

# ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE WORKING-CLASS

Documentary literature of 1930s Britain

by

Timothy Grgec

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## Abstract

Bookmarked neatly by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the 1930s are often characterised as the decade in which writers felt compelled to engage in politics. According to one predominant critical narrative, modernist subjectivity and notions of aesthetic autonomy were eschewed in favour of a more direct involvement with the social and political realities of the time. This thesis explores, and follows in part, this interpretation of the decade's literary direction by examining British documentary literature and its engagement with the social distress of the Depression.

Driven by an intense fascination with the domestic working-classes (from which each of my professional “authors” remained outsiders), documentary writers journeyed to Britain's industrial centres to experience working conditions directly. Writers of documentary literature took 1930s realist preoccupations to their most extreme by assuming the role, intentionally or not, of the anthropologist. Paradoxically, this move towards the empirical functioned as a means of crossing what C. P. Snow would later describe as the divide between the “two cultures” of science and arts. I apply Snow's notion analogously, with documentary literature representing a bridging (depending on each text) of the divides between social science and literature, realism and modernism, political commitment and aesthetic autonomy, North and South, and between the working and middle-classes.

My first chapter discusses Priestley's *English Journey* (1934), which while crossing class and geographical divisions, stylistically remains the most conservative of my chosen texts and offers the most moderate example of a generic cultural crossing. The second chapter explores *Grey Children* (1937) by James Hanley, whose journalistic arrangement of verbatim working-class voices develops a modernist aesthetic. I then move to Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), which unusually for a text by a “literary” author includes extensive figures and statistics, but is more successful in documenting the gritty realities of working life through literary means. The

final chapter centres on Mass-Observation's *The Pub and the People* (1943) whose obsessive recording of even the most minute details of pub life develops into a bizarre, almost surrealist work of literature. The order of my four chosen texts does not imply a sense of literary value but rather traces a trajectory from the least to the most radical experiments in documentary literature.

## Introduction

From the safety of New York, W. H. Auden's speaker in "September 1, 1939" observes the Nazi invasion of Poland as the inevitable culmination of a decade in crisis:

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade. (1-5)

Auden speaks for his generation, capturing the sense of regret shared by so many British middle-class writers failing to comprehend the world's uncertainty. Wyndham Lewis' *Tarr* (1918) and T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) suggest that this disillusionment towards world affairs had been developing for some time. However, by the 1930s, the crisis of belief defined Britain's literary landscape. It was a decade of economic depression, unprecedented social distress and political instability. In his 1950 autobiography *World Within World*, Stephen Spender reflects on the extraordinary historical conditions that beset him and his contemporaries: "From 1931 onwards, in common with many other people, I felt hounded by external events. The 1930s were a perpetual state of emergency for those aware that there was an emergency" (137). The "emergency" Spender writes of, a state of fatalistic suspense, presented an entirely new situation in which writers were to operate. Contemporary political exigencies forced writers to take moral and ideological positions on the events of the outside world, in part contributing to the common assumption that this was the decade in which writers "turned to politics"<sup>1</sup>. According to Kermode, this assumption transfigured into "myth":

Some writers of the time – some of the best writers of the time – were induced

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell was the first to coin this phrase in his essay "Inside the Whale". For a general overview of this phenomenon in 1930s literature, see Valentine Cunningham, John Baxendale and Christopher Pawling, Samuel Hynes, Frank Kermode, and Andy Croft.

by [the decade's] unfamiliar political pressures to write against their own bents. Uneasily allured by Communism, they professed a fatal interest in unemployment, the Spanish Civil War, the death throes of capitalism, the imminence of revolution, and of world conflict. (5)

Political commitment proved a common response to these crises, typically by adopting leftist orthodoxies in opposition to the rise of fascism abroad, or by sympathising with the working-classes at home. My thesis will examine a particular aspect of the latter, arguing that documentary literature, in its direct investigative contact with the working-classes, was a form in which writers confronted the decade's ideological exigencies.

“Of course a novelist is not obliged to write directly about contemporary history”, explains George Orwell in his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale”, “but a novelist who simply disregards the major public events of the moment is generally either a footler or an idiot” (494). This desire for political commitment was felt by Auden some years earlier before his departure to the Spanish Civil War. He writes to his friend E. R. Dodds: “I am not one of those who believes that poetry need or ever should be directly political, but in a critical period such as ours, I do believe that the poet must have direct knowledge of the major political events” (Carpenter 207). Both Orwell, the novelist, and Auden, the poet, came to a similar understanding: that the writer holds a moral responsibility to apprehend, and respond to, the politics of the time.

Orwell's essay greatly contributed to the establishment of the 1930s “myth”. The high modernism of the previous decade, a “twilight of the gods”, he claimed, had made way to “a sort of Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing”:

The typical literary man ceases to be a cultured expatriate with a leaning towards the Church, and becomes an eager-minded schoolboy with a leaning towards Communism. If the keynote of the writers of the 'twenties is 'tragic sense of life', the keynote of the new writers is 'serious purpose'. (510)



Middle-class writers, as typified by the Auden group, were acutely aware of their privileged class positions and favoured to some extent a kind of writing focused on subject matter rather than artistic technique. Hynes explains the resulting aesthetic shift as “a kind of writing that would be affective, immediate and concerned with ideas, moral not aesthetic in its central intention, and organised by that intention rather than by its correspondence to the observed world” (13).

Woolf’s “The Leaning Tower” further contributes to the 1930s mythologisation. Like Orwell, Woolf acknowledges the inescapable political urgency that plagued the generation of ‘thirties writers. She argues that her 1920s contemporaries enjoyed the Edwardian security of “settled” class divisions, a world that ultimately allowed high modernism to evade historical disorder (165). The next generation of writers, however, were forced to confront the politics of class. For Woolf, it was not until the 1930s that writers became aware of their privilege, adopting a belief that “it was wrong for a small class of people to possess an education that other people paid for; wrong to stand upon the gold that a bourgeois father had made from a bourgeois profession” (172). The tower of privilege began to lean, to use Woolf’s simile, as they became aware of it:

Directly we feel that when a tower leans, we become acutely conscious that  
we are upon a tower. All those writers too are acutely tower conscious;  
conscious of their middle-class birth; of their expensive educations. (171)

Modernist preoccupations with aesthetic autonomy and personal consciousness felt like an exclusive middle-class preserve. 1930s writers, then, wished to escape these modernist aspects – with all their implications of bourgeois elitism – through politically committed art which might influence the unfolding historical processes. It was through this “voice” of political engagement, Auden hoped in “September 1, 1939”, that writers could “undo the folded lie” (78-79).

Modernism, it seemed, had failed to engage with the political reality of the outside world. It was through a more actively politicised aesthetic that writers would forgo their privileged positions atop Woolf’s Leaning Tower and “be down on the ground with the mass of human kind” (176).

While the characterisation of the 1930s as the decade in which writers “turned to politics” is

something of an oversimplification, the climate of political urgency cannot be neglected. My thesis does not aim to counter this characterisation, but instead will explore documentary literature as a form in which writers responded to a particular aspect of political crisis, the effects of the Depression and mass unemployment in Britain's industrial centres. It will also explore the manner in which, paradoxically, this literary turn towards a more objective reality was a bridging of the cultural divide between literature and social science.

Cunningham describes the phenomenon of Britain's intelligentsia developing a sympathy towards the working-classes as "Going Over". This sympathy, he claims, drove a "widespread feeling among 'thirties authors of being travellers, on the road, making some literal or metaphorical journey" to the side of the worker and socialist cause (211). Spender explains in his 1937 essay "Poetry" that the attraction of socialism lay in its concern "with the morals of political justice" and its "far profounder grasp of the political and economic problems" of the time (19-20). A developing concern for the worker can also be seen in part as the impetus behind the rise in sociological reportage and surveys of the 1930s concerning working-class conditions.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, according to Wilson, "Going Over" meant "an active fostering of new working-class talent, something which, along with wider social changes, enabled many more writers for the working class to publish in this decade than in previous generations" (93). The 1930s saw an emergence of literary journals and magazines like *Left Review*, *The Adelphi*, *Fact*, and *New Writing*, eager to publish working-class writers. Ferrall attributes this "renaissance of working class writing" partly to "the fact that by the 1930s a second generation of working class readers and writers had emerged since the Education Act of 1870" and also as a consequence of the social

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<sup>2</sup> The period saw much sociological report concerned with the working-classes. D Caradog Jones' *The Social Survey of Merseyside* (1934) survey followed in the tradition of Charles Booth, with trained observers investigating the effects of poverty, and possible solutions and reform; Seebohm Rowntree's *Poverty and Progress* (1941) offered a detailed inquiry into the social and economic conditions of York's working classes in 1935; there were studies in nutrition such as John Boyd Orr's *Food, Health and Income* (1936); examinations of unemployment such as William Temple's *Men Without Work: A Report Made to the Pilgrim Trust* (1938), and H. L. Beales and R. S. Lambert's *Memoirs of the Unemployed* (1934); and radio broadcasts such as the British Broadcaster Company's *Time to Spare* (1934).

crisis of the Depression (“Women’s Work”).<sup>3</sup> Documentary literature, then, was the result of shifting middle-class attitudes towards the plight of the working-classes – a plight largely unknown outside of sociological report. Each of my chosen authors are an example of “Going Over” to its most extreme, journeying to Britain’s industrial centres to experience working-class conditions directly. Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), as Klaus claims, “is a product (and agent) of the second half of the decade – not because poverty or unemployment had not existed before, but because these were now for the first time regarded as relevant topics for an intelligentsia newly sensitised to political issues” (152).

It is important, then, to distinguish documentary writers from contemporary sociological reportage. Storm Jameson addresses the insufficiency of the latter in a critique of the Council of Action’s *Motherhood in the Special Areas of Durham and Tyneside*. Sociological reports, she claims,

are not documents in the proper sense of the word; they are not full enough; they do not give the essentials of speech and action. They could not; the observation, however acute, is made from outside, too briefly, and as a stranger would report upon strangers after an hour’s visit. We do not see the woman stripping the filthy, bug-ridden wall paper from the thin wall of her attic; nor the pregnant woman waiting her turn for the lavatory which serves eight families. (qtd. in Croft 246)

It would be writers, she implies, not sociologists, who would capture the “essentials of speech and action”. Quantitative empiricism, for Jameson, remained abstracted from the essential human experience. As Croft explains,

imaginative writing was seen to have a much stronger purchase on the moral and political thinking of the British reading public. Realistic, authoritative, ideologically ‘innocent’ and reliable working-class fictions was read to those

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<sup>3</sup> Andy Croft’s *Red Letter Days* and Ken Warpole’s *Dockers and Detectives* highlight the volume of 1930s working-class writing. Some of the more prominent writers are Walter Brieley, B. L. Coombes, Walter Greenwood, John Sommerfield, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Walter Allen, Jack Lindsay, Gwyn Jones, and Lewis Jones.

who wanted 'to know' the worst about the experience of their fellow citizens  
but who were wary of abstraction and statistics. (247)

Jameson's critique also anticipates the importance of "participant observation", a newly adopted anthropological technique integral to the documentary literature movement. It would be not only writers who could convey the working-class experience, but writers who had crossed the borders of geography and class – or "Gone Over" – who could experience the suffering of the working-classes.

"Realism" proved a natural direction for a more politicised practice of writing. Spender best details this 1930s preference for realism in his 1939 pamphlet *The New Realism*:

There is a tendency for artists today to turn outwards towards reality, because the phase of experimenting in form has proved sterile. If you like, the artist is simply in search of inspiration, having discovered that inspiration depends on there being some common ground of understanding between him and his audience about the nature of reality, and on a demand from that audience for what he creates. (qtd. in Lodge 190)

Lodge explains that the turn to realism in the 1930s "was a pronounced swing back from the metaphoric to the metonymic pole of literary discourse", a reference to Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphoric and metonymic discourse (191). Documentary literature represents a further swing towards the metonymic pole, that is, taking realism closer to objective reportage. In the absence of metaphoric detail, though – or, to use Lodge's phrase, "discourse with no 'poetic' coloration at all" (94) – comes a central theoretical complication of documentary literature, namely, how can such heavily metonymic documentary writing be read as literature? Lodge solves this by making the entire metonymic text "into a metaphor" for the world to which it refers (109). While I will not be reading these realist texts metaphorically, I will be claiming that they can be read, and in indeed were intended to be read, as also exemplifying the "literary".

Jameson's moral mandate "Documents" was the closest contemporary attempt to

theorise documentary writing. The presentation of documentary literature, she proclaims, is the crux:

A journalist can observe and report. No writer is satisfied to write journalism, nor is this what is wanted – visits to the distressed areas in the motor-car. Nor must the experience, the knowledge waited for and lived through, be fictionalised, in the sense of making up a story or a novel on the basis of facts collected. (15)

Here Jameson explains the functional virtues of documentary literature, namely, to objectively represent and describe reality without fictional mediation, while simultaneously avoiding the apparently authoritative empiricism of mere reportage. J. B. Priestley believed that the “one advantage of being a writer” was that “you can venture, though not of course without risk, to blurt out the truth now and again” (qtd. in Hughes 135). The “truth” was not a simple matter of recorded reality, rather as Laing posits, “what was called for was a going beyond, or rather beneath, immediate appearances (such as the description of a shift at work) to achieve the recognition and presentation of normally unseen connections” (143-4). Jameson, in her review of Mass-Observation’s “Britain by Mass-Observation”, praises the collective for going beyond “the realistic novel” towards the realms of “fact” (47). In doing so, she outlines the deficiencies of working-class realism, claiming fiction to be “an escape into the worlds of wish-fulfilment”, typically following a narrative trajectory in which “the mill-girl always ends up marrying the mill-owner” (47). Documentary literature, with its emphasis on an observed reality, would allow the “facts” of setting to be self-evident and ultimately “start from an acceptance of the real conditions of existence, and acceptance of the reality principle, the principle of adult life and of a modern scientific society” (47). The only “real conditions of existence” would be those observed by the writer themselves, allowing no potential for narrative distortion.

However, for typical middle-class intellectuals, in all of their socialist enthusiasm, genuine contact with the working-class was difficult to forge. Disraeli’s famous ‘Two Nations’ distinction

of 1845, “the rich and poor” (96), still applied to 1930s Britain – particularly in the sense of a regional dichotomy between the North and South. The industrial North remained distinctly alien to the Southern and metropolitan middle-classes. To truly “Go Over”, Cunningham explains, bourgeois writers had to leave “the quadrangles of Oxford of Cambridge and of the public schools and prep schools (frequently rurally located) where they customarily studied and taught” for the impoverished industrial centres (225). It is this sense of a geographical journey which gives documentary literature its anthropological bent. Rather than explore foreign cultures abroad, documentary writers were part of what Mengham called an “ethnographic turn” in which “British film and fiction went indoors with a vengeance, both literally and conceptually” (qtd. in Wilson 95). The rising number of state-of-nation reportages can be viewed as a movement of domestic anthropology, of national exploration. Documentary writers – alongside government officials and sociologists – were part of a wider movement intent on studying unknown working-class culture. “Misery”, as Hanley surmises, had “become a marketable commodity” (77).

Woolf’s essay “Phases of Fiction” (1929) cautiously approaches fact-based literature, acknowledging the “truth tellers” of Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift who pioneered the tradition of producing literature from journalistic document. While she praises their ability to induce “belief” in presenting fictional worlds where “things are precisely as they say they are”, Woolf remains ambivalent towards the literary mode (57). Contemporary “truth tellers”, she warns, were susceptible to the same aesthetic difficulties as their predecessors:

At length, then, taking into account the perfunctory fact-recording, the lack of metaphor, the plainness of the language and the fact that we believe most when the truth is most painful to us, it is not strange that we should become aware of another desire welling up spontaneously and making its way into those cracks which the great monuments of the truth-tellers wear inevitably upon their solid bases. (65)

For Woolf, literature that relies on factual observation seems both worthwhile and tediously restrictive. However, here Woolf is writing before the Depression. In the ensuing socioeconomic crisis, writers were forced to confront the question of what was the most effective form of literary representation in presenting the lives of working-class people to a mass readership. Croft argues that, for working-class writers, realist fiction allowed for a much greater circulation and influence than documentary reportage:

*The Daily Telegraph* said that *Love on the Dole* ‘should do much more to stir the public conscience about the evils of the slums than any number of technical treatises on housing and unemployment’. Hilton’s *Caliban Shrieks* was recommended by the *Sunday Dispatch* for ‘telling you more about unemployment that statistics ever do’. (246)

Documentary writers of the 1930s, in a sense, turned to “truth telling”, adopting an aesthetic that legitimised the documentation of an observed autobiographical experience as the only means of representing social reality. The entire purpose, of course, was to redress middle-class misconceptions of working-class life with the evidence of objective experience. Rather than overtly turning to politics, in the sense of a politically committed aesthetic, all four of my documentary texts turned to facts: to a writing of observable, objective reality.

While the “truth telling” of the documentary literature movement was a clear turn beyond the realism as a means to confront the social distress of the Depression, paradoxically, its emphasis on fact functioned as a means of crossing what C. P. Snow would later famously describe as the divide between “two cultures”. In his original 1959 lecture, (speaking as a novelist) Snow warns that due to institutional differences and cultural prejudice, the two cultures of science and the arts were fundamentally incompatible. Since the 1930s, he acknowledges that “the cultures had long ceased to speak to each other: but at least they managed a kind of frozen smile across the gulf” (17). All four selected texts are written by professional writers, albeit in Hanley’s case someone from the working class, travelling to alien industrial centres and reporting

back to metropolitan Britain. The dilemma stated by Snow, then, can be applied analogously, with documentary literature not only attempting to bridge the divide between social science and literature, but bridging the geographical divide of North and South, the epistemological divide of political commitment and aesthetic autonomy, and, of course, the socioeconomic divide of working-class and middle-class.

