Reading After Trump, Episode 1

Alex Woloch: Hi, I'm Alex Woloch.

Kenny Ligda: I'm Kenny Ligda.

Alex Woloch: This is Reading After Trump. Our aim in this podcast is to initiate conversations with literary scholars, critics, and historians about what literature can tell us about this political movement. The views expressed here are our own and don't necessarily reflect the view, policy, or positions of Stanford University.

Kenny Ligda: Okay, should we start talking?

Alex Woloch: I think we have started.

Kenny Ligda: Okay, so I'm Kenny Ligda, I'm here with Professor Alex Woloch, Chair and Professor of the Stanford English department. We're speaking shortly after the 2016 election.

Alex Woloch: 10 days, maybe.

Kenny Ligda: 10 days.

Alex Woloch: 10 days out.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, and a shared love, I think, for both of us as scholars and readers, is George Orwell. It always seems a good moment to talk about George Orwell, but it seems now especially. Orwell's name gets thrown around a lot, and it seemed like it would be nice to actually go into depth about a few of the things that he said, and bring up some things that are less known.

Alex Woloch: I mean, I think it's in the air, what does one do, what are the different things that people should do and response in the wake of the election. Maybe one thing we can do is talk about literature. Kenny and I had the idea of talking about Orwell.

Kenny Ligda: Let's get into some of the things that Orwell said. Do you have a quote that we could start with?

Alex Woloch: Yeah, okay. I think one thing that we've been talking about is just the shock of this election. Again, we're trying to really have a conversation at this moment in time, very close to these results from last week. I think, I mean, Orwell is a good writer for thinking about shock, and for handling political shock. Of course, there's multiple things that are shocking about

the results last week. Maybe we can just pause on that. Just review why and how this is such a shocking moment. Is that okay?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Okay, so maybe just talk about Trump for a minute, because I was thinking about this. Most credible polling was expecting a different outcome. If you just take the fact that Trump is the first President in American history with no political background and no military background. I mean that by itself would make this a major deal. Already, I mean, a scenario that just on those terms is outside of American history, right?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: We have the Supreme Court where this election was about two branches of government simultaneously, which is also extremely unusual. We have those factors. We have the first woman ever running for President, that's another factor. Then we have just the consistent violation of norms. I mean, Trump was a shock driven campaign, clearly. There were multiple shocks along the way, and this includes threatening to jail his political opponent if he wins, promising not to respect the results of the election if he loses. A lot of authoritarian stuff.

I think what we're both thinking about with Orwell in particular is his attention and interest in this experience of shock, of curve balls that history throws, of the remorseless predictability of history. Together with the project of maintaining some coherent political identity, and also maintaining a democratic commitment where you're not just isolated. I mean, there's a lot of moments to look for in Orwell. This is from *Homage to Catalonia*. A line, he says, "This was in late December, 1936. Less than seven months ago as write, and yet, it is a period that has already receded into enormous distance. Later events have obliterated it much more completely than they have obliterated 1935, or 1905 for that matter." I think that taps into that sense of disorientation, the idea that ... I mean, this election has profound consequences for how we understand our country, and how we understand history. Suddenly the country we thought we living in seems really far away. Suddenly the last, three weeks ago, could seem further away than periods of time that are much, much further back.

Kenny Ligda: You sent me the quote about HG Wells. What is it that ...

Alex Woloch: Yeah, yeah, right. Orwell has an essay on HG Wells, which is a meditation on a progressive thinker, a rationalist. It's a meditation on the problem that rationality can have in countering so much irrationality in the modern world, and particularly in the political world. One famous line in that

essay, which I thought of for this conversation was just "Wells is too sane to understand the modern world," right. What comes to mind for you with that quote?

Kenny Ligda: I mean, Orwell says this about a number of people, actually, in different ways. Gandhi would be another. Where he basically says that they don't get the world anymore.

Alex Woloch: If you really pause on that, "too sane to understand the modern world," it's a very haunting phrase. Think about *1984* and Winston Smith's struggle to remain sane. Think about Orwell's proposition that if you remain sane that might prevent you from understanding. We have to challenge our notion of sanity. Our notion of rationality. I mean, one way to understand that is just that no one has clean hands, I mean, so that no one can inhabit that notion of pure sanity, right? I mean which is to say that everyone has emotions, right, and everyone has feelings of anger. I mean, this is very much in the air, too, I think for people, how ever you want to say, for people on the left, for people that are appalled at this racist turn. One the one hand, it's a community that's committed to rationality, and on another hand it's a community that's experiencing a lot of other feelings, anger, depression, rage. What else?

