British Army at the outbreak of the Second World War on the North African and Italian fronts, and found work in radio comedy afterwards as performer and script writer. Those turbulent years, remembering Winston Churchill's words, he modestly referred to as „hyper-activity on the beaches”

This insider-outsider presence can be found all throughout, not only as privileged subjects but also as distanced observers: Orwell resided in the outskirts of the city, whilst Milligan penned the drafts of his letters from aboard a ship. They both mapped out scenes of subjectly compliance, failure of the establishment, manifestations of extreme poverty and the plight of work.

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Welcome to the scene

Milligan had definitely developed an acute sense of poetic perception and awareness in humanity while serving in Aden and its environs as signaller of the 56th Heavy Regiment of the Royal Artillery, D Battery. As for the earlier suggested difficulty of dating his letter, it was definitely included in his first volume of poems, stories and drawings, A Dustbin of Milligan in the chapter Letters to Harry Secombe published in 1961. According to another letter written in 1977 to a certain Mr Steven Gard, found in The Spike Milligan Letters, Milligan dispels the myth he could have included Secombe in his war memoirs earlier than the fourth volume: „Then you are worried because as yet I have not mentioned my meeting with Secombe and later Sellers. I met Secombe in Italy, which will be in vol 4 [...] I'm sorry, I can't put back the clock to meet Secombe in 1941, to alleviate your disappointment.“ It is recorded that his Regiment embarked for North Africa in January 1943. The five letters are dated April, and in April 1944, they had already been in Europe. The same timeline is followed by Mártonfi in Portrayals of the British Army in the Second World War in Post-War Humour Shows. Thus, it seems very likely that his letters, among them Aden were drafted to his friend in the spring of 1943.

An illustrative first example of such awareness in humanity comes in the aftermath of their setting off – and although humanity is a much debated concept, by it, I understand solidarity, the recognition of basic human dignity, and an equality of rights of humans of any colour, nation or gender: „Harry and I got up early to enjoy the sight of Africa at first light. We saw it bathed in a translucent, pre-dawn, purple aura.“ With the same spirit, natural phenomena merged with colours appear poetically in Aden’s part I: „Around us is the Red Sea, a festering green sheet of unskimmed molten brass“ and part II: „the pendants of constellation Castor, Pollux, Andromeda all glitter in the velvet darkness, like old oily chips on boiled haddock.“ However with the latter, an undoubtedly poetic picture turns into grim reality. The closing lines of his correspondence nicely frame his letters, highlighting social injustice out on the decks: „What a beautiful morning it’s been out on deck. And it was
a beautiful morning on the bridge as well. [...] Only on the third class tourist class passengers’ deck was it a sultry overcast dull morning, but then if you do things on the cheap you must expect these things.“ All in all, before we would imagine that everything went smoothly within the territory of the Empire, we are confronted with its failures.

Audience and narrator

This attitude leads us to how they play the role of audience and narrator. It demands courage to write about sensitive subjects such as colonialism (especially as subjects of the British Empire). And although criticism of the establishment is obvious in both writings, it remains challenging to reconcile humanistic thoughts with the crude colonial scene. As a shield, Milligan uses bouleversement. Orwell, probably in the same spirit, uses detachment for a similar purpose. Whenever he gives descriptions, he does not forget to emphasise that he is „merely pointing to a fact” or facts. Of course, these facts are his facts – subjective detachments – and inasmuch as they are subjective, the subjectively described situation clamours for some liberation to be offered – which is not there, Orwell merely draws attention to phenomena. Thereby, his style provokes a disturbing feeling, a feeling of unrest. Perhaps this is why some critics are not entirely convinced he succeeds in retaining humanistic values. Orwell is standing out as a benevolent outsider in what seems to be an abandoned landscape, which is why his critics state that at least on a symbolic level, he does not allow the humanity of humans to unfold or even „denies the natives the right to be human.” Yet, I would argue that by doing what he does, by letting writing be as it is, he causes the reader to react with indignation and manages to focus on the problem without a magnifying glass. The often-mentioned invisibility of human beings is made visible when Orwell draws attention to their invisibility, stating: „[w]hen you walk through a town like this [...] it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings.”

