

### Virginia Woolf & The Role of Gender Privilege In 1930s England

In Great Britain during the 1930's many writers and artists had a desire to improve the lives and living conditions of the average citizen through essay, novel, or pamphlet. Unemployment, horrid living conditions, and the rise of mass culture are just some of the topics mainstream, middle and upper class, writers engage with during this period. The problematic impact of privilege, whether relating to gender, wealth, education, or class upon the writing of F. R. Leavis and George Orwell requires further close examination. Other less privileged writers like Virginia Woolf offer viewpoints that give rise to the voices of the underprivileged, whether due to gender oppression or caste oppression. The supportive voices of Eric Gill and Storm Jameson accentuate and enrich the discussion.

Is there a distinctive political art in 1930's Great Britain? Upon a closer reading, two forms of narrative art seem to emerge from the time period. The first can be identified as, "the propaganda of privilege." Middle to upper class writers like F. R. Leavis and George Orwell offer insight into the lives of the British from a position of status. While both writers offer very valid points and use their art form to attempt to move the views of readers towards their own, it cannot be overlooked that there are complications with both writers. As already noted, both are writing from a privileged class and gender status. There are problematic issues with each writer's rhetorical style. Both Orwell and Leavis sincerely want to improve the lives of their fellow citizens. What becomes problematic for both writers is that very same common person's own voice being denied, translated via a privileged writer, or subjugated to a small whisper.

The other style of narrative art which comes out of 1930's Great Britain is what can be

referred to as, “the Intermodernist Other.” The Intermodernist period, the period between the World Wars, has allowed a refreshing amount of writers from outside the privileged, white, elitist, circles that Leavis and Orwell come from to be brought into the foreground. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Virginia Woolf are writing from an underprivileged status due to ethnicity and gender. Both writers offer keen insight into the lives of those they are arguing for. Their writing allows the voices of the underprivileged, the Untouchable in India in the case of Anand, in his novel *Untouchable*, and the women of Great Britain in the war against fascism for Woolf in her work *Three Guineas*.

In his 1930 pamphlet *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, F. R. Leavis argues that mass culture, the rise of broadcasting, and the automobile are causing a “crisis” in contemporary British culture (Leavis 18).<sup>1</sup> The minority culture that Leavis argues for in his pamphlet is not a call to raise the voices of the working class or underprivileged. Leavis argues that a, “very small minority” are who should be depended on for the appreciation of art and literature (17). The artist, Leavis argues, via a quote from British literary critic I. A. Richards, is, “the man who is most likely to have experiences of value to record” (qtd in Leavis 18). He places blame for the so-called crisis that culture is in primarily on the rise of radio broadcasting. Leavis not only believes a small minority has and should have experiences of value, he also seems to want to deny any medium that allows culture to pass off to the masses. In reply to those who argue for the merits of radio broadcasting due to the, “good music broadcasted and intelligent lectures” they have heard, Leavis claims broadcasting encourages passive listening and thinking (21).

Leavis writes that another duty minority culture has is to uphold the best parts of the past

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<sup>1</sup> Leavis' spelling of Civilisation.

human experience. Until the reassessment and inclusion of othered writers in the past few decades by academics in a variety of fields including Feminism, Cultural Studies, and Queer Studies, the “past human experience” is going to be filled with white, upper class, male writers writing about only the issues they deem important. At the conclusion of his argument, Leavis argues that the mass culture will, “surrender(s) everything that can interest us” (22). The access of “intelligent lectures” to the masses will allow for more citizens of Great Britain to become enlightened and engaged. Leavis is correct about one thing: trying to stop the masses from having greater access is a “futile” exercise (22). He is a relic of a past that only supported the elite.

On the contrary, other writers in 1930's Great Britain of privileged status do engage with the mass culture, but do not allow their voices to rise any louder than a whisper. In his book about working class coal miners, *The Road To Wigan Pier*, George Orwell offers a compelling look at the lives of the working class in Intermodernist Great Britain. His documentation of their lives is very moving and offers the reader a firsthand account of the horrors of living in working class Great Britain during the period. Orwell's writing, nevertheless, becomes problematic upon closer examination. Orwell should be commended for his effort to get a firsthand account of the lives of the working class coal miners. As he notes in the early stages of *The Road To Wigan Pier*, one, “can never forget that spectacle once you have seen it” (Orwell 23). Numerous times in the text he makes similar comments about the importance of experiencing the worker's lives alongside them. However, his descriptions become problematic due to the lack of firsthand accounts from the actual workers. It is rare in *The Road To Wigan Pier* to hear the voices of the

workers, their families, or friends in their own words.