Kenny Ligda: All these things that aren't exactly ...

Alex Woloch: All of the above. Too sane to understand the modern world. Orwell was definitely committed to rationality, I think. He's committed to realism. It's one of those moments, there's a lot of them in his work where I mean, he's committed to sanity. It's one of these moments where he's making clear that, what it means to be a thinker, what it means to be to struggle to understand society is a really complicated process, right?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, I think you see it in a lot of writers of this time, where you ... Auden would be another, who at this time distances himself from people that influenced him, like Yeats, Freud. Where you basically say that the people that I grew up with, who explained the world to me, don't seem to be speaking to what I'm living in now.

Alex Woloch: That's another real interesting part of the Wells essay, isn't it?

Kenny Ligda: Yeah.

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: It raises the question, who am I supposed to be?

Alex Woloch: Yeah, and who's the authority, or who are the models for understanding this? Really, really true. Orwell admires HG Wells, I mean, he admires a lot of things about Wells. He loves Wells, and he's been reading Wells since he was a child. Yeah, I think part of the drive of that essay is the world has changed. A credible model of thinking no longer works. History moves, it requires us to not just rethink things but rethink what it means to think. We don't know what our bases are. What's the epistemological or philosophical point of view from which we can be rational? Of course, it's interesting, because I mean, I think this is the same one to get into, but just Orwell himself is so often used in that way of, okay, when we're in doubt turn to Orwell, because Orwell dealt with difficult times.

Kenny Ligda: Can we go back to shock and I'd like to ... You sent me some quotes and examples of this, and it's work ... I think it's to your own work about Orwell. Can you explain to me how Orwell dealt with political shock?

Alex Woloch: Yeah, I mean, so I talk about this idea of what would Orwell do. It is a question that is continual. You find this in the body of Orwell's reception, you find people saying what would Orwell have to say about the Vietnam war, or what would Orwell do about 9/11? How would he have responded? Then we could ask that now, what would Orwell say about Trump? Where there's like, "Here's a post-fact world, here's what seems to be like a kind of erasure of history." A lot of things that he would talk about. My resistance to that question in my book, wanting to instead substitute for that question, what would Orwell do with the question I put forward, which is what form would Orwell use to write? Basically emphasizing just how experimental he is in the writing, and the way that, for Orwell, the work of thinking or the work of judging, and responding to political events is really tied up with the work of writing, and a kind of experimental impulse in writing.

That sense of experiment, of trying different forms, of a restlessness about writing is crucial to my book and to my understanding of Orwell's politics, right? Maybe I can just try to play that out. Unpack that a little bit. The example I use is, if you think about 1984 and Animal Farm, just to start with those two books. I mean, they're both roughly about the same political crisis. You know that Orwell wouldn't write another children's fable. He wouldn't write another dystopia, right? I mean, the experiment is important I think, in part because Orwell is deeply skeptical that any one piece of writing can be the answer, right?

He has this line in “Why I Write,” “every book is a failure.” Really important line for me. Every book is a failure. Which is to say, that no book is going to be, and I think more importantly, no act of writing, right, is going to be completely adequate. If you think about that, that line, too sane to understand the modern world, I think we can see a relationship

between every book is a failure, and too sane to understand the modern world. Which is a dissatisfaction with any, I mean, on the one hand, dissatisfaction with any complacent politics. Any politics that feels it has the false illusion, it knows exactly what to do. I mean, that's one way to look at it. The other way is an openness to politics, to imperfect politics, right? An openness to like, that we still want to write. The importance of writing. The importance of experimenting, and give ourselves a break that there's not going to be a perfect way to respond. That would be the sort of upbeat Orwell.

Kenny Ligda: I'm just trying to think of a good example of Orwell trying to focus his own mind, or focus our mind on something that is shocking, or that is just a political fact that's hard to reckon with.

Alex Woloch: That phrase, what does Orwell mean by, "to see what's in front of your nose requires a constant struggle." How do we understand that relationship to "too sane to understand the modern world"? "This business of making people *conscious* of what is happening outside their own small circle is one of the major problems of our time. The new literary technique will have to be evolved to meet it. Tales of starvation, ruined cities, concentration camps, mass deportations, homeless refugees, persecuted Jews, all this is received with a sort of incurious surprise as though such things had never been heard of before, but at the same time are not particularly interesting. The now familiar photographs of skeleton-like children make very little impression. As time goes on and the horrors pile up, the mind seems to secrete a sort of self-protecting ignorance, which needs a harder and harder shock to pierce it. Just as the body will become immunized to a drug and require bigger and bigger doses."