The establishment

Following on from these points of view, observers, among them,

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24 ‘Marrakech’ in George Orwell, Such Such Were the Joys, Harcourt-Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1953. 121.
Edward Said, reckoned that “keeping the Orient selectively organized and disorganized, positions the West as the privileged observer that objectifies and governs Orientals for their own benefit.”25 Indeed, Orwell was looking at aspects of native life in an interwar Marrakech that was populated by a Muslim majority, a Jewish minority and a small group of Europeans at the time, the authority of whom was served by Senegalese soldiers when writing that “I tore off a piece and he [an Arab navvy] stowed it gratefully in some secret place under his rags. This man is an employee of the Municipality.” First of all, he clearly attributes responsibility of or at least connection to the extant rule, the imperial apparatus. Moreover, he renders visible the fact that even though these people do work and are part of the legal system, it is futile and insufficient on their part in the struggle for a living. Second, being a correspondent at the time was somewhat akin to acting as a human rights activist now: dangerous and divisive. What he did by drawing attention is magnifying the shortcomings of the Empire he was a part of.

Aden, depicted here on a contemporary hand-coloured photograph26, was captured by the British in January 1839 and remained an important British port until 1967, first run by the East India Company and then as a colony. It is worthy to remember that Milligan’s letter was published in 1961 when Aden had still been part of the British Empire. He illustrates the city with nonsensical phlegm mingled with disrespect: “At last I was to step on a part of the British Empire! Last time I was in Aden in 1933 it was just a dirty hot coaling station. Today it is just a dirty hot coaling station.”27 His critique of the British Empire is not restricted to Britain, his remarks shake the pillars of the British establishment at its very foundations. He snaps at British rule by first stating its existence, then its misery, praising the institution by its weaknesses while alluding to the failures of its canonised figures

26 As part of the exhibition ‘Buildings That Fill My Eye’: Architectural Heritage of Yemen. The postcards were principally aimed at British servicemen and passing steamship passengers. They show the almost brutal functionality of a modern port with piles of coal beside the piers and lighters bringing passengers ashore from the steamships anchored in the bay. Heavy military presence is implicit in the predominance of barracks and telecommunications infrastructure, showing the harbour and municipal buildings. Source: https://blog.britishmuseum.org/postcards-from-aden/ Accessed 15 January 2018.
(Admiral Nelson’s fall), shameful elements (disorganisation), all the while repeating the keyword British to associate it with tarnished reputation:

I got a lot of wonderful snaps of [...] British soldiers on guard outside the British barracks [...]. I shook hands with a friendly Arab... I still have my right hand to prove it! Nevertheless, everywhere are signs of organized British rule... all those happy fights in the café. [...] Those happy greetings that hang from every window: ‘Tommy go home’. [...] From the Yemen hills beyond came happy sounds of rifle fire.28

He presents the British Empire at its worst, and alluding to a drowning Englishman, he debunks another old myth relating to Britishness: „It’s homely fun like this that makes us the great seafaring people we are.”

To continue, following a heated evening of flamenco, he felt the urge to spring up and do the Palais Glide: „Who said we British didn’t have it in us?”29 But he did it naked. Strangely, this British dance could only be made visible to foreign eyes with the socially unacceptable act of nudity. Only nudity could stir up the still waters that were British values conveyed by the slow, conventional moves of the dance.

The plight of work

Another instance when both Orwell and Milligan render visible what they deem invisible at first is related to an already mentioned aspect of colonialism: the plight of work and its rewards. Said suggested that „the non-European known to Europeans is precisely what Orwell says about him. He is either a figure of fun, or an atom in a vast collectivity”30 The invisibility of working humans presented as a mass-phenomenon, in Orwell’s no-comment style broadcast is as follows: „All people who work with their hands are partly invisible, and the more important the work they do, the less visible they are. [...] But what is strange about these people is their invisibility. [...] though they had registered themselves on my eyeballs I cannot truly say that I had seen them.”31 Milligan’s report of a botched-up situation is somewhat different when travellers are forced to work: „All passengers [are] in the

sea helping push the ship off sandbank.”