With the exception of Priestley, my other three “authors” take this turn to fact and documentary realism to its most extreme: all three, in their attempts of documentary realism paradoxically engage with a modernist aesthetic. While of a similar age to Hanley, Orwell and the founders of Mass-Observation, Priestley in many ways belongs to the preceding literary generation. The first chapter of my thesis will discuss how Priestley’s *English Journey* (1934) certainly crosses class and geographical divisions in his content, and performs as an example of 1930s realism, yet stylistically, remains locked in the Edwardian narration of 1920s travel literature. My second chapter explores *Grey Children* (1937) by James Hanley, whose chapter “Many Voices”, for example, quoting verbatim responses from Rhondda Valley’s inhabitants, is framed as a montage of individual voices rather than journalistic report. I then move to Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, whose attempts to take realism into the realms of non-fiction through the use of statistics and figures is less successful in documenting working-class suffering than in his literary description. The final chapter will centre on *The Pub and the People* (1943), a study of drinking habits in Bolton by Mass-Observation, which, I argue, takes its collation of minute details so far into the scientific – without any apparent thesis – the text develops into a bizarre, surrealist work of literature. The order of my four chosen texts does not imply a sense of literary value, rather a trajectory in which this radical form of cultural crossing occurred.

Documentary literature can be defined as nonfiction by literary writers of an anthropological bent concerning the working-classes. While this definition hinges on some problematic terms, the subject matter remains constant: the conditions of working-class life in industrial Britain. According to Engels, the working-classes were a product of industrialisation



from the late eighteenth century (10-11). Thompson expands on this periodisation:

The standing fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of the ‘working class’. This is revealed first in the class consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes. And second in the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organisation. (190)

While urbanisation and the specialisation of labour promoted economic growth, the process also compromised the living and working conditions of the emerging working-classes which was first characterised in literature by Defoe’s tour through the Sheffield forges, and Blake’s “dark Satanic Mills” (8). Both Engels and Thompson suggest an industrial capitalist society had transformed the individual working population into a more homogenised working-class. The determinant socioeconomic disparities of modern Britain, and systemic degradation of the working-classes, was not possible as a subject of literature, therefore, until the Industrial Revolution.

Victorian slum fiction – a genre centred on the conditions of the working poor – arose as a product of the “Condition of England” theme popular in the 1890s, and can be viewed as a genre that anticipates 1930s documentary literature. The majority of slum novels of this period were set in London, exploring the distresses of urban overcrowding and squalor. It was a genre pioneered in the 1880s by Walter Besant and George Gissing, with both writing about the poor through personal contact and observation.<sup>4</sup> Like documentary literature, slum fiction was written by outsiders hoping to depict the realities of slum life for the uncomprehending but curious middle classes. Swafford notes it was a tradition of slum exploration written by outsiders, either as “socially conscientious reporters” or explorers of “specific religious and political agendas”

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<sup>4</sup> Both writers were renowned for their accuracy of observation. Besant’s *Children of Gibeon* (1886) and Gissing’s *The Nether World* (1889) pioneered the genre, exploring London’s East End. *The Record of Badalia Herodsfoot* (1890) by Rudyard Kipling and *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) by W. Somerset Maugham continued the slum fiction tradition later into the century.

(13).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as the name suggests, most of this work was fiction.<sup>6</sup> While documentary writers of the 1930s could be viewed as conscientious explorers, their work has a distinct anthropological bent, favouring objective observation rather than social reform. Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903) challenges the familiar slum fiction tradition in its treatment of slum exploration as performance. Rather than document the East End from the outside, London masquerades as a destitute sailor, anticipating Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Like Orwell, London's adventure tale narrative maintains a generic consistency since it is concerned with depicting the dire realities of urban poverty. His motivations, however, reflect the continuation of slum exploration, and anticipate the impetus of objective observation central to documentary literature thirty years' later:

I went down into the under-world of London with an attitude of mind which I may best liken to that of the explorer. I was open to be convinced by the evidence of my eyes, rather than by the teachings of those who had not seen, or by the words of those who had seen and gone before. (i)

It is striking that there appears no obvious texts which continue the slum narrative tradition after Jack London. I can only speculate on the thirty-year gap between *The People of the Abyss* and the first text of 1930s documentary literature, Priestley's *English Journey*, yet it seems a result of modernism's revolt against exteriority and naturalism, and of the radically reformed middle-classes "Going Over" in the 1930s following the Depression, and indeed perhaps the War which, albeit relatively briefly, united the classes in a national conflict.

By the beginning of 1933, unemployment in Britain reached the figure of just under three

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<sup>5</sup> Swafford places Henry Mayhew and James Greenwood in the first category of "socially conscientious reporters", with the likes of George R. Sims, Andrew Mearns and William Booth as explorers of "specific religious and political agendas".

<sup>6</sup> There are notable non-fiction slum works of the period, such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), and William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890). While both can be viewed as anticipatory to documentary literature, they hold explicit moral agendas. The concern in the 1930s, conversely, was more towards an objectivity of observation through anthropology, despite being framed in political ways.

million people, or twenty-three percent of insured workers (Branson 1). For the middle-class, the human suffering in Britain's industrial centres was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. With a developing concern for the lives of working-class people among middle-class commentators, several middle-class authors travelled to the impoverished North – or in Hanley's case, the “Special Areas” of Wales – to observe and participate in working-class life, with the hope of effectively experiencing their subjects' hardship. Anticipated by travel ramble literature of the nineteen-twenties – a genre devoted to discovering the forgotten pastoral England “not well known to the English people”<sup>7</sup> – documentary writers challenged the nature of post-Depression modernity by, too, exploring the unknown (Featherstone 68). However, the insistence on presenting a pastoral national reality meant travel writers typically avoided the complications of Britain's industrial areas. As Baxendale explains, travel literature depicted a picture of Britain “cosily reassuring and easily accessible by motorcar” (91). While most journeys began by departing from London, which was also the centre of publishing industry, the “ugliness” of Northern industry was “incapable of providing the searcher with revelation” and thus was conveniently omitted from travel narratives (Featherstone 68). In contrast, Documentary literature confronts the uncomfortable realities travel literature fails to address: the forgotten working-classes. As he approaches the West Midlands, Priestley's intentions in *English Journey* mirror those of travel writers before him, wanting to rediscover a neglected “England” but not by neglecting its “distress”:

I am here, in a time of stress, to look at the face of England, however blank or bleak that face may chance to appear, and to report truthfully what I see there.

I know of deep distress in the country [...] and I know there is far, far more ahead of me. (49)

This is an example of the documentary impulse to find and live the human suffering of the

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<sup>7</sup> Travel novels such as H. V. Morton's *In Search of England* (1927) and M. V. Hughes' *About England* (1927).

working-classes: to bridge the regional and socioeconomic divide between middle-class observer and working-class subject.

The rise of anthropology as a scientific discipline in the early twentieth-century redefined the study of Britain's working-classes. Modernist anthropological research began in 1922 with the publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the South Pacific* (1922). Through emphasis on fieldwork methods, *Argonauts* offered the first example of participant observation – that is, an eye-witness account of a foreign culture – in its attempt to rectify Western misconceptions of the Trobriad people and “savages” and “subcultures” more generally. Malinowski appears to portray not just the facts of the culture under investigation, but the fieldworker's own experience of those facts. Rae defines this process (when applied to writing) as a form of William James' “radical empiricism” (72). It represents a turn to fact in that the writer “offers personal ‘experience’ as the only legitimate ground for truth-claims”; nothing is presented as “fact” except what is observed within a definite time (72-3). The fundamental objectivity of documentary writing, therefore, consists of the observed experiences of each writer and rejects, as Rae puts it, realist fiction's omniscient narrator in favour of a writer “perfectly capable of knowing the frustration and despair experienced by society's victims” (79). According to Klaus, participant observation was initiated in the 1920s by the Chicago School of Sociology as an alternative to the dominant school of positivist sociology (149). Nel Anderson's *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923) was the first comprehensive sociological study of American homelessness to use participant observation. Only marginally different from investigative journalism, the main purpose of Anderson's study was to present the homeless' contribution to the economy through their intermitted labour. Anderson feigned the life of a hobo for the duration of his study, achieving a degree of intimacy with his subjects previously unseen in social science. But while motivated by a fundamentally humanist belief in the value of human contact, both Malinowski and Anderson are anthropological scientists who hold no literary pretensions. Their developments in participant observation, though, would be adopted by documentary writers in

the 1930s as part of Mengham's "ethnographic turn" in which the working-classes became a subject for domestic anthropology.

For Storm Jameson, writers were to be "fieldworkers in a field no smaller than England" to explore the uncharted interiors of working-class life first-hand (317). Hanley, too, notes the potential for domestic anthropology in *Grey Children*, speculating that "some enterprising anthropologist, perhaps a little tired of those continuous travels to survey the African native and his village, might well travel down to a mining district, any mining district will do" (147). Tom Harrison, one of the founders of Mass-Observation, having completed an ethnographic study of Malekulan tribes in the Pacific was also explicit in his aims to produce in Mass-Observation an "anthropological study of [Britain's] own people" (7). However, as Mengham asserts, "the single most influential and authoritative way this 'ethnographic turn' made its presence felt" was development of documentary film (246). Technological advancements in media, photography and film, in accordance with a campaign for political and social reform, saw the inception of documentary – a genre which profoundly influenced the literary establishment. John Grierson, the founder of documentary film in Britain, describes the nature and goals of British documentary film making in his essay "The First Principles of Documentary" (1934-6). Grierson rejects the contrivances of film studio practice for raw, unabridged realities of the outside world. "Documentary" he writes, is the "photograph [of] the living scene and the living story" (97). Aitken explains Grierson's naturalist ideology, a belief that the world, as it was perceived through human sensory apparatus, or through the camera lens, "must constitute the basis of aesthetic representation because it (the perceived world), was the empirical manifestation of underlying determining forces" (7). Taking the story from the location, Grierson believed that the unspeakable poverty and misery of the working-class experience could be objectively represented through documentary film. Grierson refused to romanticise the lives of those "who work brutally and starve ignobly", the embodiment of all of the destructive force and wasteful forces of modernity itself (140). It was this motivation and sense of social responsibility that prompted

films like *Industrial Britain* (1931), *Coal Face* (1935), and *Housing Problems* (1935), the latter the first documentary to feature interviews. Grierson's desire to produce didactic – and at times propagandist – art in the hope of enacting social change: documentary film was a means of documenting, and responding to, the everyday life of British people.

Like documentary film makers, writers were becoming sceptical of fictional forms, instead favouring objective experiences in their treatment of social issues. Jameson outlines the inspiration of documentary film in her manifesto, "Documents":

We need documents, not, as the Naturalists needed them, to make their drab tuppenny-ha'penny dramas, but as charts, as timber for the fire some writer will light tomorrow morning. Perhaps the nearest equivalent to what is wanted exists already in the documentary film. As the photographer does, so must the writer keep himself out of the picture while working ceaselessly to present the fact from a striking (poignant, ironic, penetrating, significant) angle. (15)

In 1937, Jameson, alongside Stephen Spender and Arthur Calder-Marshall founded the journal *Fact*. The monthly was influenced by the French Encyclopaedists, and centred entirely on documentary fact-based writing. Precise, factual observation was, for Jameson, the only adequate framework in which writers could address pressing social exigencies through literature. In a later issue, Spender explained how the entire editorial process was committed to documentary writing. "It will not henceforward be the policy of *Fact* to review novels", Spender asserts, "unless they derive from a basis of factual material such as might for number of fact itself" (qtd. in Cunningham 304). The editors of *Fact* clearly equated objective experience with emotional honesty. Documentary writers, therefore, would seek the working-class experience for the sake of "fact itself". As Jameson claims in "New Documents", "the emotion should spring directly from the fact [...] His job is not to tell us what he felt, but to be coldly and industriously presenting, arranging, selecting, discarding from the mass of his material to get the significant

detail which leaves no more to be said, and implies everything” (316). In the emphasis of arrangement, documentary writing attempted to bridge the divide between the “anthropological” facts of the observed experience, and literary form.

Documentary literature, then, resolved (in the eyes of Jameson and my four chosen authors) the insufficiencies of realism by turning further towards fact. The most striking way in which my authors made this turn was through the emerging ethnographic technique of participant observation, that is, reconstructing a cultural experience in which the ethnographer simultaneously observes, and participates in, the culture in question. As part of what Cunningham terms the “Going Over” phenomenon, each writer travelled beyond metropolitan London to the industrial centres, studying the working-classes as if they were a foreign culture. Documentary literature represents the most radical example of writers turning beyond realism to fact, while also taking Cunningham’s ethnographic turn of “Going Over” to the working-classes. The writers I am concerned with, though, in their turn to fact, were also unconsciously, and in analogous terms, bridging Snow’s cultural divide of science and arts. Priestley’s journey is from the relatively prosperous South of England to the direr North. His amiable yet authoritative Edwardian narration throughout means *English Journey* is the least successful in bridging an aesthetic divide, though there are brief instances in which it occurs. Hanley travels to Wales simultaneously reconnecting with his working-class heritage yet remaining an English outsider, bridging the regional divide in his modernist arrangement of native Welsh voices for an English audience. The observed suffering in Orwell’s *Wigan Pier* is most effectively evoked not in his employment of statistical figures, but when his non-fictional description reads as a novel. While Mass-Observation’s “anthropology of ourselves” (7) in *The Pub and the People*, and extensive accumulation of facts on subjective responses, while impressive, develops a surrealist quality when bringing the Bolton working-class pub to a metropolitan readership. Each writer is aware of the complex relation between the actual experience of the traveller and its transcription into forms of writing. While my four selected texts do not constitute a new genre, they certainly

represent the four most effective examples in which this turn beyond realism to documentary, and its respective bridging of the cultural divide, was happening. There is extensive literary scholarship on Orwell, whereas Priestley, Hanley, and to a lesser extent Mass-Observation, are not so well recognised. As far as I am aware, the four “authors” have not been discussed collectively.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Patricia Rae’s essay “Orwell’s *Heart of Darkness: The Road to Wigan Pier* as Modernist Anthropology” writes of Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, with brief discussion of *Mass-Observation* and Hanley; H.Gustav Klaus’ *The Literature of Labour* draws on both Orwell and *Mass-Observation*; *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* by Nicola Wilson discusses Hanley and Orwell at length, with reference to *Mass-Observation* and Priestley; Valentine Cunningham’s *British Writers of the Thirties*, of course, makes reference to all four “authors”, though does analyse them collectively; Andy Croft’s *Red Letter Days* includes Orwell, Priestley and Hanley, but defines “documentary literature” in much broader terms, including, for example, working-class fiction in his application. Baxendale and Pawling’s *Narrating the Thirties* examines Orwell, *Mass-Observation* and Priestley; Stuart Laing’s “Presenting Things as They Are”, observes the reportage qualities of *Mass-Observation*, with reference to Hanley and Orwell; and “The Creative Treatment of Actuality”, Laura Marcus’ chapter, talks about the relationship between documentary film and literature with attention to Orwell and Priestley.



## 1. “What is Britain?” J. B. Priestley’s *English Journey*

“The right answer is simple enough. Britain is not a sum total of properties, is not a super-trading concern, is not merely another territory where the masses exist: Britain is the home of the British people” (*Out* 53).

During the 1930s, J. B. Priestley was intent on discovering the condition of England and its people. “What is Britain?” he asks in *Out of the People* (1941), a book on the English character intended for an American audience (49). It is a question that defined his work of the interwar years, particularly his non-fiction, including *Rain Upon Godshill* (1939), Priestley’s autobiography, and a series of radio talks published at the end of the decade as *Postscripts* (1939) and *Britain Speaks* (1941). His most significant statement on Englishness, however, was *English Journey* (1934), a documentary text examining social conditions across most of the country. This nationalist preoccupation is what distinguishes *English Journey* from other documentary literature of the period. Priestley uses the genre of domestic travel writing to go beyond simply documenting the uncomfortable realities of the industrial North and offer a more challenging inquiry into the state of contemporary English nationhood. Moreover, his wider national commitment makes Priestley the only documentary writer to travel throughout England in its entirety, instead of focusing on a specifically depressed geographical area or region. The timing of *English Journey* is also significant. Priestley began his journey in 1933, commissioned by his regular publisher Heinemann (in association with Victor Gollancz) to address the condition of England question within the context of the Depression. This makes Priestley the first documentary writer of the decade. In *Rain Upon Godshill*, he reflects on the importance of an observable reality: “if I find that the commonly accepted accounts of our life simply do not fit what I have observed of my own experience, then it would be most unrealistic and self-deceptive of me to pretend that they did or that they were trustworthy accounts” (62). Priestley stresses the

importance of being physically in touch with the land and its people in order to understand it. This mantra is extended as the basis for *English Journey*: a text developed, along with its construction of Englishness, entirely through Priestley's discoveries from empirical fieldwork.

While Priestley takes the question of "What is Britain?" literally, the question obviously carries an ideological formation. *English Journey* was not only a discovering of England first-hand in its plurality, but also a discovering of the absorptive, unifying principles that defined the English national character. As he announces in *The English* (1973), an informal explanation and study of England, "I am convinced that here we have the essence of Englishness, the great clue, the guiding thread in the maze" (10). But Priestley needed to do more than simply announce this belief. Anderson famously defines the nation, in an anthropological sense, as "an imagined political community" (6). According to this assertion, nations are socially constructed, distinguished by a collective imaginary, rather than by any tangible identifiers of characteristics. How, then, did Priestley imagine the essential cultural and national values of Englishness? For Williams, the industrial revolution proved the decisive period in history in which English nationalism achieved a self-sustaining framework, arising, in part, in reaction to the newfound economic and social conditions of industrial development. In Williams' terms, English culture adopted a dissenting role: a "court of appeal" in which emerging values of industrialism were deemed defective (4). While the conditions of nineteenth-century industrial Britain are not the same of Priestley's twentieth, there remain underlying continuities in the context of Britain during the Slump.