Much like Modernist psychiatrist Sigmund Freud and his writing about Ida Bauer, Orwell takes a significantly othered person or persons and makes their harrowing experiences all about his experiences and reactions to them. Orwell's fascination with what *he* is experiencing for the first time is what Storm Jameson writes about in her essay *New Documents*. There is little argument, as noted above, that Orwell's impulse to find out firsthand what is happening in Wigan Pier is, as Jameson argues, “decent and defensible” (Jameson 313). Jameson continues, however, that socialist writers such as Orwell cannot make their new experiences the focus of their work:

Too much of his energy runs away in an intense interest in and curiosity about his feelings. 'What things I am seeing for the first time! What smells I am enduring!...The first thing a socialist writer has to realize is that there is no value in the emotions, the spiritual writhings, started in him by the sight, smell, and touch of poverty...There is no need to record them. Let him go and pour them down the drain. (313)

Orwell's report from Wigan Pier is too hung up on his own experiences while there. For *The Road To Wigan Pier* to have more of a persuasive effect on its readers, the experiences of those in Wigan Pier need to be brought to the front and emphasized. Orwell should have gone to Wigan Pier for, as Jameson puts it, “the sake of fact,” and then allowed the voices of those living there to come to the surface.

Orwell has numerous chances during *The Road To Wigan Pier* to offer insight from those

experiencing Wigan Pier to add their voice, but nearly every time the opportunity is missed. A bit later in the text he offers a harrowing anecdote regarding mistruths about the rate of pay coal miners receive. After a few pages of statistics and commentary, instead of passing along an anecdote or quote directly from one of the miners, he uses a quote from Joseph Jones, the mayor of Barnsley in Yorkshire. At this point, is it at all a surprise even that a privileged writer, this so-called socialist, would go directly to a person of power in the local government instead of the people? Right before another page of statistics, Orwell discusses the effects of unemployment on the working class. He should be praised for noting that the only people, for the most part, who are listed in unemployment statistics are the heads of home:

This is an enormous under-estimate, because, in the first place, the only people shown on unemployment figures are those actually drawing the dole---that is, in general, heads of families. An unemployed mans dependents do not figure on the list unless they too are drawing a separate allowance. A Labor Exchange officer told me that to get at the real number of people living on (not drawing) the dole, you have got to multiply the official figures by something over three. (74)

Orwell should not be faulted for using an “expert” to back up his findings. Obviously, a Labor Exchange officer is going to know the important statistics needed to backup his argument.

While that can be commended, again, Orwell leaves out the thoughts of an important figure in all of this: the actual people living on the dole! This would be a very appropriate time for the thoughts of the working class of Wigan Pier to come alive on the page. Personally, a firsthand account from one of the living who is not counted as part of the official unemployment list

seems like a perfect fit here. How does that make her feel? Is it troubling to know, as a female, you are not properly counted? A few personal quotes alongside Orwell's thoughts would have worked magnificently.

As Jameson argues, Orwell's desire to go to Wigan Pier firsthand is commendable, but his approach in writing *The Road To Wigan Pier* could be better. F. R. Leavis seems to not even have a desire for the working class to have the whisper that Orwell graciously allows them. Others during this period in Great Britain, others who are from underprivileged groups, are raising their voices despite people like Orwell and Leavis. Female and Indian writers like Virginia Woolf and Mulk Raj Anand offer minority viewpoints and give a voice to the Other in 1930's Great Britain.

In his introduction to the 1930's anthology *History In Our Hands*, Patrick Deane agrees that women are “noticeably silent” in *The Road To Wigan Pier* (Deane 9). With Orwell not offering the voices of the women he is describing the turn must be made towards a writer like Virginia Woolf, whose essay *Three Guineas* offers an alternative voice for the women of the period, especially in light of their muzzling by Orwell. As Deane notes in his introduction to the excerpt from *Three Guineas* in *History In Our Hands*, women in 1930's Great Britain, “have more in common with subject peoples elsewhere in the world than with the male establishment in their own country” (264). Woolf asks, “what does 'our country' mean to me as an outsider?” (Woolf 266) This raises a very interesting point. If women are not included in unemployment rolls, are not offered a voice in *The Road To Wigan Pier*, and are denied access to intelligent lectures on radio broadcasts by Leavis, what exactly is their standing in society? Worse than the

translating of voice that Orwell is guilty of is the complete annihilation of voice. Woolf continues by arguing for the complete indifference of women in regards to the late 1930's anti-war movement in Great Britain because, due to the inequality of gender, it is not truly her country:

““Our country,”” she will say, ‘throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions. “Our” country still ceases to be mine if I marry a foreigner...For,’ the outsider will say, ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world. (266-267)

With the examples given of how Orwell reduces women's voice and, arguably, silences them completely, plus Leavis' desire to not even give those without privilege access, Woolf's argument seems even more valid. Obviously, nevertheless, society cannot be expected to eradicate every social injustice all at once, in the span of one day. That does not validate or excuse problematic writing like *The Road To Wigan Pier*. Woolf offers a solution for the exclusion of women from unemployment rolls. Motherhood and domestic work, Woolf argues, should be a paid position that would “lighten” what their husbands have to bear (269).