This would seem a work done out of pure necessity until the punchline reveals an additional information, one that shocks us merely because of its agents and because we are used to observing the colonial scene as Orwell depicts it. “Unless the Orient was seen for what it was, its power — military, material, spiritual — would sooner or later overwhelm Europe. The great colonial empires, great systems of systematic repression, existed to fend off the feared eventuality [of a rebellion]. Colonial subjects, as George Orwell saw them in Marrakech in 1939, must not be seen except as a kind of continental HPDQDWLRQ$IULFDQ$VLDQ2ULHQWDO´

It becomes clear that the outsiders, the travellers are not doing their originally assigned higher tasks but a lowly one usually attributed to colonial subjects. By the time we imagine a common plight in which passengers and the crew are drawn together by one cause (pushing the ship off sandbank) we are to face the truth: „[a]ll the crew stand at the rails shouting encouragement.”

Spivak warns that „[t]he clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other.”

By making the invisible visible and contrasting the fate of working humans and working animals, Orwell further contradicts any indirect accusations of Said or Said’s followers that „writing is an act of denial of the Other, of erasure of the multiple possibilities of existence in favour of one unified and monolithic discourse.”

Orwell sheds light on the different reactions to the treatment of humans and animals, respectively:

I suppose I had not been five minutes on Moroccan soil before I noticed the overloading of the donkeys and was infuriated by it. There is no question that the donkeys are damnably treated. After a dozen years of devoted work it suddenly drops dead, whereupon its master tips it into the ditch and the village dogs have torn its guts out before it is cold. This kind of thing makes one’s blood boil, whereas — on the whole — the plight of the human beings does not. I am not commenting, merely pointing to a fact. People with brown skins are next door to invisible.

I would argue that these observations depict how much territory each living creature could occupy in a land that was defined by colonial terms. That is: colonial space. Their deaths are also similar: for deceased humans there is "[n]o gravestone, no name, no identifying mark of any kind. The burying-ground is merely a huge waste of hummocky earth, like a derelict building-lot."\(^{38}\)

A disturbingly similar scene is recounted in relation to the plight of workers by both the essay and the letter. The wealthier outsider steps in the midst of poor colonised subjects and is encircled at the sight of his possessions. "Instantly, from the dark holes all round, there was a frenzied rush of Jews, many of them old grandfathers with flowing grey beards, all clamouring for a cigarette. [...] None of these people, I suppose, works less than twelve hours a day, and every one of them looks on a cigarette as a more or less impossible luxury."\(^{39}\) Their contribution to the labour is duly noted, it is not left invisible. Yet, the writer remains an outsider and keeps silent about the role of the French colonial establishment. In turn, descending the gangplank in Aden, Milligan notices: "We hit the Arab caravan halting places. Everywhere there were miserable wretches moaning: 'Buckshees!'"\(^{40}\) Any reader would be quick to draw parallels with the Orwellian description until reading on: "they were all the tourist passengers off the ship",\(^{41}\) Milligan likes to refer to people as "all the" as if they were one universal entity. All in all, the moment humans are finally shown miserable, they are recognised and acknowledged. And they are perhaps recognised because, surprisingly, they do not belong to the colonised group.

I would like to end my analysis on a note given by the second and final stanza of Milligan’s *India, India!*, depicting, naming, thus making visible the moral stance of "other people", in contrast with those wearing the khaki uniforms of the British Empire.

...Yet, in time I found them gentler than the khaki people.
They smiled in their poverty
After dark, when the khaki people
were drunk in the mess
I could hear Minema and
her family praying in their godown.

In the bazaar the khaki men
are brawling.
No wonder they asked us to leave. 42

Conclusion

To summarise, this analysis ventured to bring together two pieces of writing that are different in form – a sociological essay and a correspondence – yet very similar in their subtle criticism of the colonial establishment. They did not wish to write fiction or glorify colonial rule. Orwell managed to unveil hitherto unseen aspects of this criticism by non-commenting on subjects that would otherwise crave for a comment. Thereby, I argued, he evoked indignation and made the invisible visible, whilst Milligan captured the readers’ attention by turning the state of affairs upside down, via the employment of war-forged, sarcastic humour. Finally, discussing the topics of the establishment and the plight of work, I aimed to show that Orwell and Milligan took on the role of both audience and narrator, born as insiders in British India but remaining outsiders during their observation of local colonial subjects.

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(Accessed: 15 January 2018)