There's a lot there. I mean, first of all normalization again as a process that's deeply, I mean, not inevitable, but deeply probable. I mean, we have to actively work against. Second of all, that the normalization is not just social, it's a cognitive thing, right? The mind seems to secrete a self protected ignorance. Finally, just to think about those two lines from Orwell, to see what is in front of one's nose requires a constant struggle. This business of making people conscious of what is happening outside their own small circle. Which they seem at odds with each other, but Orwell's interested in drawing those two things together. I don't know, would you say that Orwell is skeptical of any writing that makes us too hopeful? I mean, maybe this would be a good time to think about humor in Orwell. It's complicated, right, how it works. It's complicated how Orwell's pessimism works with his commitment to decency.

Kenny Ligda: Decency. A really key word.

Alex Woloch: Key word.

Kenny Ligda: Yeah, so I was going back to this writing on comedy, and this crazy notion I had, to write 400 pages, partly on what was funny about George Orwell. The thing that really jumps out at me now, is when Orwell talks about comedy, especially in the context of Charles Dickens. Any joke worth laughing at has something serious in it. Comedy is always a revolution, a tiny rebellion, he says. This is the key thing to me at this moment, he says that comedy basically can only punch up. It can't punch down, for him. It's about the weak rebelling against the strong. Basically that comedy that's laughing at the powerless, or that's attacking the powerless is at least, a comedy that he wouldn't recognize as such.

He really likes Dickens, that Dickens didn't have relative to other authors of his time, a lot of say Irish jokes. That seems to be really key because it's all about this notion of decency, which for people that spent a lot of time reading Orwell, you realize it's really the key term that you wish that people knew more than newspeak, or doublespeak, or big brother. He's always talking about decency and it's hard to pin down, but in my mind, what decency means for Orwell is basically that the strong don't attack the weak. He has a lot of tolerance for violence in one form or another, tiny rebellion or big revolution. He hates the idea of the big man attacking the small man. That actually, now that we talked around to it, is what's really upsetting to me in this election, is that Trump is a bully.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, no, I think it's really brilliant to think about. I mean, the phrase punching up and punching down seems totally right, you know. I mean, just a couple of thoughts about that. We're again, 10 days out from this election. There was debates in the 1980s about it. There was vicious struggles about claiming Orwell, who owns Orwell. I think it was maybe Hilton Kramer, or one of the neoconservatives ... We can edit it later. Wrote this, if Orwell's alive today, he'd be a neoconservative. Again, the reduction of Orwell to anti-totalitarianism, and then the linking of him ... The effort to own him from the right. Any person that knows Orwell knows in their bones that Donald Trump is not ... What's happened in the Republican party, that seems like a much harder argument to make after this election, because precisely because of that question of bullying, and punching down, and that kind of violence. It seems like a really salient point.

The other thing I'd say about punching up and punching down, part of that is his skepticism about intellectuals and about writing, and about culture, too, so that there's forms of certitude, there's forms of propaganda that can happen to culture that have that same sort of punching down quality, right? It's important for Orwell that it's not just that writing can bear witness to, and has to bear witness to the indecency of the world. To bear witness to the various ways that people can punch up or punch down, but that writing can also be like an instrument of bullying. It has to recognize

it's own implications in the world. Orwell is very unforgiving toward, I mean, particularly toward intellectuals that are apologetic toward power. He'd be rolling over in his grave at just the things we're seeing this week and then we'll see a lot more of people that, and various kinds of institutions that were formally critical of Trump, that become less critical suddenly when he has more power.

Kenny Ligda: Orwell has yet another great essay, I wish everyone would read, Raffles and Miss Blandish. He talks about how English crime fiction has not glorified power as much. He says, "In America, both in life and fiction, the tendency to tolerate crime, even to admire the criminal so long as he is a success, is very much more marked. It is indeed ultimately this attitude that has made it possible for crime to flourish upon so huge a scale. Books have been written about Al Capone that are hardly different in tone from the books written about Henry Ford, Stalin, Lord Northcliffe, and all the rest of the log cabin to White House brigade.

