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Voices from the Past: Why British Literature to 1800 Still Matters

by Frederick Wennlund

(English 2220 Online)

If someone is said to be cultured, they generally have been to the opera, the symphony, the theater, have eaten at fancy foreign restaurants, and likely have traveled the world. One thing that is often overlooked is how well read the person is. A person who has read "the best which has been thought and said in the world" as Matthew Arnold so aptly put it, should certainly be considered among those people who are cultured. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Saint Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* are two books that not only spoke volumes when they were written, but still speak volumes to the 21st century in the areas of history and government.

Though books written in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries are not usually considered to be relevant to today, there are two notable exceptions. Both *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels* give the modern reader a wonderful glimpse into the history of the world. Winston Churchill famously stated that those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it. Though this is not always the case, people who do not study the past often make similar or even the same mistakes as those who came before. Thomas More and Jonathan Swift are writers that include a very good look at the historical nature of the times they were living in. Book 1 in More's *Utopia* is a prime example of keeping an historical record. It does not read like a history, but it tackles the major issues facing England at the time of its writing. Some of the major issues More attacks are the use of government advisors and what they should be like, the fencing in of common lands for sheep grazing, the overcrowding in prisons, and the ever troublesome problem of debt. Though the fencing in of common lands is no longer an issue; the use of government advisors, overcrowded prisons, and debt are still issues today. In addition to echoing problems that are still being considered today, *Utopia* gives a glimpse into the past. It details the different issues that were at the forefront of public debate. Historians clamor about the importance of primary sources that get into the minds of citizens of the past. More's *Utopia* does exactly that.

Gulliver's Travels is similar to Utopia in that it satirizes some of the same overarching issues as More does. There is a slight difference however; Swift highlights different problems than does More. This comes as no real surprise, as nearly 200 years have passed between the two authors. Swift, through Gulliver, attacks the idea that

"courts of law exist not to provide justice, but to benefit their own officers; that civil and religious leaders, after being chosen for venal considerations, proceed to govern with the same motives; that the rich are left free to gorge themselves on the fruits of the labor of the poor; and that members of Parliament consistently ignore their constituencies (Hammond, 446)."

These issues give an historical look at the issues faced in Swift's time period. Like any historian, I find it very interesting to know the background to the things that I read. It helps me to read between the lines and understand the context from which the author is writing. Understanding the context helps me better understand the work as well as the time period in which the work was written. Many times it is the historical insights I find more interesting than the actual literature itself, so one of the ways this period of British Literature is alive to me is that it helps me further understand pre-1800

England and the historical issues that it faced. It also has led to an increased curiosity in the historical era.

One of the things I find especially stimulating is the idea of a perfect world and how people would choose to make it such. Making the world perfect has been a goal of people for centuries, with the most recent and serious attempt, that of communism under Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, and Cambodia's Pol Pot. Both Swift and More lived in times when the idea of perfection or utopia was popular and used the opportunity to share their ideas of perfection. In *Utopia*, More's character is told by Peter Giles in reference to Raphael Hythlodaeus that, "there is no mortal alive today who can give you such an account of unknown peoples and lands, a subject about which I know you [More] are always most greedy to hear (*Utopia*, 720)." More's interest in these stories could be as a result of his desire to find a perfect world. Although the word utopia means nowhere, More seems to wish that at least some of these things may come to pass in English society. He may not believe a complete utopia is possible, but at least parts of one.

Swift's Land of the Houyhnhnms is similar to Utopia in that reason prevails over all. Gulliver closes out his tales by pointing out the rationality of the Houyhnhnms. "The Houyhnhnms...abound in all excellencies that can adorn a rational creature...the Houyhnhnms...live under the government of Reason..." In contrast to More, Swift does not seem to have any reservations about the possibility of a utopia completely governed by reason. His lack of reservation can be seen in the ending of his novel. When Gulliver returns to the land of the humans from the land of the Houyhnhnms, he is repulsed by anything human, including his own wife and children whom he refuses to sit with for meals. The one thing that stands out about this idea of utopia is what it actually means. It simply means a place of perfection that cannot possibly exist anywhere. However, if the reader digs deeper, it can be seen that there is no past to either the Utopians or the Houyhnhnms, and as a result, there can be no future and nothing ever changes (Traugott, 544). Given this and some understanding of the philosophy of Plato, it can be realized that "since the Utopians and Houyhnhnms live by absolute reason, "progress," and indeed change—even geographic change—are unthinkable (544-5)." Both More and Swift believe, in contrast to the belief today, that Utopia does not mean progress, but rather rigid unchangeability. It is interesting to see the evolution of ideas from past to present. Given that many of the most famous ideas and ideologies have come from Britain, British Literature can help trace these ideas and ideologies. It shows the modern person what people thought in their time and how humans in later centuries have distorted those ideas. Utopia is one of those examples of an idea that has gone from meaning an absence of progress to a word that embodies progress and moving ahead.

Lastly, it is interesting to see how these two authors can predict or anticipate what might come in the future. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift lays out the many problems of government in England through Gulliver's conversations with his Houyhnhnm master. Judging by the things criticized, a unified theory of good government emerges.

"Essentially, the theory to which Swift subscribed was that of the mixed or balanced state, according to which it was believed that those governments are best in which monarchial, aristocratic, and democratic elements are all present and exist in a sort of balance or equilibrium (Fink, 151)."

This ideal of government is exactly what the English government has become in the years since Swift wrote. More also seems to have an ability to predict the future. In *Utopia*, More says "so it is in a commonwealth and in the councils of princes. If evil opinions cannot be quite rooted out and if you cannot correct habitual attitudes as you wish, you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth." John Traugott interprets it this way "More is prophesying the pattern of his own life. Against his sanest instincts he elected a few years later to serve Henry VIII. And when eventually he could no

longer fit his truth to his drama being played...the game was up (539)." It is always interesting to read the works of prolific writers and then using the historical context, see how they were able to pinpoint things that had yet to happen.

In the long run, British Literature prior to 1800 will continue to be an important part of every student's anthology because of the parallels it has to modern society, the things it can teach the modern man about government, and the historical context it provides to students today.

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