England's interwar years saw a distinct rise in travel writing concerned with a pre-industrial nationhood. It was a genre centred on Edwardian revivalism. The pre-war security of Edwardian England, and the values that came with it – idyllically pastoral and uncomplicated – felt lost after the catastrophe of the Great War. In the context of modernity, and the prospect of a far greater European conflict looming, travel writers adopted the idea that a past "England was a lost or neglected place in need of rediscovery" (Featherstone 67). While

yearning for a lost England, interwar travel writing favoured a construction of nationhood based on direct experience, on real-life encounters. Preoccupation with national recovery, therefore, prompted a resurgence of travel writers hoping to study England in its domestication. “A writer on England to-day addresses himself to a wider and more intelligent public than ever before”, writes H. V. Morton in 1927, the most famous travel writer of the period, “never before have so many people been searching for England” (vii). It was also the age of mechanical transport. While not a travel writer, Virginia Woolf marvels at the newfound possibilities of travel by motorcar, claiming it gives a sense of “lightening accidentally, like a voyager who touches another planet with the tip of his show, upon scenes which would have gone on, have always gone on, will go on, unrecorded, save for this chance glimpse” (153). Morton, too, shares this sense of fascination: “the roads of England, eclipsed for a century by the railway, have come to life again” (vii). The neglected corners of England were more accessible to writers than they had ever been, despite mechanised assistance seeming contradictory to the discovery of a premodern past. Moreover, travel by motor car allowed one to avoid the ugliness of any industrial centres that might complicate a projection of the pastoral ideal. As Morton remarks, “for months I have motored through a green England which might never have known the Industrial Revolution” (185-6). In Morton’s Old England, industrialism but more broadly modernity, is antithetical to an essentially pastoral notion of the nation. What distinguishes *English Journey* from the domestic travelogue tradition is that rather than avoid the complications of industry, Priestley actively searches for it. His desire to inhabit the conditions of a Northern industrial present indeed makes Priestley’s work anthropological and thus documentary.

This ideological formation, though, is inseparable from geographical landscape, with Orwell even claiming that “when you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing a different air” (“The Lion” 57). Orwell again makes this separation of the familiar and the foreign upon returning to England after the Spanish Civil War. The south of England, he writes, with its “deep meadows” and “slow-moving steams bordered

by willows”, remains the “England” of his childhood, with “the industrial towns” conveniently distant in “a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth’s surface” (*Homage* 187). Orwell’s nostalgia, having spent almost six months abroad, is both a celebration of nationhood and an exclusion of its industrial “other”. His real “England” – at least in this text, though certainly not in others such as *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) – lies in the South and removed from the distress of Northern industrialism.

Priestley also ties nationhood to the land itself. While moving through the Hampshire countryside by motor coach at the beginning of his journey, Priestley marvels at the “timeless quality” of the landscape unique to England:

The Saxons, wandering over their Wessex, must have seen much of what we saw that morning. The landscape might have been designed to impress upon returning travellers, on the boat train out of Southampton, that they were indeed back in England again. (9-10)

Here Priestley adopts the position of a visitor returning home. The land is embedded within his understanding of home and nationhood, of his identity as an Englishman. He also notes his decision to take with him Muirhead and Rossiter’s *Blue Guide to England* (1920), and Stamp and Beaver’s *The British Isles: A Geographic and Economic Survey* (1933), suggesting an awareness of academic geography. The full title of *English Journey: Being a Rambling but Truthful Account of What One Man Saw and Heard and Felt and Thought During a Journey Through England During the Autumn of the Year 1933*, while an allusion to the pseudo-autobiographical travel literature of Dunton, and later Defoe, also serves as an acknowledgement to Morton’s reappropriation of antique chapter titles.

Priestley was not the only writer reconstituting the domestic travel genre. Edwin Muir’s *Scottish Journey* (1935), also published by Heinemann in association with Victor Gollancz, serves as a companion volume to *English Journey*. Both are unusual for travel writing of the period

in that they involve journeys “home”. Contrary to Priestley's claims of native objectivity, Muir acknowledges the observational bias in writing about his homeland:

Now it is possible to maintain a fairly fresh and objective outlook if one has had no previous connection with the thing one is contemplating, and is not influenced by memories calling one's attention to this or that. But if one has lived for fifteen years in a place there is an end of objectivity, one's latest impression is merely a thin layer super-imposed on a solid mass of memory which has already hardened into a shape of its own. (101)

Priestley, upon returning to the North of his childhood, assumes a familiarity with industrialism, inferring, an intimate understanding of the northern working-classes and their labour relations. His personal class origins are revealed when examining the Black Country, acknowledging his position as a writer living in London while giving particular emphasis to his Yorkshire upbringing:

It happens that during the last few years I have been away from industrial districts and have spent most of my time in far pleasanter places. But the first nineteen years of my life were passed in the industrial West Riding, in the shadow of the tall chimneys; and even yet I am not unduly fastidious about my surroundings. (110)

Rather than erase the North from his national construction like his contemporaries in travel literature, Priestley celebrates its inclusion. Furthermore, his identity as a Yorkshireman assumes a familiarity and authoritativeness unseen in succeeding documentary literature of the 1930s. The reason, of course, is that Priestley's North is not an entirely foreign country as it is to the Mass-Observers in Bolton and Orwell in Wigan. The North, he declares, is his home: “I am not shocked because an iron foundry or a wool-combing mill has little in common with an author's drawing-room or study: I have long known what kind of places men have to labour in” (110). This familiarity, Priestley hopes, suggests a further degree of authenticity. It

is a documentary method unique to Priestley's social philosophy as a spokesperson for the English people. "That philosophy", he claims in *Out of the People*, must "spring naturally" from the contemporary scene, "and nobody who had not an intimate acquaintance with that scene could write these chapters" (vi).

Beginning and ending in London, *English Journey* crosses geographical divisions by transporting the distress of the industrial North to Priestley's implied Southern readership. While Priestley is a proud Northerner, his middle-class upbringing and reputation as a professional writer positions him, at times, as an outsider – particularly in passages outside of Yorkshire. As he remarks when journeying through the Black Country north and west of Birmingham, for example, the "notorious region" was "still strange" (110-11). By implication, Priestley's crossing of geographical distances, North and South, industrial and metropolis, also serve as a crossing of the socioeconomic divide between working-class and middle-class, for "you have to live some time in these places to understand their peculiar qualities" he reminds his readers, naïve to the grim realities of industrialism (110).

Stylistically, however, *English Journey* is rather conservative in terms of crossing the realist and modernist, and sociological and literary, divides. This, of course, speaks to Priestley's confidence and consistency as a narrator. He maintains an amiable tone throughout the text, confidently addressing an implied middle-class readership as a self-assured man of the people, and authoritative guide to all of England. Even when his authority is undermined by ignorance, his matter-of-fact directness remains consistent. He remarks, when in the Black Country, the most distressing landscape of his journey:

I was glad that I did not know the names of the towns down there in the smoke; I felt that I was not looking at this place and that, but at the metallic Midlands themselves, at a relief map of a heavy industry, at another and greater exhibition of the 'fifties. (112)

Priestley reveals a narrative self-consciousness, reminding his readers of the limitations to the

objectivity of his experience, in this case, a geographical unfamiliarity. This same tone is seen later when travelling from Lincoln, despite a more idyllic countryside:

From Lincoln to Boston is no great distance, but the train makes a leisurely journey of it, lounging along by the side of the river, the Witham, like an angler. I noticed a lot of wild birds, but I cannot tell you what they were because I do not know anything about wild birds. (371)

Again Priestley shows a willingness to concede a lack of understanding. The narration remains self-conscious, drawing its attention to the limitations as an authoritative travel guide.

The consistency in tone speaks to Priestley's implied objective experience. There is no blurring of the fact and fiction divide, as in my other chosen texts. *English Journey* is simply a documentation of what Priestley observes. His recollections, it seems, especially in terms of working-class suffering, are to be trusted as objective reality. As he writes, "if I declare that Coketown is a horrible hole, I do not merely mean that it cannot be fitted in to some private fairy-tale Merrie England of my own: I mean that it is a damned horrible hole" (110-11).

When read with this perspective, *English Journey* functions as a kind of authoritative motoring guide to Britain, rather than "literature". The "Index to Names and Places", as its title suggests, is organised almost entirely on geographical place names. It is the only one of my documentary texts to include an index, giving *English Journey* an encyclopaedic quality. The index serves as a comprehensive record of every place, town, city and region visited (and even those referred to), including geographical landmarks, significant buildings, and potential attractions of interest (419-422).

The organisation of chapters, too, remain faithful to Priestley's experience, but by doing so, produces no radical juxtaposition in terms of narrative. We follow Priestley along his established route, from London into the gradually increasing regions of economic distress. This adds to the text's consistency as a travel guide locked in the Edwardian narration of 1920s travel literature. *English Journey*, then, accords with the broader critical narrative of the 1930s being the

decade in which writers become more engaged with “politics”. Priestley certainly remains aware of his position as a writer and of his political engagement with socioeconomic realities of the Depression. His experience of visiting the distressed areas accords to this, though there’s no radical attempt to bridge the cultural divide as his observed experience, in his eyes, is sufficiently objective.

Like the emerging film documentarists of the period, Priestley sought to directly address and engage with the social distress of the Depression. However, in his memoir, *Rain Upon Godshill*, Priestley is concerned with the artistic distortions shown by his counterparts in film:

Nearly all documentary films seem to me a very romantic heightening of ordinary life, comparable not to the work of a realistic novelist or dramatist, but to the picturesque and highly-coloured fictions of the romancer. (81-2)

For Priestley, film was inferior to print as a documentary medium because of its emphasis on avant garde artistic technique. He complains that “their very medium [of film production] compels these young men to be romantic in practice, no matter how realistic they may be in theory”, at the expense of presenting an authentic reality (83). The print medium – specifically realist and documentary literature – Priestley claims, offers more compelling and realistic representations. Priestley makes this overt when journeying through the Cotswolds, announcing:

I am here in a time of stress, to look at the face of England, however blank or bleak that face may chance to appear, and to report truthfully what I see there.  
I know there is deep distress in the country. I have seen some of it, just had a glimpse of it, already, and I know there is far, far more ahead of me. (61-2)

Priestley very much saw himself as a writer for the people; as a servant to society. With this position came a sense of responsibility and obligation to convey a truthfulness of his environment. “I try to examine the world from the standpoint of a man, more fortunate than many others”, he explains in *Thoughts in the Wilderness*, “who can afford to tell an unpleasant truth



or two, not having a boss to please, a job to lose. This is one advantage of being a writer: you can venture though not of course without risk, to blurt out the truth now and again” (24).

Rather than travelling across the country, *Angel Pavement* explores the Depression within a claustrophobic London. Here Priestley anticipates the nightmare of economic distress that would prompt him to travel north in his documentary investigation three years later. His characters, like the real-life encounters with those in industrial England, suffer in isolation. The employees of Twigg and Dersingham, a furniture dealership, are reduced to shedding “a part of themselves” each morning of work, “the most valuable part, leaving it behind, somewhere near the street door, where it would wait for them to pick it up again when the day's work was done” (36). Priestley’s narrator is concerned with the firm’s vulnerability in the time of economic crisis: “‘Things are rotten’”, Goath tells Mr Smeeth, “‘I've been in the trade for thirty years, and I've never known ‘em worse [...] They want it cheap now, want it given away’” (41). Despite remaining in London, Priestley's novel highlights the ubiquitous nature of unemployment during the Depression. Even during the firm’s more prosperous period, the threat of unemployment darkens its working environment. It is this same hardship and concern for human lives that motivates *English Journey*. Priestley again explores the Depression in his novel *They Walk in the City* (1936). The fictional Haliford, a textile town in industrial Yorkshire, remains haunted by economic decay long after the Depression, highlighting a social urgency specific to the 1930s. “Living in another age, I might never have written a line about political concerns”, he declares in *Margin Released*, but as “half an artist and half a damaged man of action” (229), Priestley felt compelled to write about the circumstances of those worst affected by the economic disaster: a compulsion which would serve as the documentary impetus behind *English Journey*.

Priestley’s documentary commitment also aimed to redress middle-class misconceptions about the working-classes. In *English Journey*, Priestley addresses his audience explicitly:

I mention this for the benefit of those people – and there are plenty of them – who think that most unemployed men are unemployable, or, if not that, at least

not very willing to go very far out of their way to find work. I should like to set some of these people on a long digging job in heavy clay. (92)

Here Priestley's "people" are, of course, the metropolitan middle-classes. The very action of embarking upon a journey through the industrial North, and experiencing working-class life directly, distances Priestley from his implicitly metropolitan and southern readers. This is apparent when Priestley visits an unnamed lake in Bournville. He observes the toil behind its artificial construction, watching the navvies – who have travelled from Birmingham – "digging and draining" with "raw and bleeding hands" (92). For Priestley, Bournville's lake, made specifically for model yachting, epitomises the working-class hardship behind middle-class luxury. While Priestley admires the recreational focus of the district, his observation reminds his readers that the working-class labourers are not only willing to travel to find work but persevere despite arduous conditions: "out of the whole fifty of sixty" workers, he marvels, "only one dropped out" (92). Later, in Seaham Harbour, a colliery town on the coast, Priestley again dispels typical middle-class misconceptions about mining: "Those persistent legends about miners who buy two pianos at once and insist on drinking champagne would shrivel up and then utterly vanish within five seconds here" (324). Priestley realises, in reflection upon his own middle-class sensibilities, that despite the prominence of crockery in middle-class culture, and his life specifically, not once has he questioned how "cups, saucers, dishes, plates, jugs, mugs, teapots [and] basins" are actually made (218). Again, an implied readership becomes increasingly clear, as Priestley distances himself from an uncomprehending middle-class:

How do cups and saucers and plates come to have gilt lines and floral decorations and even whole pictures on them? You – I am now addressing the vast oafish lay public – do not know. But I know, having actually been there when the trick was done. (218)

This statement outlines the essence of Priestley's documentary commitment: attempting to arrive at "truth" or "reality" through direct experience and observation. His middle-class readers, he

implies, amidst the growing influence of post-war consumerist culture, appear to hold no regard for the manufacturing behind their consumption, nor for the role of the working-classes in facilitating their lifestyle. For, “who wants to know about coal?” he asks:

Who wants to know anything about miners, except when an explosion kills or entombs a few of them and they become news? The mining communities are remote, hidden away, mysterious. If there had been several working collieries in London itself, modern English history would have been quite different. (322)

Throughout his journey in 1933, Priestley encounters a number of “Englands”. The first, Old England, is found in the Cotswolds. It is a region of medieval “villages, manor houses [and] farmsteads, built of such magical material” (48). It was a region famous for its masonry, and Priestley marvels at the unique architecture distinctive of Tudor Revival. Old George, a septuagenarian Cotswold mason, embodies the generational craftsmanship particular to the region: “Old George has always been a mason, and his father and grandfather were masons before him; they were all masons, these Georges; they built the whole Cotswolds: men of their hands, men with a trade, craftsmen” (53-4). His earlier novel, *The Good Companions*, also begins in the Cotswolds:

Here are Bodkin Top and High Greave and Black Moor and Four Gates End, and though these are lonely places, almost unchanged since the Domesday Book was compiled, you cannot understand industrial Yorkshire and Lancashire, the wool trade and the cotton trade and many other things besides, such as the popularity of Handel’s *Messiah* or the Northern Union Rugby game, without having seen such places. (1)

Priestley makes a necessary juxtaposition, central to his documentary process in *English Journey*: in order to understand the true extent of England’s industrialism, one must first “see” the Cotswolds landscape in all its beauty. But while this suggests a preference for Old England in the face of industrialisation, Priestley’s hope for the future does not give Old England priority over

the rest of the country. The Cotswolds remain far from Priestley's ideal England. Other than offering a picturesque marketing image, for Priestley, the Cotswolds represent a way of life rooted in the past. Priestley's ideal is an England that retains this beauty and value while embracing the modern:

There will remain a countryside that will be able to give both body and spirit a holiday, and that may yet offer our minds material out of which we can conjure for our grandchildren a way of life better than the dirty hotch-potch of to-day and better than the yesterday that those old anonymous masons have here glorified, and flattered, for us. (66)

For Priestley, England cannot neglect its past, yet it cannot return to it either. An eccentric country squire, "a very courteous and charming English gentleman of leisure", becomes an anachronism of Old England's backwardness and resistance to progress. Priestley is critical of the gentleman's clothing and demeanour, especially in his refusal to subscribe to anything modern. Priestley, in defence of mechanised labour, contends that "our business now was not to sentimentalise the Middle Ages", as his dinner companion insisted on doing, "but to take the whole roaring machine-ridden world as it is and make a civilised job of it" (64). The values of the landed gentry, Priestley feels, are an obstacle to modernity, and hold no place in his future England.

The human consequence of the Depression is the primary interest of Priestley's journey, and in England's North he finds a catalogue of distress and ugliness. It is Priestley's second "Nineteenth Century England", found in the bleak industrial heartlands, that most impels his documentary impulses. Once again, Priestley anticipates the real-life experience of his travels in his earlier fiction. *The Good Companions* begins with its narrator travelling through the North:

At first the towns only seem a blacker edge to the high moorland, so many fantastic outcroppings of its rock, but now that you are closer, you see the host

of tall chimneys, the rows of little houses, built of blackening stone, that are like tiny sharp ridges on the hills. These windy moors, these clanging dark valleys, these factories and little stone houses, this business of Intaking, have between them bred a race that has special characteristics. Down there are thousands and thousands of men and women who are stocky and hold themselves very stiffly, who have short upper lips and long chins, who use emphatic consonants and very broad vowels and always sound aggressive, who are afraid of nothing but mysterious codes of etiquette and any display of feeling. (1-2)

In *English Journey*, Priestley enters the North on a bus “that runs between Coventry and Birmingham” (77). Despite his claims to a familiarity with the industrial landscape, he partly defines the North as an English “other”. Priestley associates the physical ugliness of landscape with moral deformity. This is most overt when visiting Sheffield, which he describes as a descent into hell: “the smoke was so thick”, he recalls, “that it made the foggy twilight in the descending streets, which appeared as if they would end in the steaming bowels of the earth” (154). The “true North country”, a landscape deformed by industrialism, develops into a symbol of human sin: “it had found a green and pleasant land and had left a wilderness of dirty bricks [...] What you see now looks like a debauchery of cynical greed” (400). The more he considers this England, the more he develops a sense of betrayal not only on behalf of the industrial working-classes, bound to awful work and living conditions, but on behalf of the nation itself. When finding a group of boys throwing stones at a warehouse in West Bromwich, Priestley captures the hopelessness of human suffering. Instead of condemning their behaviour, Priestley despairs at the environment to which they are subjected. “Where they could run to, I cannot imagine”, he writes, “they need not have run away from me, because I could not blame them if they threw stones and stones and smashed every pane of glass for miles. Nobody can blame them if they grow up to smash everything that can be smashed” (115). The chapter ends with an allusion to

Shakespeare's *Richard III*, contemplating the future of West Bromwich's stone-throwing boys, living in a town out of season: "out of all seasons except the winter of our discontent" (115).