Woolf refers precisely to what the men have to bear as “slavery” (269). Eric Gill, in *Art & The People*, argues that slavery in the 1930's is multifaceted:

The slave, however economically bound, remains a responsible workman. He cannot do otherwise...Slavery has existed in all periods of human history, but no slavery has been so absolute as that of our own time, because no previous slavery

has been operative at the same time in both the economic and intellectual spheres.

(358)

To become free, the voice of the underprivileged must be higher than a whisper. In his novel *Untouchable*, Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand gives a voice to the lowest of the low in Indian society: the Untouchable. The Untouchable in India feels a similar slavery, arguably “worse than a slave,” that Gill talks about above (Forster VI). Instead of writing about his own experiences as an outsider of privilege, Anand uses fiction to offer a first person account of the sad and disturbing experience an untouchable encounters during their daily life. Bakha, the protagonist of *Untouchable* offers an account of the life of an Untouchable that reveals much more about their lives than Orwell's self important writing about the coal miners of Wigan Pier. The grim reality of the Untouchable life can be summarized by the abuse Bakha endures for even touching someone from a superior caste, who tells him “I will have to bath now and purify myself anyhow. Well, take this for your damned irresponsibility, you son of a swine” (50)! If a critic ever tried to argue that Orwell is the one writing fiction and Anand the one writing non-fiction, one might be hard pressed to find error in the argument. Anand is able to bring the horrors of living as an Untouchable to life in a way which moves the reader to want to take action. For an Untouchable is thought of so lowly in Indian society, as Bakha observes, “they would ill treat us even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt” (79).

Anand is not an Untouchable himself, but is perfect for writing about them. E.M. Forster writes in the preface to *Untouchable* that the novel “could only have been written by an Indian

and by an Indian who observed from the outside” (Forster VI). The important difference here between Anand and Orwell is that by being Indian, and the subject of the great British Empire, Anand is already an other. Anand is already an outsider who, due to his status, is better able to write about the plight of the Untouchable than someone with Orwell's class status writing about working class coal miners in *Wigan Pier*.

While all of these differing approaches to 1930's propaganda have elements that are compelling, the writing and experiences of the underprivileged are clearly more attractive and persuasive. Virginia Woolf has experienced what it feels like to not have a voice, not have a country, to not belong. George Orwell can try to document his experiences in *Wigan Pier*, but as a member of the ruling, privileged, class his account does not have the qualities that Woolf's and Anand's accounts contain. F. R. Leavis' denial of mass culture and radio broadcasting makes him seem very conservative and unattractive. Why does he think it is so dangerous for the masses to have access to “intelligent lectures?” The study *Britain By Mass Observation*, argues that the masses desire facts in, “a form that suits the times we live in” (Mass Observation 292). Based on the observations George Orwell offers about the lives of coal miners in *The Road To Wigan Pier*, the working class lacks the leisure time necessary to enjoy culture. *Britain By Mass Observation* agrees:

Books are expensive to buy and not always available in libraries. The language they are written in is often difficult to understand. Often, too, there just isn't time or energy left at the end of a hard-working day for going back to school, as it were, and being lectured by some writer who obviously moves in a world of ideas

quite different from one's own. (292)

What gives Leavis the right to try to deny the masses the ability to gather “facts” on their own time and in a comfortable manner? Propaganda which does not go directly to the underprivileged source is not very persuasive. As a reader, hearing the voices of Woolf and Anand, who are actually living under the Empire and are not translating voices of the underprivileged like Orwell does, is much more pleasurable. The denial of the power of mass culture and the voices of the working class is just an excuse for the ruling parties, no matter how radical they want to seem, to hide behind empire and only allow the poor, working class, and female members of the British Empire to gain a voice on the terms of the privileged. This is unacceptable in 2011 and just as unacceptable in Intermodernist Great Britain.

The significance of the inclusion of underprivileged outsiders like Anand and Woolf into the discussion of 1930's British writing is necessary and, frankly, absolutely thrilling. So are the supportive voices of Gill and Jameson. Despite the heavy tone of critique towards Leavis and Orwell here, they are also important voices in coming to an understanding of Intermodernism and the time period. Even if a reader does not enjoy or find their work moving, their status as privileged members of the British Empire should make one more conscious of the need to bring the voices of writers like Woolf, Anand, and studies like *From Britain By Mass Observation* to the top of the between war canon. The problematic nature of Leavis and Orwell only highlight what is so great about the others.

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