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ORWELL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: *The Road to Wigan Pier*: OUTSIDER LOOKING IN

In 1936 the Left Book Club commissioned George Orwell to "write on the depressed areas of North England" (*The Road to Wigan Pier* xiii). In the hands of a different author, such a task would have provided an opportunity to earn some money and perhaps display to readers the appalling conditions in the north. Orwell however, used the work to examine not only these conditions, but also his own identity.

Orwell wrote three non-fictional narratives; *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Homage to Catalonia*, each of which are outstanding works of reportage and remain valuable records of lower-class society during the 1930s. Orwell's habit of attempting to live the life of his subjects however, means these works are also acts of autobiography that allow the reader great insight into his personality. *The Road to Wigan Pier* is also unique among the three for the explicit autobiographical detail Orwell includes.

Orwell opens the narrative with a description of his stay in a Wigan "tripe shop" run by the "Brookers," that doubled as a lodging house. He describes appalling conditions; the bedroom that he shared with three others "in the morning ... stank like a ferret's cage" (4). Orwell describes Mrs Brooker, whose "only real trouble was overeating," as having "a big, pale yellow, anxious face" (5). Her husband is depicted equally grotesquely: "dark, small-boned, sour, Irish-looking ... and astonishingly dirty" (5). Their various habits, such as Mrs Brooker "tearing off strips of newspaper" (13) to wipe her mouth, or Mr Brooker handing Orwell a slice of bread "with a black thumb print on it," (6) do nothing to endear them to the reader. After revealing that he saw a "full chamber pot under the breakfast table" (14) Orwell quits the lodging house, remarking that the Brookers' other habit of endlessly repeating themselves, "[gave] you the feeling that they are not real people at all" (14). This is because, in reality, they were not.

Whilst travelling through the north gathering information for *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell kept a diary. This diary, written on an almost daily basis, does record Orwell spending time at a tripe shop, yet in the diary the "Forrests," not the "Brookers," run it. In this house, he similarly shares a bedroom with three others, notices breadcrumbs from breakfast still on the table at dinner, and discovers a chamber pot underneath the table (*A Kind of Compulsion* 432).

The Brookers however, are not exact imitations of the Forrests. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Mr Brooker is shown doing most of the housework, while Mrs Brooker "seldom rose from her sofa in the kitchen" (9). In the diary however, it is Forrest's wife and daughter-in-law who "do practically the whole work of the house and shop" (427). These and other distortions of fact have lead Robert Pearce to suggest that "several portions of Part I should be considered little more than fiction" (413).

This decision to omit scenes of his time spent in surroundings more comfortable than the Brookers' however, exhibits Orwell's desire to impress on the reader the worst conditions of the north. His description of the Brookers' house as "fairly normal as lodging-houses in industrial areas go" (13) despite it being, according to Bernard Crick, among the worst in all of Wigan (184), also displays a great propaganda skill. Similar to advertisements for the power of a particular washing powder showing it cleaning the dirtiest of garments, Orwell here condemns the evils of the political system of the time by showing the dirtiest living quarters. As propaganda, it is particularly effective. The opening passage of the narrative is a wonderful beginning that exhibits great novelistic skill:

The first sound in the mornings was the clumping of the mill-girls' clogs down the cobbled street. Earlier than that, I suppose, there were factory whistles which I was never awake to hear. (3)

The setting appears quite idyllic; waking to hear girls walking down the street, the mention of unheard factory whistles as though their sound hangs in the air like a sweet remembrance. The next sentence however, starkly intrudes on this picturesque setting; "There were generally four of us in the bedroom, and a beastly place it was" (3). The description of the Brookers' lodging house that follows, complete with black-beetles swarming about the larder of tripe, is a veritable litany of evils of the political system, highlighted all the more by its juxtaposition against the opening sentence.

Those who read *The Road to Wigan Pier* as a historical document, should view it as a historical piece of leftist propaganda. Orwell's intention was not to write history, but to further the cause of Socialism within England. That the narrative's accuracy was questioned only after publication of the diary highlights Orwell's propagandist skill. Few, for example, could read the second chapter of *The Road to Wigan Pier* without agreeing with his sentiments that:

... all of us really owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel. (31)

The propaganda aspect however, only half explains his manipulation of facts. Though the purpose of this work differs from the earlier *Down and Out in Paris and London* and the later *Homage to Catalonia*, where the purposes are more to inform than convert, *The Road to Wigan Pier* remains above all Orwell's journey.