There are various instances where Priestley, in disbelief of the appalling conditions, compares the northern working-classes to another race. When in Shotton, at the foot of a steaming hill of ash and fumes, Priestley supposes the town's inhabitants "were not supposed to have even noses and lungs. You would imagine that they were held to be members of a special race, born tip-dwellers" (338). Typical of modernist anthropology, Priestley brings the experiences of this "special race" back to England, despairing that "Shotton and, let us say, Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds were both in the southern half of this island of ours, not more than a good day's motor journey from one another, both under the same government" (338). Here the shocking conditions of industrialism come sharply into focus. Working-class distress cannot be easily dismissed as an exclusively Northern phenomenon. The crisis of the Depression, Priestley suggests, is more far-reaching and closer to his readers than they might think.

But later, in East Durham, Priestley writes of the region's profound remoteness. They exist in "strange isolation" to the rest of Britain, he writes, "the miner lives there in his own little world and hardly ever meets anybody coming from outside it" (327). This world, Priestley observes, has even generated its own dialect. When receiving a tour from an unnamed local guide, Priestley notes how the miners "have a curious lingo of their own, which they call 'pitmatik'" (334). Interestingly, though, "pitmatik" is the unique preserve of pitmen, and only used between them to exchange stories from the colliery, "usually very grim stories", which are inappropriate for women or children (334). Priestley, of course, employs the rhetoric of anthropological inquiry to emphasise his subject's hardship. Their lives remain alien to a middle-class readership. *English Journey*, then, aims to bridge this cultural distance. Priestley is aware that "their environment [...] must blunt their sense and taste, harden the feelings and cloud the mind", but he reminds his readers, "miners and their wives and children are not members of

some troglodyte race but ordinary human beings, and as such are partly at the mercy of their surroundings” (327). Once again, he places blame on the nation of England itself, lamenting a domestic state of affairs that no “democratic civilisation has any right to encourage” (327-8).

Priestley also found a third England: one emerging concurrently to his travels. It was the England of the twentieth-century, still somewhat shapeless and undefined, influenced by global forces: “a post-war England, belonging far more to the age itself than to this particular island” (401). Priestley is neither nostalgic for the pre-modern England of the Cotswolds, nor unequivocally welcoming of England’s modernised future. With the growing influence of television and cinema, American consumerist culture was further encroaching on the values of contemporary Britain:

This is the England of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dancehalls and cafés, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons. (401)

The indulgences of Priestley’s third England are reflected in his earlier novel *Angel Pavement*. Turgis attends *The Glad-Rag Way*, a film about a beautiful girl who travels to New York. In the darkness of the theatre, Turgis shares a romantic exchange with an unnamed woman seated next to him, whose scent “reported at once to his imagination, which immediately dowered the vague dark figure beside him with all sweetness and prettiness, not unlike that of Lula Castella, who was at the moment absent from the screen” (161). The two share an awkward fumbling of elbows and legs, blurring the distinction between film and reality. Rather than losing himself to the film, Turgis becomes lost in his own erotic exchange: “the dream life of the screen was nothing compared with the pulsating real life of those contacts in the warm gloom” (161). The moment, however, is fleeting. The two withdraw at the film’s conclusion, realising any chance of

romance is hopeless within their monotonous present. Hollywood, a kind of metonymy for American consumerism, is a false dream.

Priestley's position, though, is more complicated than a simple rejection of an emerging mass culture. Miles notes that it is not modernity that Priestley condemns, rather, "it is the absence of a genuine modernity, a state of affairs that is genuinely new and genuinely progressive" (47). Priestley even acknowledges that England has something to gain from mass culture, with this third England being "as near to a classless society as we have got yet" (321). Priestley implies that England's social hierarchy is slowly eroding and he sees a benefit in adopting American democratic ideals. "In this England", a world that embraces American democratic ideals and consumerism, "for the first time in history, Jack and Jill are nearly as good as their master and mistress" (402). But in 1933, with England still in the depths of economic depression, Priestley is still aware that England's upper classes have been much less affected by the Slump. He was also ambivalent towards a more egalitarian society. Priestley remained a product of Edwardian England. Colletta claims that while he "resented the deeply entrenched values of social superiority that allowed only certain classes to have ease and comfort", the relegation of the working-classes to an existence of drudgery "somehow seemed the correctly ordained order of things" (99). His unwillingness to forgo England's complicated class system completely lies in the value he attributes to Old England. An England "without privilege", he admits, was "a bit too cheap", lacking the sophistication and culture he had come to love (403). Moreover, a more liberal democracy, in Priestley's eyes, reduces the opportunity for individual expression: "I cannot help but feel that this new England is lacking in character, in zest, in gusto, flavour, bite, drive, originality, and that is a serious weakness" (405). His solution is a compromise between the old and the new, between socioeconomic hierarchy and egalitarianism: "Most of us would be willing to give up a little space in the ship and take a few items from the menu if we knew that the people waiting on us were being allowed to live a civilised life" (20-1).



At the text's conclusion, Priestley's motor car crawls along the Great North Road as he returns home to London. The capital marks both the beginning and end of Priestley's journey, though it is largely omitted from the overall narrative, becoming the symbolically absent centre of England. As he slowly approaches, with a blanket of fog enveloping the metropolis, London's absence becomes literal:

If the fog had lifted I knew that I should have seen this England all round me at the northern entrance to London, where the smooth wide road passes between miles of semi-detached bungalows, all with their little garages, their wireless sets, their periodicals about film stars, their swimming costumes and tennis rackets and dancing shoes. (401)

Both absences are deliberate. Priestley's journey, discovering England in its plurality, reflects an endorsement of provincial character. London is the city of "Big Englanders", the heart of government and empire, and home to the "red-faced, staring, loud-voiced fellows, wanting to go and boss everybody about all over the world" (416). Priestley prefers "little England", and sees the future not in an overpowering metropolis, but in a network of cities and towns contributing to a broader collective whole. Priestley implores not only a geographical connection, but a moral one, arguing that all Englanders share a moral obligation to consider the welfare of their compatriots: a patriotism of domestic duty.

## 2. Between the Tides: The Displacement of James Hanley

“Mr Hanley has written an important and disturbing book. One would like to see it in the hands of everyone who has any interest in the problems of the distressed areas, and not least those who have charge of public policy” (“South Wales” 6).

James Hanley made his reputation as a writer in the 1930s for his vivid, and at times scandalous, portrayals of northern working-class life. It was also the decade in which Wales would become his adopted home. He remains an oddly mysterious figure. In one sense, he rejects any clear class categorisation. The son of Irish seaman Edward Hanley, James’ immediate family were certainly economically working-class, though they did inherit elements of middle-class cultural capital. Edward was born to a respectable lower middle-class Dublin family. He worked as a clerk in a solicitor’s office for a brief period before moving to Liverpool to begin a life at sea, while Hanley’s mother, Bridget, came from a family of professional “sailing boat captains” (*B.W.* 23). The opening chapter of Hanley’s autobiography, *Broken Water* (1937), depicts his family travelling by coach on day excursion to Howth Hill. This representation of Hanley’s early childhood, a relatively prosperous and sheltered life in middle-class Dublin, complicates his position as a working-class writer. This confused class status is inextricably linked to the constant regional displacement throughout his life. Region, of course, is partly synonymous with class. As Jessop claims, there exists a “spatial division of labour between town and countryside, between north and south, between different regional [and] national” economies (424-5). The Hanleys’ migration to Liverpool in 1909<sup>9</sup>, then, holds particular significance as the effective “proletarianization” of the formerly middle-class family. But to label the Hanleys as simply working-class Irish immigrants is to disregard their former class status. The family regularly attended theatre and concerts; James

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<sup>9</sup> The date in which the Hanleys emigrated to Liverpool is disputed. Chris Gostick claims Hanley’s father and mother were both born in Ireland, and established themselves in Liverpool in 1891 (before James’ birth in 1901), whereas John Fordham speculates the family became Irish migrants much later in 1909.

“often went to the opera with score in hand” (Anderson). Both James and Bridget were gifted pianist, and brother Gerald also became a writer. As Fordham posits, the Hanleys cherished their “lost heritage”. which restores to some extent “the loss of esteem that comes with the conferred identity of ‘immigrant’” (12).

*Broken Water* explores this troubled sense of regional belonging. Destined for a professional career, the young Hanley abandons his studies for life at sea. On his first day aboard ship, an account of seasickness becomes a symbolic discard of his seemingly oppressive education. It also marks the end of his childhood:

Everything went overboard. The History of the Plantagenets and the Tudors, the Battle of Waterloo and Anne Boleyn. Over the side. Drawings of elephants and compound interest, the subject of predicate, tonic-sol-fa, ‘What I would like to be when I grow up,’ over the side it all went. It was all useless, it didn't stand a ghost of a chance aboard ship. (34)

The young Hanley blurs the bodily distinctions of inside and outside, of self and other. It is the first of several instances in his life where past restraints and commitments would be tossed “overboard” at the arrival of a new profession. His life, then, is one of constant migration and new beginnings. However, Hanley seemed to embrace this peripatetic unsettlement. He writes his friend Frank Harrington that a “creative writer’s real home lies on the fringe of society. I can see far better, and more distant, looking in, rather than looking out” (Anderson). The title of his 1939 essay collection *Between the Tides* seems to aptly describe this sense of regional displacement. Hanley occupies a curious position of being in-between. He evades a clear distinction of social class, while also having no clear sense of cultural or regional belonging. It is this double displacement that distinguishes Hanley from my other chosen writers, and makes *Grey Children* (1937) the most complicated documentary text in terms of how it bridges the cultural and regional divide. Hanley is an outsider to mining South Wales, while, simultaneously, exploration of its “Special Areas” is a form of reengagement with his working-class origins.

Hanley's class distinction is further complicated in adult life when he became a full-time writer. Having been discharged from the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1918, Hanley, returned to Liverpool and worked as a railway porter. It was during this time that he decided to pursue a career as a novelist, writing *Drift* (1930) late at night between shifts. This marked the beginning of a prolific literary output for the young proletarian writer, publishing several novels and short story collections – including his most famous works *Boy* (1931) and *The Furrys* (1935). While suffering a precarious financial position for much of his career, Hanley's writing allowed him to transcend the Kirkdale slums of his childhood. He purchased a small cottage near Corwen, North Wales, in 1931 where he would live for the rest of his life. Despite his reclusiveness, Hanley remained well connected with London's literary scene. In particular, he developed a close friendship with Charles Lahr, an influential publishing figure and owner of the Progressive Bookshop. In 1934, Hanley was one of the leading figures in the creation of the British Section of the Writers International, and represented Britain alongside E. M. Forster at the 1935 Paris Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture. He was also a founder and regular contributor to *Left Review* which made an institutional commitment to publish working-class writers, and he became a judge for their working-class story competitions.

As there is no complete biography of Hanley to date, it is difficult to ascertain why he moved to Wales in 1931, and why, six years later, he was so determined to explore the Rhondda Valley in the south of his adopted country. Gostick posits that Hanley initially rented a cottage near Corwen because “he could live much more cheaply than in London and have all the seclusion he felt he needed for his work” (187). Not only did Hanley find a new home and publishing opportunities in Wales, it was also during this time that he met his wife, Dorothy Heathcote, known as Timothy, the descendent of the aristocratic Langton family and notable pianist and writer. Once again Hanley would throw himself “overboard”, leaving behind the experiences of manual labour – from his time aboard ship, the army, and on the Bootle railyards – to mark a new beginning. It was a new life of pastoral reidentification, and the moment in

which Hanley would henceforth earn his living entirely by writing.

For Fordham, Hanley's self-imposed exile to Wales represents Fredric Jameson's "fantasmatic subtext": "an 'unconscious master-narrative' which is evidence of an authorial desire for plenitude to compensate for a sense of loss" (137). This encapsulates the inherent contradiction of Hanley's 1930s literature. On the one hand, Hanley seeks a necessary distancing from the industrial world. On the other, as seen in his later fiction of the decade, and with *Left Review*, Hanley's authorial commitment reaffirms the fundamental priorities of his proletarian writing. At the heart of this contradiction lies *Grey Children*, a study of the Rhondda Valley district of South Wales and what would prove to be his first, and only, non-fiction text apart from his autobiography.

The Welsh mining experience remained entirely alien to the Northern working-class writer, yet it still allows to engage with his broader proletarian identity. While unemployment affected most of Britain in 1937, when Hanley began his journey to South Wales its concentration was distinctly regional. Earlier in the decade, Ramsay MacDonald's National Government acknowledged four "Distressed Areas" – southern Scotland, North Tyneside, West Cumberland and South Wales – where Britain's mass unemployment was most dire. Diplomatically renamed the Special Areas Act in 1934, each area saw the appointment of two commissioners in the hope of restoring industrial production. However, government efforts seemed to have achieved little by the time Hanley visited the Rhondda Valley. He writes in the foreword:

But when the late Prime Minister described this area as a 'special area' he was rather wide of the mark. On his own assumption it would imply that being so it would receive the consideration due to it, but I have not seen much evidence of it. And in spite of the now apparent belief that, swinging on the full tide of vast re-armament programme, things are beginning to brighten up in South Wales, I am afraid I do not agree at all. In fact, I should say things are worse

and not better. (vii)

In 1937 coal mining still accounted for more than a third of insured workers in South Wales (“The Special Areas” 900).<sup>10</sup> The region, synonymous with mining, was a casualty of locational industry since as Marquand explains, “its boundaries are well defined; for there is no industry of any importance outside the limits of a coalfield” (21). Hanley, as a writer, aimed to not only document the true extent of Wales’ economic crisis, but also give voice to the human suffering. “A special area is a new kind of social hell”, he laments, “with nothing special about it except the demoralization of a whole people, physical and moral” (vii-viii). Rhys Davies offers a similar assessment in his travel guide *My Wales* (1937), claiming that “the collapse of the industry had left a race of people abandoned and useless, ruined and hopeless” (57). Rather than account for the cause of the crisis, *Grey Children* aimed to explore the breakdown of the individual human lives behind the unemployment statistics. “Fortunate are those who live in London and anywhere away from these valleys”, he writes, “The full sense of it does not come home to one until he or she has personally experienced this mass degradation, and the stink of charity in one’s nostrils everywhere” (180).

Hanley, as an English observer, was not alone in examining Wales: the 1930s saw a revisionary interest from writers determined to explore Britain in its regional diversity. With this response came renewed perspectives on the relationships between region and metropolis, industry and domesticity, and, by implication, the working-class and middle-class. Wales, in its position as both a region and nation, incites a peculiar geographical and political aesthetic. As Hopkins writes, Wales represents “a kind of domestic otherness: it is not ‘foreign’ to England, but neither is it wholly familiar” (62).<sup>11</sup> The November 1937 issue of *Fact* is devoted entirely to Phillip Massey’s *Portrait of a Mining Town*, a documentary study of Ebbw Fach, South Wales. It

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<sup>10</sup> The term “insured worker” came after the National Insurance Act 1911, a system of insurance for industrial workers.

<sup>11</sup> H. V. Morton’s *In Search of Wales* (1932) and Susan Buchan’s *The Scent of Water* (1937), are another two notable contemporary works by English outsiders exploring this peculiarity.

was the first of a series of projects by the magazine to survey the “typical corners of Britain as truthfully and penetratingly as if [their] investigators had been inspecting an African village” (4). Like Hanley, Massey bases his project entirely on first-hand observation and interviews, aiming to objectively present the “facts” of the “Distressed Areas”. Massey’s readers, of course, are the English “upper classes” who he claims “know little and care less” about the Welsh proletariat (37-8).

Relocated Welsh writers, too, travelled back to their native homeland. Rhys Davies’ *My Wales*, published in the same year as *Grey Children*, offers in part another documentary account of industrial Wales in its chapter on mining conditions in the Rhondda Valley. Like *Grey Children*, Davies’ account is intended for an English audience, though it is less concerned with documenting working-class life than redressing English misconceptions about Wales and the Welsh character as “true and real Britons” (9). Davies, though, had emigrated to London in the early 1920s to pursue his writing career. He would never live in Wales again, so despite his Welsh nativity, Davies also writes as an outsider and as a mediator of Wales for English readers.

Working-class living conditions were clearly a matter of urgent public attention in 1930s Britain. The unprecedented level of suffering forced a renewed sense of state responsibility regarding the lives of the poor. The 1930 Housing Act and Means Test of the following year saw an influx of government officials investigating working-class welfare. The complications of varied provision and eligibility, alongside incessant visitation, though, created a climate of bureaucratised inquisition for Britain’s working-classes. Hanley, on arrival to the Rhondda Valley, is confused for another government official and seeks clarification from his guide, John Jones:

‘when I first arrived down here I was abruptly asked, “Hello, are you another?” I’ve been rather mystified by that. Perhaps you can tell me what it means?’

Jones explains:

‘Yes. The fact is the men down here, in fact all the people down here, have grown very, very sensitive about the enormous number of people who come down here from London or Oxford and Cambridge, making enquiries, inspecting places, descending underground, questioning women about their cooking, asking men strings of questions about this and that and the other. (22)

Jones makes no distinction between the purpose or agenda of the outside observers: the body of housing and sanitary inspectors, truancy and child-welfare officers are homogenised as one intrusive force. His comment reflects a general loathing of central government officialdom, who further alienate the Welsh working-classes through humiliating processes of scrutiny. Ivor Thomas, another of Hanley's respondents, shares Jones' contempt for “the officials swarming around town”: “You can't blow your nose but they know about it”, he complains, “you'd think we had no feelings at all” (14). Vincent writes of how each visit brought a threat to household assistance, or even the possibility of eviction, if the working-class beneficiaries failed to “conform to standards of conduct set out in the rule books” (77). Moreover, regular inspections from government officials imposed a sense of intrusion upon the working-classes. As Wilson explains, “the Means Test recalled a reading of the working-class home as thoroughfare – as social, if not public space” (92). Bureaucratic regulations also had the potential to separate families. An unnamed miner's wife tells Hanley, “my father had to leave us because when my husband was drawing dole they deducted the amount of the old man's pension, so he went into the workhouse. He's seventy. No matter what anybody says, it is disgraceful to see your father going to a place like that” (6). Government visitation, regular and far-reaching, seems a torment for the Welsh working-classes. It was important for Hanley, then, as an outside observer, to distinguish himself from the flurry of bureaucrats impinging on the privacy of those living in the Rhondda Valley.

