

Balancing Culture & Commerce at the Hogarth Press

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Abstract

Culture and commerce have frequently been seen as two opposing interests for publishers, with the need to function as a business balanced by their role as a cultural gatekeeper. In light of this, this article examines how Virginia and Leonard Woolf's accounts of setting up and running the Hogarth Press reflect on modern day society's perception of publishing in the early 20th Century in terms of balancing culture and commerce. Looking at the history of the Press through the Woolfs' own words, the theories of John Carey and Pierre Bourdieu are examined in relation to the Hogarth Press, and the company's status in the 1920s is compared to the publishing industry today.

Key Words

Hogarth Press, Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf, culture, commerce.

Introduction

We are thinking of starting a printing press, for all our friends' stories. Don't you think it's a good idea?" [V. Woolf *Letters* [1926] 1976: 120].

The Hogarth Press was one of the most well-known independent publishing houses of the early 20th Century, in part due to its "celebrity parents", Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Virginia's letters and diaries, published by Leonard after her suicide alongside his own autobiographies, provide insight on the publishing culture in which they lived and worked. Their own accounts appear to value culture over commerce in the Press, yet it will be argued that commerce still played an important role in the company's development. Viewing commerce as less important than culture can be problematic, particularly when producing "best-selling" works and considering the role of cultural gatekeepers in the early 20th Century.

The Woolfs' Accounts

In their records of the early years of the Hogarth Press, the Woolfs present the Hogarth Press as a hobby used to fill time. As Leonard describes:

it would be a good thing if Virginia had a manual occupation of this kind which, in say the afternoon, would take her mind completely off her work" [1964] 1980: 169].

Although both Leonard and Virginia mention the promised income tax refund from Inland Revenue was used to buy the Press, neither of their accounts indicate concern for the company's profitability. Whilst Leonard's account demonstrates more business acumen in his careful account of costs and profits, in comparison to Virginia's purely emotional response to starting a business, neither forecast earnings from the Press. Leonard's autobiography records setting up the Hogarth Press as a reasoned, but inherently emotional and personal, occupation; the investment in the Press for the benefit of Virginia's mental health provided payment enough.

There is a whimsical and fanciful tone to Virginia's initial descriptions of their decision to start the Press. In a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies in February 1915, two years before the Woolfs purchased their Press, Virginia writes, "we are both so excited that we can talk and think of nothing else" [1915], 59]. Leonard is more practical in describing their early days, yet their later business partner John Lehmann describes how "both the Woolfs', but in particular Leonard, had an emotional attitude towards the Press; as if it were the child their marriage had never produced" [1979, 33]. This description reaffirms the assumption that the commercial aspect was not the main focus for setting up the Hogarth Press in 1917, revealing instead that the main driving factor was the couple's emotional involvement.

However, their view of the Hogarth Press as a hobby rather than a business venture faced a turning point in 1920. "Unintentionally and often reluctantly", writes Leonard, the Hogarth Press was turned "into a commercial publishing business" [229], when they took on Ralph Partridge as a partner, as the Press was "clearly too lively and lusty to be carried on in private any longer" [V. Woolf *Diary* [1920] 1978: 55]. This decision appears to be much more considered and reasoned in Leonard's account than in Virginia's diary in 1920, where she describes how "if the Press is to live, it had better run a risk or two" [62]. Unlike Virginia's diary however, Leonard's autobiography has the benefit of hindsight; the far more rational account of choosing to take on a business partner is the response in retrospect, rather than necessarily recording his feelings at the time. However, it is clear that in both accounts, if indeed the Press was the Woolfs' "never-born child", Partridge's involvement marked the Hogarth Press' transformation. Virginia describes how in 1921, the Press "begins to outgrow its parents" [*Diary*, 144], demonstrating the development from an emotionally driven hobby to a commercially successful business.

Carey's Depiction of 20th Century Publishing Culture

Whilst discrepancies occur between Virginia and Leonard's accounts regarding the importance of commerce during the early days of the Hogarth Press, their accounts both refute Carey's argument that the 20th Century intelligentsia aimed to exclude the masses

from culture and preserve it for the limited elite. Virginia's request for Violet Dickinson to distribute their leaflets "among the great" [*Letters*, 1917: 155] seems to gain little traction, and indeed their subscription scheme allowed the Hogarth Press to reach an audience beyond Bloomsbury and the Woolfs' circles. The Press allowed the Woolfs' to break from convention, not excluding certain audiences from culture but providing an alternative discourse from established publishers. Leonard explains that T.S. Eliot's poetry and Virginia's novels would be "condemned as unintelligible and absurd" [241] in the 1920s, not only by the "vulgar, trivial working millions" [Carey, 2002: 9], but also by "the literary 'establishment'" [L. Woolf, 241]. This claim does not support Carey's assertion that the masses would fail to appreciate the same cultural works that the intelligentsia would. The established elite that Carey imagines governing culture chose not to publish these works; the Hogarth Press was not producing works to exclude the masses, but instead providing "writing of merit which the ordinary publisher refuses" [V. Woolf *Letters*, 1918: 242], and therefore producing an alternative discourse. Southworth identifies an "openness and non-exclusive quality" [2010: 1] in the Hogarth Press, quite opposed to Carey's argument of purposeful exclusivity.