It is not surprising, given Orwell's history, that having been commissioned to write of the poor in the north of England, he would choose to experience those conditions first-hand. His decision however, to write what he saw, through his own eyes, where he is the active participant, cannot be explained by his desire to win over readers to the socialist cause. His trip down a mine is a prime example, with Orwell stepping outside the narrative to describe his own physical unease:

I am handicapped by being exceptionally tall ... You have got to bend double, you have also got to keep your head up all the while so as to see the beams and girders and dodge them when they come ... After half a mile it becomes (I am not exaggerating) an unbearable agony. (23)

Thus not only have we the astonishing description of work underneath the earth in conditions that are Orwell's "own mental picture of hell" (18), but also Orwell's personal experience in the mine. He constantly compares himself to the miner: "your guide is sympathetic. He knows that your muscles are not the same as his" (24). Orwell also compares his life to that of the miners':

I am not a manual labourer and please God I never shall be one, but there are some kinds of manual work that I could do. At a pinch I could be a tolerable road-sweeper or an inefficient gardener or even a tenth rate farm hand. But by no conceivable amount of effort or training could I become a coal-miner; the work would kill me in a few weeks. (29)

The passage reveals both Orwell's middle-class upbringing, and an ability to be candid about his limitations. A lesser writer would conjecture that perhaps had they grown up in the right circumstances (as a miner) they could possibly have coped. Orwell however, dismisses such thoughts completely and remarks on his time in the mine that:

... it raises in you a momentary doubt about your own status as an "intellectual" and a superior person generally. For it is brought home to you, at least while you are watching, that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. (30)

Such comments sharply reveal Orwell's background. He acknowledges his "superiority" is dependent on the miners' work, but he "remain[s] superior."

Indeed Orwell's attitude towards those he meets throughout the narrative reveals much about his own attitude and upbringing. Orwell is ever the outsider looking in, and often seemingly looking down.

In Part II of the work, he writes of having "got rid of [his] class-prejudice, or part of it," (134) yet Orwell's attitude towards those he meets reveals an almost sub-conscious prejudice that lingers despite his best efforts. The very act of going north to report on the poor as though they were subjects in a social experiment, smacks of superiority. Orwell realises this distasteful aspect when he writes of inspecting homes:

Everyone was astonishingly patient and seemed to understand almost without explanation why I was questioning them and what I wanted to see. If any unauthorised person walked into my house and began asking me whether my roof leaked and whether I was much troubled by bugs and what I thought of my landlord, I should probably tell him to go to hell. (68)

The concluding sentiment would strike a chord with all readers. The focus of his own questioning however reveals Orwell's specific purpose. He appears more concerned with viewing the conditions of the north, than the poor themselves. Despite the time he spends living with miners and pensioners, we get little more than brief portraits of those whom he considers typical. When Orwell does attempt to show understanding of their position and feelings, he does not report their own words, but his own conjectures. When riding on a train from Wigan he sighs:

... a young woman ... kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe ... I had time to see everything about her—her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold ... She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye ... it wore the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen ... what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain pipe. (15)

Despite Orwell's ability to present such a moving and vivid scene, the passage is problematic. It seems doubtful that Orwell gathered all this from a momentary glimpse of a girl from a train, and indeed his diary reveals he did not actually see the girl from a train, but while "passing up a squalid side-alley." He writes in the diary:

... I thought how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling in the gutter in a back alley in Wigan ... At that moment she looked up and caught my eye, and her expression was as desolate as I have ever seen; it struck me that she was thinking just the same thing as I was. (*A Kind of Compulsion* 427)

Why Orwell changed the setting is unknown, for the scene is as powerful in the diary as in the published version. Writing that he saw her while leaving Wigan, does however, paint a bleak picture that gives the story greater resonance. Left in the original setting, the question of why Orwell did not approach the girl and talk to her, would also occur. The diary records no conversation between the two, thus leaving only Orwell's conjectures on her thoughts. It is truly disappointing that he did not bother to discover what they actually were. The published form of the encounter however, is a bitter symbol of Orwell's detachment. Sitting comfortably in the train Orwell can see "everything about" (15) the girl, yet they are separated by the glass, unable to converse, just as Orwell is separated from the Brookers and the miners of Yorkshire by his upbringing. Many have viewed Orwell's comments in this work as snobbish (Crick 183) however to do so is to ignore the larger context of Orwell's writing. Orwell strives for equality with the working-class people of Wigan, yet this scene displays how insurmountable is the barrier between himself and them. From throwaway remarks about the lower classes during his childhood, to explicit comments on whom he could associate with and whom to avoid, Orwell has had to overcome a lifetime of in-built prejudice. The picture of Orwell looking out of the train at the girl and "row after row of little grey slum houses" (15) is moving because of the plight of the girl, but, more importantly, because the reader understands, as does Orwell himself, that he has not achieved connection with the people of Wigan.