Through Jones' explanation, Hanley creates an implicit distance between middle-class observer and working-class subject, between metropolis and region. Wales remains on the



periphery of Britain as a marginalised centre of impoverishment. According to Jones, “an unemployed man is just ringed round by all kind of officials and all kinds of people interested in his welfare” (23). This interest, though, comes with a socioeconomic and regional misunderstanding. As Ivor Thomas tells Hanley, “You really don't belong to yourself any more, as though it were a crime to be out of work, or it was our fault! A hell of a lot they know in London” (15). For Jones and Thomas, government officials lack a genuine regard for the human lives they are examining. This lack of empathy, it appears, is a result of class difference, and, by implication, the absence of human emotion in government reports. Government officials “travel about in cars and ask how we're getting on”, claims an unnamed miner, “and we go on mending boots and making tables and what not, and not a thought about work in the air at all” (8). While not overtly stated by Hanley, his criticisms of central bureaucracy suggest an unconscious bridging of a cultural divide. Hanley's sympathy emerges as a bridging between government welfare study and literature. His role as a writer allows a more intimate connection with Rhondda's working-class subjects, a connection that cannot be achieved through the statistical abstractions of government reports.

Furthermore, Hanley's *Grey Children* bridges the divide between metropolis and region. Jones elaborates to Hanley: “Now we're Welsh. We're a proud people, but we also have a code of manners that the English quite misunderstand” (22). It is the same “critical feeling of difference” (3) Davies writes of in *My Wales* – a difference of distinct Welsh nationality and spirit misunderstood, it seems, by officious English observers. Hanley, however, exists somewhere in-between. He is neither a working class miner nor bureaucratic observer; neither Welsh nor Londoner. Hanley's confused spiritual and regional position, alongside his objective as a writer, separates his purpose from the faceless mass of bureaucrats. Part of this episode with Jones, then, positions Hanley as a bridge between the economic and cultural divide: as a mediator transmitting the experiences of South Wales back to London's middle-class readership. As he explains in the foreword: “I have tried to deal with them [Rhondda's

inhabitants] as people and not so much as problems. They have had their say and I have no comment to make, for I could not better their own words” (vii). Hanley’s perspective is one of admiration for his subjects, reminding his readers that the Welsh working-classes are indeed human. His outsider status, too, allows a platform for the Rhondda working-classes to reflect in detail on their circumstances. “I hope you don't mind my talking so much”, Jones tells Hanley, “But, honestly, it's a change to talk to somebody, especially somebody strange to the place” (28).

The interview becomes Hanley’s dominant literary technique to authentically translate the Welsh working-class experience. His opening chapter “Many Voices” interestingly contains no commentary or writing from Hanley himself but is rather a series of unmediated verbatim testimonies from various people of the Rhondda Valley:

‘When the kids have gone to school I go off for a walk. That’s the only thing I do now; walk. Once I used to go to the library, but I read all the books that’s ever been written until my head was buzzing round. Sometimes I get quite fed up with the whole thing, but I’d commit murder for my two kids or for the missus.’ Alfred Hughes. (2)

‘Although my husband is as weak as a cat he was fined two pounds for attacking a constable who was at least six-foot-four, so the court said. He had four stiches in his head. You daren’t open your mouth in these parts. And look at the Swansea business! No, we’re not interested in any social centres, thank you!’ Mrs Pritchards. (11)

‘When I was a lad of seven I went to work in the pit strapped on my father's back. That's all I got to say.’ Seventy-seven-year-old pensioner. (11)

Hanley’s opening chapter allows his subjects to exist on equal terms, with no single perspective achieving a dominant authority. We read the voices of the employed and unemployed, old and

young, healthy and sick, named and unnamed, all distinctly independent from one another.

Hopkins observes that Hanley's opening chapter creates "a strong sense of the real, autonomous human being crushed by a system which is simultaneously inhuman, and yet enacted through particular human beings" (68). Throughout most of the testimonies, unemployment is felt as a dehumanising experience, particularly in regard to Means Test inspections. "All these questions every day", remarks Daniel Griffiths, "and being watched, and spied on at every hand's turn, and this blasted Means Test business. That's the worst – it's inhuman" (5). Another respondent, Evelyn Jones, shares a similar sentiment: "We have the Means Test fellow here on Tuesdays. It's very difficult. I can't stand the missus crying, and that always happens when he arrives. We're just bloody numbers down here. That's all – just bloody numbers" (3). The bureaucratic concern for the poor, a system reliant on quantitative analysis, appears insensitive to the privacy and empathy of real individuals. The Rhondda Valley working classes are also dehumanised in biological terms, as if they were another species. The chapter begins with an unnamed miner declaring, "we're about fed up with people coming down here looking us over as though we were animals in a zoo" (1). John Williams describes to Hanley a sense of unwanted enclosure: "I wonder they don't send a man round to see us eating out meals! All we'd want then is bloody cages" (9). By beginning the text with "Many Voices", Hanley asserts his documentary commitment of giving voice to the Welsh working-classes. *Grey Children*, in turn, immediately projects the human quality of its respondents. This is an example of Hanley crossing the cultural divide between science and arts. The Welsh working-classes are not just statistical abstractions, nor are they a wholly foreign culture or species, but human beings with a multitude of perspectives and opinions.

Hanley's opening chapter achieves a similar outcome as the famous 1934 collection of interviews, *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, by H. L. Beales and R. S. Lambert. The project, originally published in *The Listener*, presents a cross-section of twenty-five unemployed men and women of various ages and occupational categories. In most cases, the memoirs were written by the

unemployed themselves, though sub-editing was necessary in presenting the answers “grammatically into line with each other” (13). One contributor, a Rhondda miner, shares the same feelings of humiliation as Hanley’s respondents:

After being out of work for some time, investigation officers called at our houses to confirm information given to the Exchange – about birth of children, income, etc., and it seemed to creep into the minds of the men that they were being spied upon, and that if they were caught in the house, or street corner, or carrying coal, they were in for it. (144)

With the aim of representing the “authentic voice of the unemployed” (13), one must question why Beales and Lambert, grammatical inconsistencies aside, publish *Memoirs of the Unemployed* in Standard English? The same accusation can be applied to *Grey Children*. While there seems to be no access to interview transcripts, or even Hanley’s personal notes for the novel, he clearly converts the Welsh working-class dialect into Standard English. As he concedes in the foreword, “I have no comment to make” on the Rhondda Valley working classes, “for I could not better their own words” (vii). Hanley presumably makes this decision with a middle-class readership in mind, as Methuen was a mainstream London publisher. Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933) offers one of the most well-known contemporary examples of including working-class dialect in fiction. In his treatment of Hanky Park, an industrial slum of Salford, Greenwood negotiates the regional differences of North and South through what Constantine observes as “the curious practice of translating all dialect expressions into language readily comprehensible” (243). Much working-class dialogue in the novel is followed by Greenwood’s own parenthetical translation, such as when Mr Hardcastle warns his family on the dangers of thrifting: “what we can’t pay for cash down we’ll do bout (without)” (92), or when Harry declares to his father, “ah’ll ne’er part wi’ a brown (penny)” (221-2). Lewis Grassie Gibbon, in his *A Scots Quair* trilogy (1932-4), also inflects his native Braid Scots dialect for a middle-class English audience.

However, the problem of standardising working-class English was not limited to literature. Klaus

attributes the failure of 1930s British radio as a principal documentary form to the “BBC’s proscription on anything other than ‘correct’ English” (131). This proscription, according to Klaus, effectively deprived the working-classes the opportunity for public expression. *Grey Children*, then, raises the issue of linguistic determinism: “that identity and consciousness are only genuinely expressed through language that is native to the experience” (Wade 118). Despite documentary literature aiming to authenticate the working-class experience through participant observation, the question remains whether public expression in literature was possible for the working-classes? Orwell, in a letter to Jack Common, remains doubtful:

As to the great proletarian novel, I really don’t see how it’s to come into existence [...] the thing is that all of us talk and write two different languages, and when a man from, say, Scotland or even Yorkshire writes in standard English he’s writing something quite different from his own tongue as Spanish is from Italian. I think the first real prole novel that comes along will be spoken over the radio. (314)

It was impossible, in Orwell’s view, for the working-classes to create an independent literature while not the dominant class. For him the contemporary novel as a form was inherently a bourgeois mode of production, fundamentally incompatible with the revolutionary potential of working-class writing.

While Hanley’s wider aim is to let the people of South Wales articulate the realities of unemployment for themselves, John Jones becomes a carefully selected representative of their experience. Jones is an important figure for Hanley, acting as a guide for most of the text, and is the character who receives the most attention. Through Jones, Hanley (and the reader) are introduced to working-class Wales. It is with him that we walk the streets of the Rhondda Valley villages and towns, meeting various members of the community, and slowly uncover the everyday minutiae of idleness. Hanley explains Jones’ significance:

He seemed to me to be a fair example of the Welsh miner. He was intelligent,

a sensitive man, and very much alive to what was going on in the world about him. He read much, thought much, and also, as one could see from that sensitive face, he felt about many things too. An ideal subject to draw out. (22)

For Hanley, Jones represents ordinary life in the Rhondda Valley: “he has worked in the mines since he was fourteen, and has been out of work for eight years” (17). Jones is a member of the Independent Labour Party and supporter of the Miners Federation, and despite his circumstances, seems to maintain a sense of respectability, maintaining a “scrupulously clean” home and vegetable garden (17). Interestingly, Jones himself seems conscious of Hanley’s literary construction. “Mind you, we don't always have this kind of dinner; sometimes we've had none at all”, he remarks to Hanley after sharing a dinner of mutton and vegetables, “I don't want you to go away thinking, ‘oh well, if they can put up dinners like that it's not so bad with them after all” (19-20). Like Hanley wanting to project a particular Welsh experience, Jones, too, is careful to emphasise an authentic representation.

Jones also embodies the paradoxical nature of unemployment in South Wales. On the one hand, the urgency and desperation of unemployment fuels a desire to do “any kind of work rather than feel so bloody useless” (27). On the other, having been idle for almost a decade, “up in the fresh air all the time”, Jones fears a return to the coal pit (27). It seems it is not until he is unemployed that Jones can objectively reflect on the dangers of the mining industry, and the oppressive industrial system more broadly. Heinemann writes of the dangers of mining compared to other industries at the time: “The death rate from accident is nine times as high as in the factories. The general accident rate is six times as high as in the factories, twice as high as in the docks, five times as high as in shipping” (65). Ted, a former miner of twenty-five years, shares the same feelings as Jones. Idle for “some time”, Ted had “become through a period of years what so many of them had become: acclimatized to a new kind of life, no work and no money, worry and scheming from day to day, but on the other hand they enjoyed a freedom they had never known” (206).

Years of idleness above ground have renewed Jones' perspective, allowing him time to reflect on his economic and societal position. Hanley explains that "for the first time in his life" Jones can objectively see the "miserable-looking surroundings" that define his economic and environmental position (24). Unemployment, then, becomes "a freedom of a kind" for Jones, albeit "a rather lousy kind of freedom": an unwanted freedom of "ill" health and "under-nourishment" (27). Rather than the liberty of free time, Jones experiences a hopeless monotony of street-corners "the same as the day before; men and lads talking together, all the same things over and over again, not a sign of any work" (27). With nearly one third of the insured population out of work, Jones' freedom is sadly shared by the "seventy or eighty thousand" other unemployed men in the Rhondda Valley (19). Furthermore, his fear of returning to the colliery is in part reflective of a changing mindset in the Rhondda community. Jones explains to Hanley the generational mining tradition, an industry synonymous with south Wales: "It's just something in your blood, I suppose, it pulls you underground, so to speak. You do what your father did and what his father did, that's how things work out in a mining district" (142). However, Jones claims, "it's a new race of people altogether that's growing up" (142). Rhondda's inhabitants, especially those younger and out of work, having witnessed the terrible potential for accidents and industrial disease, had become increasingly aware of the dangers of the coal pit, seeking work elsewhere. "Many miners refuse to let their boys go below", Jones claims, "there's a generation that's grown up now with its eyes wide open, and it looked around a bit and it saw things, and it has seen, too, the lousy deal miners have had ever since mines were sunk" (20).

South Wales' "Special Area" imposes a mental and physical degradation not only on the inhabitants of Hanley's present, but also inhabitants to come. Hanley's chapter "Children" laments the innocent lives of Rhondda Valley's children destined to cyclic misery. For Hanley, the children of the "Special Area" indeed reflect the "special problem itself" (171). "The child is voiceless", he explains, "it can make no protest against anything; it relies entirely upon its elders for everything. It lives in the most appalling surroundings without understanding their

significance" (171). The social tragedy, for Hanley, is their wasted potential. An unnamed teacher, he claims, "said that the level of intelligence amongst miners' children was above the average in his opinion, and he had taught in schools outside Wales" (189). There is indeed no opportunity to use their supposed above average intellect when fated to a life of unemployment. The same teacher shares with Hanley a hopeless outlook for his pupils:

'Why should these children have to pay so cruelly for the mistakes of their elders? Why should they be denied the ordinary comforts that we would never think of refusing to a pit pony? Why? It's not a very difficult question though it might be a hard one to answer. Did you ever see a farmer putting a colt out to work in the field before it was ready for such work? No. But nothing is thought of sending a boy half a mile under the earth to work like a nigger for a miserable wage that wouldn't keep a race-horse in good hay'. (190)

It is a reality Hanley explores with particular pathos in his early fiction. Fearon, the intellectually promising protagonist in *Boy*, is forced to work on the Liverpool docks so as to contribute to the family economy. Fearon's headmaster, Mr Sweeney, shares a similar sentiment to the unnamed teacher in *Grey Children* lamenting how many of "his pupils had been dragged from their benches, some willingly, many unwillingly, and sent down to work amongst men at that tender age" (13). The children of the Rhondda Valley face the same fate as those children in Fearon's Liverpool. For both, the romantic narrative of childhood as a time devoted for play and education is brutally unachievable. "Even their play is dangerous", remarks Hanley, "for they have only the street or main road" (175). However, children prematurely exiting education to join the labour force was a common reality in working-class Britain. With the introduction of the Education Act 1918 came a raise in the school leaving age to fourteen years old (Cunningham 422). Fearon, through an exemption from the Education Committee, leaves school at thirteen. His father tells him of the "young whipper-snappers down at the docks not half your age" who "work like men" (18). While Mr Fearon speaks in hyperbole, one gets the impression that, because of the



pressures of working-class poverty, child labour laws were not always adhered to. While Fearon at least has the possibility of work at the Liverpool docks, the prospects for the children in *Grey Children* seem much more distressing. The teacher explains to Hanley that his students are ultimately left with two choices upon leaving school: “live at home and don’t work, as there isn’t any for them”, or leave South Wales altogether in the hope of finding “jobs in factories or any kind of work at all” (180).

It is also in children that the physical and biological results of poverty are most overt. Hanley notes that “the money isn’t there to buy food”, resulting in “underfeeding” and “hastily eaten meals, often of the cheapest kind, from which the children can derive little or no sustenance” (184). Ill-fed and ill-clothed, the children of the Rhondda Valley are condemned to a foreshortened life, unaware of their future being lost. Moreover, the children seem to be perpetually fatigued. Overcrowding and inadequate sleeping conditions, alongside morning work commitments like paper and milk delivery, result in many children arriving to school looking not “like children at all, but rather like little old people” (172). Their lives are sadly turned, for reasons beyond their comprehension, into “many little hells” – a reality of malnutrition, sleep deprivation, and domestic duties. If the state of affairs continue, Hanley warns, “one might expect some reversion to savagery” (180). While the loss of innocence and beauty is pitiable, for the people of the Rhondda Valley it is especially tragic, as it marks the beginning of something potentially frightening:

It is not only an absence of work, it is a real moral descent into the abyss, a descent too deep for any so-called Christianity to retrieve it. It is, in brief, a state of sheer worthlessness. I intend to keep on saying this because people, men and women and children, are going on living in the middle of it all, at this very moment. (180)

This is reminiscent of Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1903), who comprehends, in the same apocalyptic tone, a Hobbesian biological legacy for the children of the East End: “It is

incontrovertible that the children grow up into rotten adults, without virility or stamina, a weak-kneed, narrow-chested, listless breed, that crumples up and goes down in the brute struggle for life” (23). For Hanley, severe impoverishment has transformed south Wales into a state of nature: “a moral, social and industrial jungle” (192).

Hanley’s displacement in terms of class and regional belonging complicates his position as a documentary writer. Hanley was certainly raised in a working-class family, despite holding certain degrees of middle-class cultural capital. The constant movement of his adolescence, and international career at sea, though, denies him a clear sense of regional identity. *Grey Children* serves as an anthropological study of Wales’ “Special Areas” by an outside observer. In his capacity as a writer, Hanley acts as mediator between Rhondda Valley’s working-classes and a Southern English audience, transmitting the human aspect of unemployment unseen by contemporary central government investigation. *Grey Children*, thus, bridges the cultural divide between region and metropolis, while also, in Hanley’s eyes, redressing the insufficiencies of scientific report. Hanley’s documentary text can also be viewed as a bridging of the tensions inherent within his own personal identity: his journey to South Wales is both a reengagement with his working-class origins, albeit in a different industrial region to his childhood, and an engagement with Wales itself, the country of his newly adopted home.