The Hogarth Press represents freedom rather than restriction in both Leonard and Virginia's accounts. Free of constraints brought by the criticism of editors, Virginia's writing flourished, and as a result so did "her willingness to admit herself into the company of literary outsiders" [Mepham, 1991: 58]. This can be seen in her interactions with T.S. Eliot [an American from outside of their social circles] and New Zealander Katherine Mansfield. Whilst her diary shows her personal feelings about associations with these "outsiders", their social standing did not prevent their work being published by the Hogarth Press. In addition, many of the Press' authors were first-time novelists, and judged on their writing rather than their personal qualities.

This emphasis on freedom, rather than the restriction of culture as Carey sees it, is evident in the ethos of the Bloomsbury Group, of which the Woolfs were key members. Although there was never a stated aim or manifesto to unify the members, who "always remained

primarily and fundamentally a group of friends” [L. Woolf, 11], the 13 members shared a common view. Mephram summarises that the group was:

unified by their rejection of the culture of their parents’ generation, an oppressively moralising culture [...] They shared a sense of the need for renovation throughout domestic, intellectual, cultural and political life [...] Their overwhelming impulse was to break out of conventionality and to lead the way towards a more relaxed, less philistine and less cruel social order” [Mephram, 38].

Although this may seem to support Carey’s argument with the intelligentsia of the early 1900s turning away from moralising the newly literate masses, Mephram highlights the Bloomsbury ideal for the lessening of rigid social structures, rather than encouraging Carey’s view of the fault line forming in society. Leonard too writes that Virginia, along with her siblings Vanessa and Adrian, had “broken away from the society into which they were born [...] the upper levels of the professional middle class” [49], thereby lessening Carey’s argument that it became more important and urgent to preserve culture for the elite at the turn of the century. Leonard’s account suggests that for them, the opposite appears to be true, with boundaries between classes opening up, allowing more social mobility and in effect a greater sharing of culture.

Despite their assertions of the Hogarth Press being a hobby and a “by-product of our life and energies” [L. Woolf, 243], the Press did come to represent more than a past-time for the Woolfs’. The growth in income generated was extraordinary; from a mere three percent of the Woolfs’ income in 1924, the Hogarth Press was responsible for generating fifty-four percent of the couple’s income only eight years later [figures from L. Woolf, 291], allowing Leonard to leave his job as literary editor of the *Nation*, and concentrate fully on publishing. The money brought in by the Hogarth Press was therefore significant to the Woolfs’ lives; Carey’s account of publishing as “a determined effort [...] to exclude the masses from culture” [Carey, 16] assumes that commerce held no sway for the European intelligentsia, whereas Leonard describes how “our financial position was a good deal darker or more precarious” [62] before 1920 than after the Press was properly established. Publishing

works solely for readers within the Bloomsbury Group or other members of the social elite would have been insufficient to make the Hogarth Press a commercial success. Southworth illustrates how the Woolfs' enjoyed the independence and personal control of the Press, but also how they were "determined nevertheless to compete in terms of reviews and sales with their commercial counterparts" [10]. To do so required an audience beyond a single social class.

Two Economic Logics

Commerce did indeed fulfil an important role in establishing the Hogarth Press as a successful publishing house, but the emphasis in both Leonard and Virginia's accounts is primarily on the cultural aspect of their printed works. In 1923, their 13 titles published were "more or less unorthodox [...] in many cases unfamiliar" [L. Woolf, 240-241], and as previously discussed, these were works with "little or no chance of being published by ordinary publishers" [185]. For Virginia, the freedom to "be able to do what one likes – no editors, or publishers" [*Letters*, 1917: 167] meant that, as a writer, she was released from pressures of producing work that would be instantly commercially successful, but instead made her "the only woman in England free to write what I like" [*Diary*, 1925: 29]. This independence spread to the Woolfs' publishing list, allowing them autonomy to produce material that they felt had cultural importance, and thereby converting the literary value of works in to economic value through publishing.

As Bourdieu explains, two economic logics occur in "antagonistic coexistence of modes of production and circulation obeying inverse logics" [Bourdieu, 1996: 142]. Publishers can either focus on accumulating symbolic capital, which may not produce short-term economic profit, or prioritise "immediate and temporary success" [Bourdieu, 142]. The Hogarth Press is a firm example of a publisher focussed on longer-term goals, generating symbolic capital and a reputation for quality literature rather than producing instant best-sellers with no future prospects.