Despite the vivid depictions of squalor in the homes and the crushing difficulty of working in a mine, the importance of Orwell's inability to achieve connection highlights that this is his story. The beginning of Part II reveals this clearly as he writes: "[t]he road from Mandalay to Wigan is a long one and the reasons for taking it are not immediately clear" (113). In this second half, containing the most distinct autobiographical writing he would ever attempt, we discover that the crucial aspect of the work is not Wigan (or its non-existent pier), but that Orwell himself has ventured along a metaphorical road, one that has taken him from snobbish child to socialist author. Throughout Part II Orwell is actually no longer venturing through Yorkshire, but "writing in front of [his] comfortable coal fire" (29). From this position he concerns himself with the question of whether it is "ever possible to be really intimate with the working class?" (106). To answer this, he decides to trace his steps from the age when he was "an odious little snob" (128).

As befitting an apostle of Socialism, Orwell is obsessed with questions of class. Writing of his own life, he states: "I was very young, not much more than six, when I first became aware of class-distinctions" (117). Not coincidentally this is the same age he "knew" he would become an author ("Why I Write" 1). He also recounts reaching the age when he "was forbidden to play with the

plumber's children; they were common" (117). Orwell acknowledges that this was "snobbish" but "necessary, for middle-class people cannot afford to let their children grow up with vulgar accents" (117). He recalls his youthful meetings with the "lower class" by stating: "*the lower classes smell*" (119). Clearly, this is not his adult opinion, but it supports his argument on the difficulty of engendering complete equality throughout English society. "However well you may wish him," Orwell writes, "however much you may admire his mind and character, if his breath stinks he is horrible and in your heart of hearts you will hate him." (119)

Such accentuated snobbishness almost overpowers the text. Orwell realizes this however, and acknowledges he will "be accused of being behind the times" (122). He claims that the snobbishness infecting the middle-class "derives from the early training in which a middle-class child is taught almost simultaneously to wash his neck, to be ready to die for his country, and to despise the 'lower classes'" (123). Orwell records such matters not through pride of his upbringing, but disgust. This training of young English middle-class boys and girls, in Orwell's opinion, leads directly to the imperialism he hates so completely. This also leads to what Orwell believes is the greatest barrier to a strong Socialist movement in England; that being a middle-class socialist requires you to "abolish a part of yourself" (149). This narrative, and his other non-fictional works, are ultimately attempts to display to all, that the middle-class Eton boy was free of class-prejudice, and had "abolished" that part of himself.

In Part II, Orwell also turns to the subject of Burma¹ and his hatred of imperialism, writing: "in order to hate imperialism you have got to be a part of it" (134). He describes his feelings of guilt after Burma:

For five years I had been part of an oppressive system, and it had left me with a bad conscience. Innumerable remembered faces—faces of prisoners in the dock, of men waiting in the condemned cells, of subordinates I had bullied and aged peasants I had snubbed, of servants and coolies I had hit with my fist in moments of rage (nearly everyone does these things in the East, at any rate occasionally: orientals can be very provoking)—haunted me intolerably. I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. (138)

Regardless of his shamefaced justification of hitting the servants, Orwell is exceptionally honest. He couches the descriptions of his upbringing in terms full of self-loathing and belittles his attempts, as recorded in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, to relieve the guilt of Burma through mixing with the poor "Unfortunately you do not solve the class problem by making friends with tramps," he despondently writes, "At most you get rid of some of your own class-prejudice by doing so" (143).

The initial purpose of *The Road to Wigan Pier* was to investigate the conditions of the unemployed in northern England. As the years pass however, and those conditions fade into history, *The Road to Wigan Pier* retains its relevance, not through Orwell's specific writing of Wigan, but the indirect influence the conditions have in revealing his identity. The initial focus was Wigan, now it is "the road" that holds the paramount interest. The point that emerges from the work is that Orwell was not merely intent on detailing the Wigan slums or the backbreaking work of the miner, but also on answering his question, of "if it is ever possible to be really intimate with the working-class?" (107). This subtle slant on the original intention allows Orwell to examine his own life. He writes of being disconcerted that the miners and others in the north address him as "sir" (145), and that members of his class have little comprehension of the working-class life. *The Road to Wigan Pier* is an earnest attempt to redress this situation. Orwell's manner of placing himself as the central protagonist causes the narrative to remain a work of autobiography, long after the Socialist propaganda has dated. It reveals a man ashamed of his upbringing, who wishes to announce he now lives according to different principles. The images that remain indelible are Orwell down the mine struggling with his height, Orwell seeing the chamber-pot underneath the dining table, Orwell in the train looking at the girl with the most hopeless expression. The numerous pay slips and floor measurements he uses to describe the life of the poor, are soon forgotten. The enduring picture is one of atrocious living conditions, in the midst of which, is Orwell the guilty middle-class writer, haranguing the men and women of England to "abolish part of themselves," join the struggle, and fight for a better, more just society.

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Endnotes

1. Orwell served in Burma as a member of the Indian Imperial Police, from 1922–1927.