### 3. Beyond Orwell's Nose: Obsessions with the Body in *The Road to Wigan Pier*

I began last Week to permit my Wife to sit at Dinner with me, at the farthest End of a long Table; and to answer (but with the utmost Brevity) the few Questions I asked her. Yet, the smell of a *Yaboo* continuing very offensive, I always keep my Nose well stopped with Rue, Lavender, or Tobacco-Leaves. (Swift 276)

Much literary scholarship concerns George Orwell's treatment of smell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), in particular, how his olfactory descriptions proved him a hypocrite. His famous pronouncement that "*the lower classes smell*", when taken directly, certainly suggests Orwell failed to evade the prejudicial trappings of the middle-class to which he claimed to no longer belong (119). However, its qualification marks a more sophisticated polemic against the British middle-classes, rather than an assertion of personal prejudice. The middle-classes, he claims, even the most enthusiastic bourgeois socialists, will never truly believe the working class to be equal: "It is summed up in the four frightful words which people nowadays are chary of uttering, but which were bandied about quite freely in my childhood. The words were: 'The lower classes smell'" (119). What Orwell asserts is that the middle-classes think, and were brought up to believe through social conditioning, that the lower classes smell. "Here you come to the real secret of class distinctions", he claims: class prejudice extends beyond one's cerebral understanding to a physical manifestation (119). Rather than place the body and mind as two opposing binaries, working-class labour and middle-class cognition, Orwell suggests that the two are intrinsically linked. I will argue that Orwell takes this fundamental division between working-class and middle-class further than his nose: *Wigan Pier* is a text obsessed with the entire body, "an impossible barrier" for a classless socialist utopia many of his middle-class contemporaries claimed to champion (119). While Orwell employs statistics and figures to supplement the text's

objectivity, it is his more “literary” descriptions that deal with the literal body of his own experience, and thus provide a more visceral and effective treatment of his documentary material. It is through Orwell’s “literary” qualities that epitomise the documentary impulse in the sense of portraying the gritty reality of working-class existence, and are therefore the “literary” parts of *Wigan Pier* mark the paradoxical crossing of the cultural divide.

*Wigan Pier* is divided into two parts. Part One provides a straightforward account of what Orwell experienced during his two-month journey through Wigan, Barnsley and Sheffield in 1936, documenting industrial living and working conditions. He maintains that he travelled to the mining regions partly because he “wanted to see what mass-unemployment is like at its worst, partly in order to see the most typical section of the English working class at close quarters” (113). However, Crick explains, the idea of *Wigan Pier* came from Orwell’s publisher, Victor Gollancz, who “wanted the same kind of thing as *Down and Out* but now a book about working men in poverty and unemployment, not tramps and out-casts. The idea was Gollancz’s, not Orwell’s” (181). Until then, while his sympathies lay with the marginalised members of society, the still emerging and experimenting Orwell was not an overtly political writer. Part Two, then, becomes striking in its directness, serving as both an acknowledgement of Orwell’s own class prejudices, and as a polemical essay against the middle-class socialists of Gollancz and the Left Book Club who respectively published and read the book. In the North, Orwell primarily stayed in common lodging houses, witnessing some of England’s most severe industrial distress. Crick notes the meticulous research Orwell conducted during his two months stay in the North:

Orwell was taken into many houses, simply saying that he wanted to see how people lived. He made systemic notes on housing conditions and wages. He spent several days in the local Public Library, his name is in the register (as Eric Blair), consulting reports on public health and conditions in the mines. He did his homework as a social investigator. He typed up his notes neatly [...] six pages on Wigan (about 4,500 words) categorised under Population, Health, Employment

(including rates of pay and unemployment benefits, etc.), Housing, Religion and Miners. (184)

From this account, Orwell seems to have taken his role as an ethnographer seriously, perhaps more so than his role as a writer. While both parts of *Wigan Pier* constitute non-fiction, Orwell's process of selection, abstraction and arrangement, is a literary one. As Williams asserts, "the character of the observer [Orwell] is as real and yet created as the real and yet created world he so powerfully describes" (51). Part One serves as a sociological study of working-class conditions, while simultaneously providing a response to those conditions by Orwell as a narrator and outside observer.

In both parts of *Wigan Pier*, Orwell employs factual figures and statistics to supplement the ethnographic report. However, these documentary aspects of the text, aimed to achieve a more authoritative objectivity and redress middle-class skepticism, perform a kind of disembodiment. Figures and statistics (alongside Orwell's plain, referential style), by virtue of being empirical, remain removed from the literal body itself. The more documentary aspects of Part One, particularly Orwell's use of statistical data from various health, nutrition, housing and unemployment surveys, alongside his own diary entries on specifications of observed slum houses, aim to supplement the objectivity of his observations in Wigan. Orwell's literary description, then, is connected with the quantitative, giving the text the appearance of an authentic, statistical document. The astonishing living conditions he so viscerally describes in Part One, for example, are placed within the context of Wigan's unemployment statistics:

Take the figures for Wigan, which is typical enough of the industrial and mining districts. The number of insured workers is round about 36,000 (26,000 men and 10,000 women). Of these, the number of unemployed at the beginning of 1936 was about 10,000. But this was in winter when the mines are working full-time; in summer it would probably be 12,000. Multiply by three, as above, and you get 30,000 or 36,000. The total population of Wigan is a little under 87,000; so at any

moment more than one person in three out of the whole population – not merely the registered workers – is either drawing or living on the dole. (70)

Orwell, too, directs his documentary attention to wider national discourses on working-class diet, which, of course, implicitly concern his obsession with the body. As Orwell reminds us rather crudely, “a human being is primarily a bag for putting food into” (84). For example, Orwell compares the allowance of an unemployed miner and his wife, representing their weekly expenditure “exactly as possible”, with a scientific study in the *New Statesman* on “the minimum weekly sum on which a human being could be kept alive” (85-7). The first budget, for the man, his wife and two infant children, allows a weekly expenditure of thirty-two shillings (the allowance from the Public Assistance Committee):

	s.	d.
Rent	9	0 $\frac{1}{2}$
Clothing Club	3	0
Coal	2	0
Gas	1	3
Milk	0	10 $\frac{1}{2}$
Union fees	0	3
Insurance (on the children)	0	2
Meat	2	6
Flour (2 stone)	3	4
Yeast	0	4
Potatoes	1	0
Dripping	0	10
Margarine	0	10
Bacon	1	2

Sugar	1	9
Tea	1	0
Jam	0	$7\frac{1}{2}$
Peas and cabbage	0	6
Carrots and onions	0	4
Quaker oats	0	$4\frac{1}{2}$
Soap, powders, blue, etc.	0	10

Total    £ 1    12    0    (85-6)

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Orwell stresses that this list is not comprehensive: the budget leaves out several necessities needed to produce and cook food in the first place, such as fuel and replacement of utensils. He also omits more general domestic expenses like furniture, bedding and clothing costs. “Any money spent on these”, he remarks, “would mean reduction to some other item [of food]” (86). The purpose of this budget is to remind his readers how little the working-classes have to spend on their own sustenance. It seems during the 1930s there was much debate among dietitians and sociologists about the theoretical minimum on which human beings could be kept alive. To emphasise the economic limitations on this family’s nourishment, and indeed the Wigan working-classes more generally, Orwell compares the allowance with one published in the *New Statesman*:

	s.	d.
3 wholemeal loaves	1	0
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. margarine	0	$2\frac{1}{2}$
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. dripping	0	3

1 lb. cheese	0	7	
1 lb. onions	0	$1\frac{1}{2}$	
1 lb. carrots	0	$1\frac{1}{2}$	
1 lb. broken biscuits	0	4	
2 lb. dates	0	6	
1 tin evaporated milk	0	5	
10 oranges	0	5	
<hr/>			
Total	3	$11\frac{1}{2}$	(87)
<hr/>			

The second budget, surprisingly, has no allowance for fuel, as its author “explicitly stated that he could not afford to buy fuel and ate all his food raw” (87). Orwell chose the second budget especially because it “represents about as wise an expenditure as could be contrived” (87). The comparison serves not to condemn the first working-class family’s dietary spending, but rather emphasise their needs as human beings. While it may be achievable, at least in theory, to survive on three shillings and eleven-and-a-half pence per week, Orwell writes, “the ordinary human being”, such as those he has observed in Wigan, “would sooner starve than live on brown bread and raw carrots” (88). Those involved in the “disgusting public wrangle” – dietitians, sociologists, and writers to the *New Statesman* and the *News of the World* – Orwell claims, fail to understand the sheer misery of poverty. It is the lived experience of this misery that separates documentary writers from social scientists. For Orwell, a purely quantitative assessment of working-class conditions is insufficient, as “no human being finds it easy to regard himself as a statistical unit” (79). The dehumanising nature of unemployment figures fail to translate “that frightful feeling of impotence and despair which is almost the worst evil of unemployment – far



worse than any hardship, worse than the demoralisation of enforced idleness” (79). This is the advantage of documentary literature, of living among, and participating in, working-class life. Orwell, through his participant observation in Wigan, recognises that those “underfed, harassed, bored and miserable”, despite their circumstances, “don’t want to eat dull wholesome food” (88). Moreover, the use of figures and statistics is particularly striking for being included in a text by a literary writer. *Wigan Pier* is the first, and only, long nonfiction of Orwell’s to include statistical data, establishing an interconnection between science and literature, between the theoretical and visceral treatments of the body. This data can be read as an anticipation of the bodily obsessions he reveals later in the text.

And yet, despite how striking and unusual the inclusions of figures and statistics in literature is, the more affecting treatment of the body and its relation to class prejudice are found in the “literary” parts of *Wigan Pier*. The beginning, for example, is indistinguishable from a realist novel. As Orwell describes, “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). Immediately Orwell portrays the impressions the environment makes upon the body. His working-class subjects begin their day’s work in predictable routine, the waking to each day dictated to the inexorable forces of industrialism. *Wigan Pier* opens at the lodging house of Mr and Mrs Brooker: a setting chosen – perhaps deliberately – for its inconceivable dirtiness. Orwell’s landlord and landlady are exaggerated for literary effect as caricatures of everything grotesque about working-class living conditions and attitudes. The two complain incessantly, adding to Orwell’s disgust. Mrs Brooker lies “permanently ill” from “over-eating”, constantly wiping her mouth with used strips of newspaper that litter the floor in slimy “crumpled-up balls” (5-13). Due to his wife being invalid, Mr Brooker does most of the housework, including the preparation of food. The Brookers’ dirtiness proves overwhelming when it impinges upon the boundaries of Orwell’s own body. Mr Brooker’s “permanently dirty hands” prove impossible to evade because of his “peculiarly

intimate, lingering manner of handling things. If he gave you a slice of bread-and-butter there was always a black thumb-print on it” (6). Orwell’s treatment of the Brookers provides an example of what Kristeva terms abjection, namely, the response of repugnance caused by threats to bodily boundaries: “something rejected from which one does not part” (4), for example, “a piece of filth, waste of dung” (2). Orwell writes, “on the day there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table I decided to leave” (14). The full chamber-pot represents the abject, signifying the other side of Orwell’s bodily border, encroaching upon the very place he eats food. Orwell is forced to leave the lodging house when its odour imposes itself upon his physical boundaries. He cannot escape the persuasive power of “the dirt, the smells and the vile food” entering his lungs, imbuing his body.

Typical of other documentary writers, Orwell treats the Wigan working-classes as a foreign culture, performing the role of a writer turned ethnographer. Like Tom Harrisson in *The Pub and the People*, Orwell employs the familiar colonial dichotomy of “civilised” and “uncivilised”, framing his journey North as a “civilised man venturing among the savages” (101). Harrisson’s experience in the Western Pacific prompted his later study of domestic anthropology. The impetus behind Orwell’s journey North, too, is partly derived from his time abroad (in both Burma and Paris). Rather than a purely anthropological interest, though, Orwell’s journey to Wigan was part of a wider 1930s commitment – as seen in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) – to submerge himself “right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against the tyrants” (*W.P.* 138). *Down and Out in Paris in London*, while concerning England’s destitute, is more like slum fiction than documentary literature. Its adventure tale narrative, with Orwell masquerading as a tramp rather than living among them as an outside observer, maintains a generic consistency. “Some day I want to explore the world [of poverty] more thoroughly”, he concludes in the earlier memoir, “to understand what really goes on in the souls of *plonguers* and tramps and Embankment sleepers” (229-30). *Wigan Pier* advances this commitment in a more complicated examination of

both working-class conditions and the prejudices of middle-class socialists. Orwell served in Burma for five years in the Indian Imperial Police Force. He remarks in *Wigan Pier* on the oppressive realities of colonialism, an experience that left him haunted by “innumerable remembered faces” of prisoners, subordinates, and those incarcerated by the British Empire (138). The same tyranny he witnessed and enforced in the sub-continent, Orwell realises, could be found at home: “Here in England, down under one’s feet, were the submerged working class, suffering miseries which in their different way were as bad as any oriental ever knows” (139).

Orwell’s colonial dichotomy provides an analogy between imperialist and domestic oppression. In his essay, “A Hanging” (1931), Orwell describes a hanging he witnessed while serving in Burma:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realised what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working – bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming – all toiling away in solemn foolery. (45)

Rae posits that “this intense moment of sympathetic identification” marks “a turning-point in Orwell’s career, rendering him hostile to Britain’s imperialist enterprise and determined to understand the inner lives of its casualties, both abroad and at home” (82). To begin in comprehending the lives of the oppressed, Orwell suggests, one must “identity with that person’s body” (Rae 82). Orwell employs this colonial analogy most evocatively in *Wigan Pier* through his descriptions of the body. There is constant emphasis on the blackened faces of the miners, emerging from the pit like “negro[es]” with distinctive blue scars on their noses, forming “a blue stain like tattooing” (32-3). Later, in Sheffield, Orwell describes the feeling of “walking among a population of troglodytes”, with the children holding a “frail blue appearance” from calcium deficiency (89). These visceral details, verging at times on ethnographic report, create the

sense that the Northern working-classes are entirely foreign race living within England itself. In Part Two, Orwell continues this characterisation, reflecting on how he was raised to believe “‘common’ people were ‘sub-human’: they had coarse faces, hideous accents and gross manners, they hated everyone who was not like themselves” (117). Orwell’s characterisation is in part because the mining and labouring classes, particularly in the North, were as foreign to him as the Burmese on the sub-continent. “Watching coal-miners at work”, Orwell remarks, “you realise momentarily what different universes different people inhabit. Down there where coal is dug it is a sort of world apart which one can quite easily go through life without ever hearing about” (29). *Wigan Pier* represents a mission to not only find this “world apart”, but live it momentarily, and report back on, thereby bridging the divide between colonised and coloniser, between working-class and middle-class. It is through his treatment of the body that Orwell would “pierce [the] wall of indifference”, to use Zwerdling’s phrase, “and make his audience conscious of life outside the pale” (138). Despite treating the working-classes as a foreign culture, Orwell aimed to emulate their lived experiences, to temporarily be a part of their world.

The “population of troglodytes” Orwell describes are not only a product of appalling living conditions and diet, but also, Orwell alleges, the mechanisation of modern life. As Orwell puts it, “the prevailing physique” is not just symptomatic of England’s industrial centres, “for it is probable that the physical average has been declining all over England for a long time past” (90). He bases this claim on two factors. Firstly, “that the Great War [had] carefully selected the million best men in England and slaughtered them”, and secondly, on modernity’s “unhealthy ways of living”, that is, how mechanisation and mass production had provided “cheap substitutes for everything” (91). Pearce outlines the fallaciousness of such an argument, claiming Orwell was advancing a misleading perspective:

People were healthier and were living longer in 1936 than ever before in British history. A far higher percentage of men were fit to fight in 1939 than in 1914. And if there were fewer unemployed before 1914, real wages for many

full-time manual workers in the 1900s were lower than the dole for those forced to live on it in the last 1930s. (426)

While there is certainly cause for scepticism in assessing the validity of Orwell's claims, the impoverishment of the northern working classes is displayed in their bodies. As Jacobs writes, for Orwell, "the body serves as a symbol of the social order, and a degenerate social order must produce an inferior physical type" (5). In their physical weakness and degeneracy, the working-class body is a sign both of an increasingly unsympathetic industrial system and the "mentality of the English governing class" which condemns a working-class family "to live on thirty shillings a week", while also having "the damned impertinence to tell them how they are to spend their money" (92).

At times, Orwell goes beyond the "darkest Africa" trope, comparing the industrialised North to a kind of abyss. The analogy between poverty and an earthly hell was a common one. Orwell's Wigan with "smoke and filth that must go on for ever" (15) is reminiscent of Jack London's East End in *The People of the Abyss*, which Tambling claims had a profound effect on young Orwell at Eton (171). It is Orwell's description when entering a mine for the first time, though, that best describes a biblical descent into a subterranean underworld:

The time to go there is when the machines are roaring and the air is black with coal dust, and when you can actually see what the miners have to do. At those times the place is like hell, or at any rate like my own mental picture of hell. Most of the things one imagines in hell are there – heat, noise, confusion, darkness, foul air, and, above all, unbearably cramped space. Everything except the fire, for there is no fire down there except the feeble beams of Davy lamps and electric torches which scarcely penetrate the clouds of coal dust. (18)

Orwell's descent is both literal and metaphorical. On the one hand, bent double, crawling through the claustrophobic coal-face, Orwell submerges himself to act-out a day's work of a miner in order to understand their labouring conditions. He emphasises the arduousness of their

work by registering its effects on their bodies, the “unbearable agony” of pained knees and thighs, and “constant crick in the neck” (23). Coal was the invisible heart of Britain’s Industrial Revolution, and, in 1930s, remained integral to the Imperial economy. “It keeps us alive”, Orwell declares, despite the English middle-classes being largely “oblivious of its existence” (30). His descent into the mine, engaging in the “frightful business of crawling to and fro” (25) proves the necessity of objective observation in documentary literature: the belief of seeing something first-hand in order to understand it. It is with this lived experience, a literal submerging of the body, that Orwell can criticise the ignorance of his middle-class audience:

It is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. You and I and the editor of the Times Lit. Supp., and the Nancy poets and the Archbishop of Canterbury and Comrade x, the author of *Marxism for Infants* – all of us, really, owe the comparative decency of our lives to lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel. (30-1)

On the other hand, by likening the descent to hell itself, Orwell evokes the panic and fear of downward socio-economic mobility, the prospect of the lower-middle-class sinking into the labouring classes is a vision of hell. Orwell is constantly reminding his readers of the fragility of his “lower-upper-middle-class” position and the struggle his class face in maintaining bourgeois appearances on a low income (113, 128). As Hoggart explains it, it was “a superiority maintained only, or almost entirely, by their accents; a thin thread keeping them from the abyss” (vii).