Again, the Woolfs' accounts differ slightly on the concept of 'the best-seller'. While Leonard writes that, by 1924, the Press "had on its general list already two potentially best-sellers, Vita and Virginia" [305], he also describes the slow sales of Virginia's first works. Despite being met with positive reviews, Virginia's sales figures remained steady yet modest until the publication of *Orlando* in 1928. In this way, Leonard defines best-seller in a positive light, as an accumulation of consistent sales over a period of time. His account documents the publication of Virginia's works in the early years of the Press as a long-term investment, rather than intending them to become instant best-sellers with short lifespans. However, Virginia's view on the matter was altogether more complicated; Willis explains how "low sales figures temporarily demoralised her [Virginia], but high sales figures made her slightly uneasy because they smacked of commercialism" [1992, 53].

This is apparent in her own accounts, as Virginia seems to both desire and fear becoming a best-selling author and publisher. Describing how "I have no notion of my standing" [*Diary*, 1921: 110], the balance between accumulating symbolic and economic capital is less clear for Virginia than for Leonard. As a "first-class business man" [L. Woolf, 242], Leonard was much more comfortable with receiving economic return from their cultural output than his wife was. His own account regularly assures that "we did not expect to make money out of it [the Press]" (242), yet the close recording of figures and profit demonstrate that the economic payback from their investment in symbolic capital was better understood by Leonard.

In contrast, Virginia's account is far more emotional, and she is more concerned with avoiding commercialism. Writing to Janet Case in November 1920, she recounts how "several books will come out in the spring. I don't know where it's going to stop" [*Letters*, 445]. In her own accounts, Virginia values the culture of the Press much more than its economic success. Her diary records how "the Press must now lose something of its charm & become more strenuous" in 1923 [233], lamenting the profitability of their venture. However, this does not signify, as Virginia feared, the transition of the Hogarth Press into what Bourdieu later describes as a movement away from "pure art" towards an

“accelerated return of profits by a rapid circulation of products which are fated to rapid obsolescence” [142]. Her fears tell us more about her own value system than the direction of the Hogarth Press, which remained true to its aim and resisted rapid expansion.

Again, benefitting from hindsight, Leonard explains the success of the Press in their determination to avoid the lure of short-term economic profits, and therefore resisting the urge “to become too big too quickly” [185]. By publishing “only books which we thought worth publishing” [439], the Hogarth Press was investing in cultural and symbolic capital, and thus guaranteeing longevity and ongoing success.

Comparison to today

The balance of culture and commerce in Leonard and Virginia’s accounts tells us much about their own feelings towards the publishing industry, and the management of the Hogarth Press. Cultural capital is important in the publishing industry today, yet there is a more apparent focus on commerce, with marketing being a much larger part of contemporary publishing than it was for the Hogarth Press in the early 20th Century. Indeed, the only indications of the Woolfs’ marketing activity in Virginia’s account of the Hogarth Press are her letters requesting friends to send their notices to “any generous people” [*Letters*, 1917: 154]. There is a sense in both Leonard and Virginia’s accounts that works published with the Hogarth Press will sell based on their literary merit rather than a marketing strategy. However, the personal accounts of Leonard and Virginia give a skewed impression of the role of commerce in their business. Leonard describes the “very curious type of business we were trying to create” [243], indicating that, unlike the contemporary sense, their business was not primarily concerned with generating income. In fact, both downplay the importance of commerce and focus on the cultural aspect of their press.

This shared sentiment puts the publishing culture of the Hogarth Press in the early 20th Century a world away from the industry as we know it almost a century later, where publishing is dominated by large conglomerations and the economic potential of a book would be seen to be prioritised over the publisher’s personal taste. However, the Hogarth

Press was still a business, and to presume that commerce had no relevance would be a misunderstanding of the industry in the 1920s. The personal accounts of Virginia may ignore the financial implications of their venture, but Leonard's account keeps a much closer eye on the fiscal nature of their hobby, with Leonard's books showing "accurately the profit or loss on each book published, the revenue and expenditure of the business, and the annual profit or loss" [242]. Therefore, his autobiography, published in 1964, looks back on the early years of the Press in a manner that highlights the importance of their accumulation of symbolic capital while minimising the relevance of their economic capital. It must be remembered that analysing a business from an extremely personal perspective naturally colours the representation of the publishing culture of the time, and so focussing on culture over commerce does not necessarily mean that the role of commerce in publishing was quite as different as today's market as it would seem.

Conclusion

Though their personal accounts provide an invaluable resource for understanding the running of the Hogarth Press, it would be foolish to overlook the personal sentiment that can influence such accounts when remembering one's own ventures, which had such private importance and personal reasons for conception. Leonard and Virginia's accounts give us an insider's viewpoint into the development of the Press, with Virginia's allowing an emotional and at-the-time response to shine through, whilst Leonard's autobiography provides more figures and facts, and the benefits of hindsight to analyse their own decisions and responses.

The Hogarth Press was certainly an act of love: for Leonard, a solution to his wife's mental health troubles and for Virginia, an escape from the constraints of publishers as an author. However, commerce is necessary for any successful business. While the production of important cultural works was imperative in the Woolfs' publishing programme, this could only be achieved through a careful balance of commercial judgement.

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