Switching back eight years, one finds Mark Twain adopting much the same attitude towards the disgusting bandit Sade, hero of 28 murders, and towards the western desperadoes generally. They were successful, they made good, therefore he admired him." Just this idea that we see when someone reaches a certain phase, they automatically get this level of respect, and a kind of assumption, "Well you've made it this far, there must be something good about you, and you're deserving of being taken seriously." That you can actually see institutions turning their position, definitely speaks to where we are right now.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, I mean, this is just another line from that essay, "People worship power in the form in which they are able to understand it. A 12-year-old boy worships Jack Dempsey. An adolescent in a Glasgow slum worships Al Capone. An aspiring pupil at business college worships Lord Nuffield. A *New Statesman* reader worships Stalin." I mean, a sense that, it's possible to fall for that power worship. Yeah, I mean, power worship comes up a lot in Orwell, right? That inclination to revere what's powerful, or to accept what's the status quo. To accept the power of the given. Again, gets into this question of normalization.

Kenny Ligda: I want to go back to decency. Decency is a key thing in Orwell, then. I don't think we've ever really talked about it, but what does it mean to you? What do you think he means by decency?

Alex Woloch: The first thing that comes to my mind is that line toward the end of the Dickens essay, like a mind without can't, right? Free 19th century liberal spirit, a mind without can't. I think I have a complicated sense of what decency means. I agree with you that it's a lot about power, about sympathy for the underdog. The way that I see Orwell's decency is the

ability to hold onto a coherent belief system, without ever forgetting its fragility. I think that combination of integrity, of having belief, and not being absolute about it allows for a toleration without ever descending into relativism, or skepticism, or detachment.

Kenny Ligda: I for sure want to talk about this thinking, over thinking thing.

Alex Woloch: I can just jump into it. I mean, so, to me, this is about the challenge of holding on to political beliefs while accepting and understanding that it's not always easy to act on them, or that there's not a clear way to translate them into action. These two quotes I took, "It is not possible for any thinking person to live in such a society as our own without wanting to change it." That's a quote that I don't think has gotten that much attention in Orwell studies, but seems to me like it's something that connects to, that's really important to his work. "It is not possible for any thinking person to live in such a society as our own without wanting to change it." In my book I just discuss, again, a little bit like "too sane to understand the modern world."

The implications of that quote, right? The importance of thought, the fundamental rebelliousness of thought. If to be a thinking person means wanting to change society, and particularly the connection of thinking to desire. Thinking gives birth to the desire for social change. Then Orwell's attentiveness to that, having that desire doesn't mean there's any easy way to translate it, right? The pitfalls of thought that too quickly imagines itself to be anything other than a failure. The quote that I put together with that is, "There is one way of avoiding thoughts, and that is to think too deeply." Which seems to me again to connect a lot of Orwell's writing.

Kenny Ligda: It connects us back to this moment of people are thinking a lot about what to do. It's really unclear what to do. You can imagine in a Book Two of *Paradise Lost* way, a way of spending the next four years or so just overthinking this.

Alex Woloch: Yeah, yeah, what to, I mean, it's unclear what to do and it's also unclear what to think, which is even a slightly more sobering prospect. For instance, it's easy to have a train of thought that leads one to just want to wash one's hands.

Kenny Ligda: Right.

Alex Woloch: I mean, that would be an example. I think this imperative of the necessity of thinking, the necessity of being a thinking person, the pitfalls of avoiding thought but also Orwell's insistence on the pitfalls of thinking too deeply or of getting lost in thought, thinking that thought can solve the problems, of being too sane for the modern world. All those things can

connect. For me, yeah, Orwell's decency I think, is tied up in being able to hold those two ideas about thinking together. I mean, it's a robust form of sanity.

Kenny Ligda: Can I ask a last question?

Alex Woloch: Yeah.

Kenny Ligda: What can you imagine is the role of writing now, of literature now?

Alex Woloch: Yeah, so I had that question, and I did have an answer. I mean, this is what came to mind. I'm sure I'm not the only person to have this thought. I thought of the Auden quote, "Poetry makes nothing happen." This is from the “In Memory of WB Yeats,” "Poetry makes nothing happen," and then the next line, "It survives in the valley of its making." That seemed apropos, I mean, that seemed resonate with this moment. Poetry makes nothing happen, it survives. I mean, I think that's something that's on the mind, survival, right? Basically surviving, and I mean, not just surviving those people but again, that idea of having a political identity that can survive is pretty good right now. I mean, I think that's a lot of the work right now, is thinking about that.

Kenny Ligda: You've been listening to Reading After Trump: Conversations in Literature and Politics. This is a production of the Stanford English department, in collaboration with the office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning. Reading After Trump is created and hosted by Alex Woloch and Kenny Ligda. Sound engineering and editing is by Catherine Wong, except where I messed up by Kenny Ligda. Music is by Brett Yarnton.