Orwell’s strongest identification with bodily class differences is in his treatment of smell. He admits that the lower classes are “bound to be” dirtier than the upper classes, “considering the circumstances in which they live” (121). Many of those he encountered did not have access to bathrooms, or even wash houses, so one can assume they indeed “smelled” of the filthy living and working conditions in which they lived. The middle-class disgust towards this “smell”, however, was as much an inherited prejudice as of olfactory reaction. “That was what we were

taught [as children]”, he claims, that “the lower classes smell” (119). It was a prejudice inherited from his “lower-upper-middle-class” upbringing, and a prejudice he accuses many of England's bourgeois socialists of still believing. His exploration of smell best illustrates the fundamental argument of *Wigan Pier* that class prejudice is a physical manifestation: that prejudice is part of the body. He declares that

Race hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but a physical repulsion cannot. You can have affection for a murderer or a sodomite, but you cannot have an affection for a man whose breath stinks – habitually stinks, I mean. However well you may wish him, 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)

Orwell treats physical repulsion as an objective fact, an insuperable reality of class distinction. His treatment of class distinctions is more sophisticated, though, than simply adopting this belief as his own. Instead, he discusses how the belief was ingrained from childhood, and the consequences of such a destructive inherited viewpoint: “even ‘lower-class’ people whom you knew to be quite clean – servants, for instance – were faintly unappetising. The smell of their sweat, the very texture of their skins, were mysteriously different from yours” (119-20).

Smell, for Orwell (or rather, the middle-classes he is accusing), signifies the othering of working-class existence. In smell, he tells us, lies “the real secret of class distinctions” (119). He cites W. Somerset Maugham, who anticipates Orwell’s view on smell and class distinctions in his 1922 novel *On a Chinese Screen*:

For in the West we are divided from our fellows by our sense of smell. The working man is our master, inclined to rule us with an iron hand, but it cannot be denied that he stinks: none can wonder at it, for a bath in the dawn when you have to hurry to your work before the factory bell rings is no pleasant

thing, nor does heavy labour rend to sweetness; and you do not change your linen more than you can help when your week's washing must be done by a sharp-tongued wife. I do not blame the working man because he stinks, but stink he does. It makes social intercourse difficult to persons of a sensitive nostril. (142)

Orwell later explores the same othering, though instead of middle-class and working-class, he claims smell marks the distinction between coloniser and colonised, civilised and oriental: “like most other races, the Burmese have a distinctive smell – I cannot describe it: it is a smell that makes one's teeth tingle” (121-2). Orwell's discussion of Burma again, though more implicitly on this occasion, places the Northern working-classes as a colonial “other”. Orwell claims the Burmese “smell” is clearly different to that of the English working-classes, but both are distinctively different from himself and the English middle-class he represents. More importantly, Orwell's treatment of smell in *Wigan Pier* extends from a single bodily sense into a force that informs his entire being. Middle-class socialists, he claims, could not simply adopt a position of universal tolerance in a theoretical classless utopia. The efficacy of such an ideal extends beyond the mental, as “to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself” (149). For Orwell, one's entire existence is informed by class distinctions. “My sense of humour,” he claims, as a “typical member” of the middle-class, “my turns of speech, my accent, even the characteristic movements of my body, are the products of a special kind of upbringing and special niche about half-way up the social hierarchy” (149).

The relationship between “fact” and “literature” is not always clear in *Wigan Pier*. The famous passage of a woman unblocking illustrates this dilemma:

At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was blocked. 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 [...] For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her – understood 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).

While this passage seems plausible enough, in reality, it provides the most obvious example of Orwell consciously distorting the events he observed. The scene is described from the window of a train as he leaves Wigan, whereas we know from his diary entries that he observed this woman while walking the town. Despite its perceived clarity, the passage is not just documentary description but reaches towards literary symbolism. The “exhausted face of the slum girl”, employed at the apparent conclusion to Orwell’s journey, marks the poignant culmination to the misery Orwell experienced in the industrial North. Fowler observes, too, the significance of this passage being observed from a train, suggesting not only a “voyeur’s eye about his vision”, but a means of escape (45-6). The train also creates a tangible barrier between Orwell the observer, and the woman as subject, adding to the hopelessness of the situation. The question arises, then, of whether such veracity is necessary in documentary writing, a genre centered on the objectivity of a lived experience. As Crick argues, if we accept *Wigan Pier* consciously as literature, “it doesn’t matter that [Orwell] deals with typical rather than actual events; but if we take it as reportage, than any suspicion of retouching and invention of detail can damage our trust in author’s judgements” (188). This passage exemplifies Orwell’s bridging of the divide between “literature” and documentary reportage. Although this scene was largely imagined by Orwell, it provides a far more visceral account of working-class suffering. The image of the woman unblocking the “foul drain-pipe” is Orwell’s last image of Wigan, and a defining image of human suffering he was witness to. It is through Orwell’s “literary” description in which the grim realities of Wigan are best documented, paradoxically bridging the divide of literature as documentary. While Orwell’s use of statistics and figures throughout *Wigan Pier* aimed to supplement the objectivity of his

experience as if he were an ethnographer, his empiricism performed a kind of disembodiment of the literal body. It is Orwell's "literary" description that provides a more affecting treatment of working-class plight, and of middle-class prejudice as a manifestation of the body. The more "literary" parts of the text, then, serve as the paradoxical bridging of the cultural divide, in that their treatment of the literal body more effectively translates the documentary impulse of working-class suffering that Orwell's empirical data.

#### 4. Working-Class Leisure: Science and Surrealism in *The Pub and the People*

From the start of my own field-work, it has been my deepest and strongest conviction that we must finish by studying ourselves through the same methods and with the same mental attitude with which we approach exotic tribes. (Malinowski qtd. in *Hinton* 103)

In the preface to *The Pub and the People*, Harrisson reflects on his experiences as an anthropologist. Previously financed by the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Society and the British Museum, Harrisson could “go anywhere in the world in search of rare or previously unknown birds from mountain tops, or to peoples with coloured skins” (7). Anthropology was still an emerging scientific discipline in 1937. Its examinations, especially in British anthropology, remained outwardly focused on the discovery of “uncivilised” cultures abroad. Harrisson observes that while he had worked extensively in the jungles of Central Borneo and the Western Pacific, the “wilds” of Lancashire and East Anglia – unknown to the metropolitan middle-class – were entirely neglected by the discipline, arriving at the famous conclusion that “while studiously tabulating the primitive, we had practically no objective anthropology of ourselves” (7).

Harrisson’s realisation encapsulates the fundamental conception of the Mass-Observation project: to turn the anthropological lens inward on the “civilised”, everyday life of contemporary Britain. In 1936 Harrisson journeyed alone to Bolton, immersing himself in working-class life.

He writes of this experience in the preface:

I went to the industrial North of England (until then strange to me) and spent many months working in different jobs, trying to pick up the threads of mass life in Britain in much the same way as one does when visiting a little known country. (7)

Unlike the distant jungles of the Western Pacific, Lancashire remained strange to Harrisson. It would take a rather astonishing coincidence to eventually lead the young anthropologist

to Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings. In 1937, to further promote *Savage Civilisation* (1937), Harrison published a poem about “cannibals” from his new book in the *New Statesman* (the only verse he would ever publish). By chance, Madge’s letter “The Constitutional Crisis and Domestic Anthropology” (1937) appeared on the same page as the poem. Madge was writing in response to Geoffrey Pike, a Cambridge teacher and educationalist, who, in an earlier issue, spoke of the “desperate need” of an “anthropological study” of Britain itself (qtd. in Calder 126).

Madge announced that a group of poets and film-makers had formed a new scientific organisation tasked with conducting an “anthropology at home” (*First Year’s* 105). One month later, another letter appeared in the *New Statesman*, this time authored by Madge, Jennings and Harrison, calling for volunteer mass-observers in what would be the first formal document of the Mass-Observation movement.

Before joining Madge and Jennings, Harrison showed great potential for organising and conducting collective study. He was born in Argentina in 1911. The family returned to England in August 1914 for his father to enlist in the Army. Despite his parents emigrating back to Argentina at the end of the war, Tom, alongside his younger brother Bill, were sent to boarding school. By all accounts it was a miserable experience, yet, in retrospect, Tom reflects:

I think being born far away from the country was a great advantage. I wouldn't change it for anything in the world. This ‘stranger’ situation, the feeling of belonging to England and not belonging to it, [...] the feeling strange in Britain makes it much more exciting to be in Britain. (qtd. in Heimann 12).

As Heimann posits, Harrison’s unusual childhood and separation from his parents, “gave him a similar feeling of belonging and not belonging to human society, as if mankind belonged to a different species from himself” (12-13). Moreover, it allowed Harrison to see Britain from the status of an outsider. His curious relationship with culture and society continued into adulthood. After leaving Cambridge, he briefly lived in Harrow, publishing a book on the birds of the district. He then organised a series of ornithological surveys, one such study involving a

team of one thousand nationwide observers (Calder 125). He rose to prominence as an anthropologist almost accidentally in 1937 with his best-selling *Savage Civilization*, a study of cannibalism in the New Hebrides and was praised for having penetrated and immersed himself in native Malekulan tribal life using the Malinowskian technique of participant observation.

Harrisson's rhetoric in the preface to *The Pub and the People* reinforces the colonial dichotomy between "civilised" and "uncivilised". William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) is probably the first work to impose this trope upon England itself in its exploration of domestic poverty. Booth's title evokes a connection between "darkest Africa" – a common colonial trope, further solidified in later anthropological discourse – and the slums of London's East End. Booth poses in the introduction:

As there is a darkest Africa is there not also a darkest England? Civilisation, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? May we not find a parallel at our own doors, and discover within a stone's throw of our cathedrals and palaces similar horror to those which Stanley has found existing in the great Equatorial forest? (11-12)

Like Booth, Harrisson transports colonial attitudes towards foreign culture to the equally foreign working-class England. As Edmond observes, Harrisson's own "anthropology at home" was "similar to the distinctive version of participant-observation he had practiced in the New Hebrides" (213). For example, *The Pub and the People* proudly declares that "there is not one single direct interview in the whole book" (10). All reported conversation is overheard either by observers secretly, or from observers participating in discussion, as "questions asked by a stranger (the interviewer)", pose the risk of inevitably influencing the responses given (10-11). "What people say", Harrison writes, "is only one part – sometimes a not very important part – of the whole pattern of human thought and behaviour" (11). As with *Savage Civilisation*, Harrisson aimed to immerse himself in the Bolton working-class life he observed. He explains

this insistence of participant observation, and how his unique anthropological methodology could be applied domestically:

Well at the age of 22 I went to an island in the pacific called Malekula and spent three years living among cannibals, whom I found were neither better nor worse than old Harrovians. I tried to get an inside picture of their customs and ways of thinking, and for this I found it essential to live as they live. Then I came back to England and went to live in an industrial town, trying to apply the same principles of observation to our own civilization. (2)

Harrison was proud of his ability to engage with those outside of his nationality and class. He claims that he and his team of observers achieved total immersion in Worktown, going by “practically unnoticed” in their investigations, penetrating “every part of local life” (8). For an effective understanding of culture – be it in the Malekulan tribes or Northern industrial classes – Harrison claims, one had to be a participant-observer.

Mass-Observation’s Worktown study is of course indebted to Robert Lynd’s 1924-5 *Middletown* survey (1929). Lasting eighteen months, the Middletown (Muncie, Indiana), study was “a pioneer attempt to deal with a sample American community after the manner of social anthropology” (vi). Until Middletown, Lynd claims, anthropology was a discipline concerned solely with studying “savages” and the “less civilised”, and thus the first example of domestic anthropology (vi). In *The Pub and the People*, Harrison explains the rationale behind renaming Bolton:

We have called it Worktown not because we take it as a typical town or as a special town, but because it is just a town that exists and persists on the basis of industrial work, an anonymous one in the long list of such British towns where most of our people now earn and spend. (8)

Their American predecessors shared this sense of anonymous universality in their renaming of Muncie, Indiana, as Middletown:

There were no ulterior motives in the selection of Middletown. It was not consulted about the project. [...] Two main considerations guided the selection of a location for the study: (1) that the city be as representative as possible of contemporary American life, and (2) that it be at the same time compact and homogenous enough to be manageable in such a total-situation study. (7)

The Middletown study, of course, is purely anthropological. Its statistical focus, conducted entirely by outside observers (supposedly in secret to negate the complications of subjective bias), is entirely removed, on an emotional level, from the inner lives of its subjects. As Lynd reflects in the sequel, *Middletown in Transition* (1935), the observers in the original Middletown survey were “under no emotional compulsion to defend Middletown” (xiv). Harrison and his team of observers, conversely, spent over three years in Bolton living among their subjects fully immersed in working-class life. It was through participant observation in which *The Pub and the People*, however, aimed to capture the popular mood of working-class Bolton within the framework of quantitative analysis, adding a degree of closeness and human connect to the material absent from pure anthropological science.

After the Depression, mass unemployment in Britain’s industrial centres brought the North into national consciousness. Bolton was severely affected. McHugh notes that “unemployment [in Bolton] as a proportion of the working age population was 17 percent for men and 13 percent for women in 1936”, higher than the English average of 13 percent (62). Its social distress was also well documented in literature. J. B. Priestley claims in *English Journey* (1934) that “the ugliness” of Bolton is so complete, “it challenges you to live there” (262), while William Gerhardie offers a similar assessment in 1939, declaring Bolton looks “like the bottom of a pond with the water drained off. In here were the people who, if they could endure this, could endure anything” (qtd. in Cross 7).

While there existed a substantial body of contemporary sociological study concerned with working-class leisure, the founders of Mass-Observation felt science failed to truly

understand the real, everyday lives of ordinary English people.<sup>12</sup> *The Pub and the People* studies the single most popular form of working-class leisure in Worktown: drinking at the pub. “There has been little attempt”, Harrison explains, “to make an objective, unbiased appraisal of the pub, and especially of how the pub works out in *human* terms of everyday and everynight life, among the hundreds of thousands of people who find in it one of their principal life interests” (10). The project celebrated the pub as a way of life. In 1937, Bolton had 465 premises licensed for the sale of alcohol of which 300 were pubs (Snape 94). According to Mass-Observation, the pub “is the only kind of public building used by large numbers of ordinary people where their thoughts and actions are not being in some way arranged for them” (17). Unlike other public institutions, such as the religious, arts or sporting, at the pub the working-classes became participants, rather than spectators. With this freedom, Harrison believed, came a more authentic behaviour. Patrons of the pub could converse freely and informally, addressing one another by their Christian names, without interruption or instruction. They could curse, place bets, and, for those in the exclusively male vault – found only at public bars – patrons could even spit (95). This is what makes the pub such a significant setting for anthropological study: it is where the working-classes, in terms of public behaviour, are at their most natural, and therefore most authentic. It is the most authentic insight into everyday life. *The Pub and the People*, then, allows Bolton’s workers be studied at their most natural, and express themselves in their own words.

The pub as a setting holds a particular relevance in English literature. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1476), for example, begins at the historic Tabard inn in Southwark. In the 1930s, the pub represented, in theory, a spatial convergence of class. This is explored most overtly in George Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936), whose narrator explains that “pubs are generally proletarian. In a pub you can meet the working class on equal terms – or that’s the theory, anyway” (95). Ravelston, editor of the highbrow monthly *Antichrist*, represents the guilt-ridden

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<sup>12</sup> Majors studies of working-class leisure from the period include George Cutton’s *The Threat of Leisure* (1926); Arthur Pack’s *The Challenge of Leisure* (1934); and Henry Durant’s *The Problem of Leisure* (1938).



middle-class who felt compelled, at least intellectually, to forgo their privilege to be among the masses. It is only at the pub where Ravelston can fulfil “a lifelong attempt to escape from his own class and become, as it were, an honorary member of the proletariat” (88). However, Ravelston fails to genuinely immerse himself, unsettled by the “foul yet coldish air” of the “filthy smoking room” at the public drinking house (95).

Like Orwell’s Ravelston, the working-class pub remained foreign to most of Worktown’s Mass Observers. The team of professional observers were typically upper middle-class “social explorers” from London, eager young men, as Jeffery describes, “who felt it was their duty to make contact with, and get to know, the working-class” (27). Humphrey Spender, the principal photographer for the Worktown study, explains the fascination he shared with his fellow observers in surveying Bolton:

My kind of class...certainly came from a privileged background of nannies and governesses. There were always servants in the house and we were really protected from it [contact with the working-classes] so immediately that set up a peculiar attraction towards the forbidden fruit, towards a common people. (qtd. in Jeffery 27).

Both Ravelston and Worktown’s observers represent the 1930s phenomenon of “Going Over”, the desire of the enlightened middle-classes to be among the masses, in the hope of bridging the gulf in class between them.

Like T. S. Eliot’s “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME” (141-169) in “The Waste Land” (1922), “The Last Hour!” chapter in *The Pub and the People*, uses the barman’s closing refrain as a counterpoint between the pub and human suffering. For, as Harrison tells his readers rather grimly, “beer drinking is one answer to the solution of the personal problem of existence, it provides a mechanism for dealing with situations which appear to be recurrent and almost universal” (336). At closing hour, Bolton’s publicans return to the cycle of industrial life. The pub is a period of freedom, of brief respite, serving a similar function as “the Cup ‘Tie, the

Coronation, [and] religious and political revivalism” – all instances of distraction from the fear of “wars, unemployment, revolutions” and a “lack of confidence in the future” that typifies the Northern industrial existence (338). The pub was a form of escape, a place where “ordinary people with ordinary incomes can come without formality, swear with impunity, meet strangers and talk about anything, and maybe spit on the floor” (338).

The pub proves an interesting setting for sociological study, in that it exists in a public sphere, while also providing a private refuge for many of Worktown’s inhabitants. As Orwell puts it, “all the culture that is most truly native centres round things which when they are communal are not official – the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the ‘nice cup of tea’” (“Lion” 59). Orwell implies that there exists a disjunction between officialdom and the genuine – or in his anthropological terms “truly native” – understanding of culture. While numerous studies of leisure were conducted in Worktown by the Mass Observers, *The Pub and the People* affirms the popularity of drinking as a form of leisure, and thus fundamental to working-class culture. Like Orwell and my other selected documentary writers of the period, Mass-Observation, in documenting the drinking habits of working-class Bolton, aimed to experience the true heart of working-class culture, beyond what was observed in contemporary social surveys and sociological studies. Seebohm Rowntree’s *Poverty and Progress* (1941), for example, a detailed inquiry into the social and economic conditions of the working-classes of York in 1935, declares that no account of the working-classes would be complete without reference to their leisure (329). Rowntree’s section “What do People Talk About in Public-Houses” offers the same level of detailed sociological analysis shown in *The Pub and the People*. His use of overheard dialogue, quoted seemingly verbatim, could be mistaken for a Mass Observer’s report:

‘I went round an Engineering Works in Huddersfield. It was the most efficient place I have ever seen.’ I pricked my ears at this; but the rest of the group were clearly not interested in business efficiency, at any rate on a Sunday! The next

remark I heard was: 'I'm afraid York will lose against Millwall on Wednesday!'

(359)

What confines Rowntree's passage to sociological report, rather than documentary literature, is that even the overheard conversation is mediated through Rowntree. This is the closest the working-classes of York get to speak for themselves, despite being analysed from a distance by an outside observer. Rowntree was also a sociologist, with *Poverty and Progress* holding no literary pretensions as a purely sociological study.

For a "truly native" understanding, to use Orwell's phrase, of working-class Bolton, Mass-Observation aimed for total immersion in their observation. "That was an absolute Golden Rule", Humphrey Spender recalls, "if anyone knew they were being photographed then it was a failure; it had to be unobserved" (qtd. in Jeffery 27). However, this technique posed some serious ethical concerns. Spender remarks how he was often "too scared to speak" in Bolton for fear of exposing his middle-class origins (27). He viewed the camera as "a scientific instrument of precision" to supplement the validity of written observations (27). While his intentions were well-meaning, in that he wished to visually document the true extent of Northern working-class distress, at times his photography became obtrusive. For example, *The Pub and the People* documents an account of Spender inside a busy pub being denied permission by the landlord to photograph its patrons. Spender allegedly defended himself in typical middle-class fashion, declaring his legal rights, as Harrison recalls:

And most landlords believe that their customers have some secrecies to be preserved – the 'better class' the client the more secrecies. Thus when Humphrey Spender was, for the one and only time in taking hundreds of such photographs, caught snapping a scene in a crowded pub, the landlord completely lost control of himself, called the police, etcetera, etcetera. Spender was within his legal rights, of course, but the landlord was within his moral rights. (164-5)

Despite his best efforts to observe unnoticed, Spender's altercation with the landlord reflects a separation of class etiquette. Spender's reaction, reverting to a typical bourgeois stereotype, appears entirely out of place to the barman and his patrons. His perceived "semi-educated" vernacular, a little pompous and insufferable, becomes a source of ridicule. This episode reflects the outsider status of Mass Observers. Like Ravelston, Spender remained a "fish out of water" (*Aspidistra* 95) inside the public bars of Bolton.

A study of popular culture and opinion could not, according to Madge and Harrison, be accurately evaluated using the entirely empirical approach of quantitative science. Rather, Mass-Observation's new "science of ourselves", drawing on the artistic influences of Surrealist poetry, documentary film-making and pseudo-anthropology, would combine a curious blend of literature and scientific statement – two seemingly contradictory cultural fields – to discover the true behaviour of everyday working life in Britain. Madge outlines the relationship between the Mass-Observation movement and literature most clearly in his *New Verse* essay "Poetic Description and Mass-Observation" (1937). Madge draws on three passages of prose: an extract from a contemporary novel, a historical account of an actual event, and a Mass Observer's report of a bus ride in Birmingham. The third piece is particularly interesting to Madge because of its scientific relation to facts, while also concerning everyday human interaction. The passage reads:

Coming home on a Midland Red 'Bus from Birmingham (a distance of approx. 6 miles) I was sitting on the front seat, near the large sliding door. There was a cold easterly wind blowing through the door, and after having some cigarette ash blown in my eyes, I touched the Conductor on the sleeve to attract his attention, and said, 'May we have the door closed, Conductor?' He turned around and leant towards me in a confidential way, and then said in a most insolent manner, 'Yes, when I'm ready to shut it!' I was too surprised to make any reply. The door remained open until I left the 'bus. (2)

Madge claims this passage is poetic because of its unique merging of scientific detail and human emotion. By taking up the role of observer, Mass-Observation reports are elevated from a subjective presentation of events to an objective one. The above passage is about human beings – an exchange between bus driver and customer, superior and subordinate – within a mechanical environment that conditions their actions. As he declares later, laying a fundamental assumption of the Mass-Observation movement more generally: “Mass-Observation is a technique for obtaining objective statements about human behaviour” (3). The passage offers factual information, such as the distance of the journey, and the location of the observer’s seat, useful to a number of scientific interpretations. However, the passage, for Madge, also holds a poetic significance in that the “subjectivity of the observer is one of the facts under observation” (3). Of the three examples cited, Madge's latter point can only be applied the third passage from Mass-Observation. Both the novel extract and the indirect historical account hold no sense of participant objectivity: the described fragments of reality are not actually experienced first-hand. In the third passage, “the observer has simply been a recording instrument of the facts” (2). As Kohlmann observes, these “poetic facts” intended to “bridge the divide between poetic pseudo-statement and scientific description, between the view of poetry as an autonomous realm which was subject to forces of poetic convention, on the one hand, and a widening of poetry’s experimental base, on the other (141). The “poetry” of Mass-Observation would be accessible to the masses, because it was written about, and by (in the case of working-class observers) the working-classes. Poetry, for Madge, would no longer be “restricted to a handful of esoteric performers” (3). In reference to Thomas Hardy’s “A Thunderstorm in Town” (1893), Madge argues that, for a contemporary audience, especially one of a less formally educated working-class readership, “poetic form has become a disadvantage and prevents some people from appreciating Hardy’s poetry” (5). Simply, Madge saw poetic form as a restriction on expression that inhibits the understanding and comprehension of poetry among the masses.

Madge’s emphasis on the popular poetic quality of observers' reports illustrates one way

to read *The Pub and the People*, and the Mass-Observation project more widely, that is as an attempt to merge the two cultures of scientific analysis and poetic discourse. One untrained observer, a local drinker, is asked to spend an evening at his usual pub and observe the drinking habits of those around him. His report, quoted verbatim, offers an example of Madge's claim to Mass-Observation as new form of poetic potential in scientific writing:

Beers are being consumed steadily at the rate of 15 minutes per gill; at each fresh order an interval of five minutes invariably elapses before it is drunk, and then only a small sip. The three men all follow suit as any one reaches for his glass and show wonderful anticipation in drinking equal amounts, so that all three glasses register the same level after each drink. (169)

Firstly, in empirical terms, the report reveals the average time taken for each member of the group to consume a quarter pint of beer. The observer also concisely notes the action of consumption. His observation offers an understanding of everyday drinking behaviour as an adaption of human beings to their environment: in this case, the uniformity in the rate of drinking as a group. These conclusions are supplemented in more absolute terms with further study of drinking times. Harrison writes of the scientific method and results: "We have timed about a thousand drinkers. It is very difficult laborious work [...] 63.8 per cent of all times were between 6 to 10 minutes, the day's average being 9.7 minutes. Only 9.6 per cent of the times were under 6 minutes, and 26.6 per cent were above 10 minutes" (172-3). From these pseudo-scientific findings, Harrison concludes that, when observed, the act of drinking offers a complicated physiological combination of "both voluntary and reflex movements" (169).

Moreover, when regarded as a social phenomenon, drinking "is accompanied by a number of conventions and habits which are both voluntary (consciously willed) and reflex (unconsciously reacting from stimuli)" (169). Secondly, the observer's description of "wonderful anticipation" signals a moment of subjectivity unique to Mass-Observation's "popular poetry", as the subjectivity of the observer can be studied within the wider context of the Worktown

project. These apparently mundane details, such as the uniformity of drinking habits, then, usually unnoticed in their familiarity or insignificance, are called sharply into focus by Mass-Observation study. Therefore, in addition to the quantitative value of observers' reports in their detailing of circumstances and surroundings, the act of observing itself offers a particular literary quality. As Jennings and Madge claim in *May the Twelfth*, Mass-Observation heightens the observer's "power of seeing what is around him and gives him and new interest and understanding of it" (x).

The claim that Mass-Observation reports reveal a new form of poetic potential in scientific writing was anticipated by Madge's earlier critical thought, before the inception of Mass-Observation itself. In his essay "Poetry and Politics" (1933), Madge rejects the notion of "essentially poetic material", as, if such a notion were to be true, only "a certain number of things" would contain "poetic essences" (2). While his argument is contradictory at times, his central claim holds that poetry, and literature more generally, should not be used to retreat from reality into imagination. "The mind", he writes, "is a poetic instrument and so is poetic despite itself even when it sets out to be scientific" (2). The mark of a poet, for Madge, is his or her connection to everyday life. This of course fits within the wider 1930s context of writers turning towards realism and fact, with Madge demanding a more tangible link between art and unfolding historical processes. He elaborates on these assertions in another essay for *New Verse*, "Surrealism for the English", published later that year: "The air of conviction which passes and has passed for logical proof, is poetic origin. (This being, of course, the poet's way of putting it)" (16). Madge claims that all forms of writing, whether factual or fictional, scientific or emotive, have a "poetic" quality. Surrealism was an artistic movement that arose in post-war Paris in revolt against a world stifled by mechanisation and scientific rationality. However, Madge warns, for Surrealism to attain any relevance in 1930s Britain, it would have to be in reaction to Britain's own historical circumstances. Close study of French Surrealism was needed "to extract the essential purpose from the formal appearance of their work", though contemporary English

writers could not simply imitate the form of French surrealists, nor simply adopt the term “surrealism” as their own but “will need something more: namely, knowledge of their own language and literature” (14). English writers were to turn, in Madge’s eyes, to their own writing traditions and develop literary surrealism within a uniquely English context.

Mass-Observation’s surrealist influence is apparent in *The Pub and the People*. In “Talking”, a section concerned with pub conversation, the typical is juxtaposed with the absurd. The arrangement of distinct categories gives the text a sense of systematic organisation, a logical ordering of the extensive – and, at times, chaotic – sea of data collated over the course of almost three years. A barman surmises usual topics of conversation as, “What’s in the news, sensational, sport main topic among men. Work and past events, good old days reminiscent. Along women their trouble, especially Marital, but of course children” – all rather typical of what one would expect of everyday working-class patrons (186). One observer even undertakes ten-minute sample counts of conversation across various pubs and times. From his findings across 157 conversations, conversation topics can be classified under ten categories:

Pubs and Drinking 18 per cent

Betting 16

Personal-topographical 15

Sports (not betting) 13

Jobs 12

Money 9

Politics 8

Weather 6

Films 2

War 1. (186-7)

This data is compared with another of Mass-Observation’s sociological studies, a “survey of conversational topics made during a year in Streets, Tramcars, Dance Halls, the Labour



Exchange, All-in Wrestling Stadium, Public Urinal, and Pubs” (190), in an attempt to understand any marked differences between pub conversation and conversation in other public settings.

While the method of the sociological surveys is “based on a count of conversational references”, rather than entire conversations as in Worktown observer’s study, Harrison comes to the conclusion that “there is no marked difference between the topics of talk in the pub and those in other public places” (190-1). By comparing the Worktown observer’s study with another more extensive and wide-reaching collection of surveys, Mass-Observation aims to prove itself as an authoritative scientific body. Perceiving contemporary sociological study as deficient, published lists from Mass-Observation suggest the task of comprehending and presenting Bolton’s mass feeling have fallen to the hands of Mass Observers. However, within the same section, Harrison creates a deliberate incongruity by including a rather bizarre account of a conversation about tortoises. The observer records:

Best room, Three women, Seven men, all regulars. At one table a group of three men and one woman. One of the men is large, tough looking, puts his head between his hands and complains of being tired, talks about trade being bad (he is a salesman at the market) suddenly produces a small live tortoise from his overcoat pocket and threatens the woman with it. She screams a little [...] They have a long conversation about how you can't drown tortoises or suffocate them; the only way to kill them is to cut off their heads. ‘But you can't get at their heads’. (189)

Surrealism sought to collapse the distinction between the dreaming and waking worlds, bridging a metaphysical and logical divide. The deliberate incongruity of “Talking”, too, blurs the distinction of the ordinary and extraordinary, of the mundane and bizarre, scientific and arbitrary, objective and subjective. The most seemingly trivial details are suddenly transformed into objects of fascination. This highlights the fundamental paradox of Mass-Observation and of the wider documentary literature movement: with such an intense scientific focus, the cumulative

effect of its obsessive quantifications of even the most minute details creates a bizarre, surrealist work of literature.

In terms of why people drink and frequent pubs, Mass-Observation concludes, in much vaguer terms, that alcoholism is at the heart of English drinking culture. Rather than address the “the drink problem”, though, the more interesting question, for Mass-Observation was why do people drink beer? The answer is afforded a lengthy section, drawing on statistical findings from a newspaper survey, and verbatim quotes from publicans themselves. Earlier in 1937, Mass-Observation organised a questionnaire in the local press, asking readers why they drank beer, with 52 percent citing health reasons, an echo of brewing advertising which promoted the supposed medicinal qualities of beer. One woman responds:

My reason is, Because [sic] I always liked to see my Grandmother having a drink of beer a night. She did seem to enjoy it, and she could pick up a dry crust of bread and cheese, and it seemed like a feast. She said if you have a drink of beer you will live to one hundred, she died at ninety-two. I shall never refuse a drink of beer. There is no bad ale, so Grandma said. (43)

This answer is an example of Madge's “popular poetry”, evoking a pathos for not only the late Grandmother, but also the respondent. Drinking at the pub becomes a cultural inheritance for the unnamed woman, with beer itself becoming a supplement, or even substitute, for nutrition. The small indulgences in the face of poverty, alongside the nostalgia of beer as a reminder of the woman's grandmother, serve as a haunting justification of drinking as a form of working-class leisure.

Mass-Observation aimed to provide a new form of scientific research, compiling an exhaustive record of subjective responses to various phenomena of British society. The movement, which was founded by a surrealist poet and a pseudo-anthropologist, reflects the decade's artistic ambitions, aiming to take “poetry” to a mass audience by moving beyond an objective scientific analysis of everyday behavior into a kind of literary surrealism. *The Pub and the*

*People*, the only publication of the exhaustive Worktown project, was intended as a service to English society still comprehending the social distress of the Depression. To truly understand working-class conditions, it was believed, scientific facts needed to be transformed into poetry. Despite such a profoundly scientific focus, *The Pub and the People* develops a bizarre, surrealist quality, paradoxically crossing the cultural divide of science and arts. In terms of documentary literature, it proves the most extreme example of this cultural crossing, going so far towards the scientific pole its muddled, at times incoherent, aesthetic becomes a type of literature in itself.

## Conclusion

“As I write”, begins Orwell in his 1941 essay “The Lion and the Unicorn”, “highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me” (56). The 1930s had concluded in dramatic fashion with the outbreak of the Second World War. As Orwell indicates, life for writers, and wider society, had changed entirely.

1930s documentary literature became established as a particular response to the social crisis of the Depression. While the next decade was to see a continuation of realist perspectives, documentary literature as such suddenly became obsolete, as unemployment, according to Taylor, had effectively “disappeared” by 1940 (491). From the crisis of Czechoslovakia, Britain’s labour and capital were largely mobilised (albeit gradually and defensively) to prepare for the prospect of a large-scale European conflict. The economic and social distress that defined the previous decade was in this way resolved through the twin phenomenon of conscription and rearmament.

The threat of aerial bombardment that Orwell speaks of was certainly genuine. The threat of invasion from the Axis powers had summoned a collective response in the British war effort that extended far beyond the armed forces. The war was known as “The People’s War”, to use Calder’s term, in that “the people of Britain were protagonists in their own history in a fashion never known before” (17). The entire population of men, women and children, it seems, was mobilised in the nation’s defence, and in the cause of a just war. People were becoming their own actors in the drama of war, and thus were no longer in need of a literature predicated on exposing the conditions of, and giving voice to, industrial society’s most marginalised.

Aside from his 1939 autobiography *Broken Water*, Hanley was not to write another long-form non-fiction work after *Grey Children*. He remained prolific during the war, returning to fiction and a love of writing of the sea. For Orwell, too, the war brought a dramatic shift in literary focus. His writing of the 1940s shifted from championing society’s oppressed to

furthering his preoccupation with the socialist fight against fascism and totalitarianism. Mass-Observation continued to research British public opinion, though was quickly used for propaganda and consumerist purposes during the war effort. Its initial radical genesis largely ended with the permanent abandonment of the Worktown project in 1939. The war is also largely responsible for the delayed publication of *The Pub and the People* in 1943, as the collective redirected its efforts to supporting the war with publications like *Britain* (1939) and *War Begins at Home* (1940).

Paradoxically, it was Priestley, the most literary conservative of my chosen “authors”, who would continue challenging the “Condition of England” question into the 1940s. He proved to be an acute and prolific commentator on contemporary English life, focusing largely on post-war reconstruction as seen in *Out of the People* (1941) and “The Secret Dream: an essay on Britain, America and Russia” (1946). The 1940s also marked the decade in which Priestley would cement his reputation as the voice of popular feeling during the war through his radio broadcasts.

The documentary literature I have examined, then, was largely a 1930s phenomenon, prompted by the social distress of the Depression and ending abruptly during the Second World War. While my four chosen texts were not the only examples of documentary literature from the period, they are certainly the most significant, and prove a trajectory in success of crossing the cultural divide between literature and social science.

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