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THE USES OF LITERACY

*Aspects of working-class life  
with special reference to publications  
and entertainments*



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produced. Thus there may be financial problems even though the actual circulation of the paper has not fallen. The death of *John O'London's Weekly* in 1954, when there was said to have been no significant loss in readership, may well be a case in point.

A considerable absolute increase in the amount of material produced, an increasing concentration in the organs supplying the material, consequent greater difficulties for minorities: these seem the main features in the organizational development of popular entertainments and publications. What, in equally brief summary, are likely to be their effects?

The readers of the more popular papers are clearly not only working-class people, though working-class people are likely to form a majority if only because they are a majority of the total population. No doubt these journals realize that the biggest single group to which they can address themselves is that comprising the three-quarters of the population who today leave school finally at the age of fifteen. In this connexion it may be useful to say something more about a matter I hinted at earlier – that is, about one possible effect of the scholarship system. The relation between the intellectual minority in the working-classes and those classes as a whole is an immensely complicated subject which I can discuss only tentatively. It is obviously important not to confuse the intellectual minority with the 'earnest' minority: a sense of social purpose does not necessarily accompany the possession of brains. Nor do all those who enjoy advanced education leave their class emotionally or physically. Nevertheless, the intellectual minority, with particular effect during the latter part of the nineteenth century, used to stay within the working-classes more than it does today. Its members formed some of the fermenting elements in their groups, and were an important part of that 'working-class movement' which, as I have already noted, helped to bring about considerable improvements in the material lot and status of all working-class people. They were able to help to improve

conditions partly because they were among the few who were able to meet and engage the managers in other classes with their own weapons, those of the intellect.

Today many of them are selected at the age of eleven and are often translated, by a process of education, into membership of other classes. At present, roughly one in five of the children of all classes go to grammar-schools. The home background of some lower middle-class or middle-class children may make it easier for them to win scholarships: and a few working-class children can still not take up scholarships, or they leave the grammar-schools early, because of financial pressure. But I was the poorest boy in my class and went to the grammar-school along with the next poorest boy and a few others; grants are higher today, working-class people are in general better off, and education is still valued by many working-class people. It therefore seems a large exaggeration to say of 'the best working-class lads', as the Vice-Principal of Ruskin College said recently, 'The majority are still driven by economic pressure to add to the family income as soon as possible.' Of those who go to the grammar-schools, not all leave their class, but a substantial proportion do.

The examination at eleven-plus may be in many things clumsy, but it does with a fair measure of success select intellectually agile children. Is it not therefore likely to cause the working-classes now to lose many of the critical tentacles which they would have retained years ago? It hardly helps to conclude that this proves only that we must stop speaking or thinking in terms of 'classes', that now each does the work he is best fitted for, and the clever son of poor parents takes up his position in that part of a democratic society where he can be of most value. Few people are likely to regret that clever children in the working-classes now have a greater chance of obtaining posts appropriate to their abilities. But even if the title 'working-classes' is not used, there exists a great body of people who have to perform the less interesting, the more mechanical jobs. It is a matter of some importance that they are likely to include a

smaller proportion of the critically minded than they have hitherto included. For this is happening at a time when many who seek the money and favour of working-people approach them constantly along the lines to which they are most receptive and exposed, with material whose effect is likely to be debilitating. By the interaction of these two important factors in contemporary life we might eventually find ourselves moving towards a kind of new caste system, one at least as firm as the old.

I suggested earlier that it would be a mistake to regard the cultural struggle now going on as a straight fight between, say, what *The Times* and the picture-dailies respectively represent. To wish that a majority of the population will ever read *The Times* is to wish that human beings were constitutionally different, and is to fall into an intellectual snobbery. The ability to read the decent weeklies is not a *sine qua non* of the good life. It seems unlikely at any time, and is certainly not likely in any period which those of us now alive are likely to know that a majority in any class will have strongly intellectual pursuits. There are other ways of being in the truth. The strongest objection to the more trivial popular entertainments is not that they prevent their readers from becoming highbrow, but that they make it harder for people without an intellectual bent to become wise in their own way.

The fact that changes in English society over the last fifty years have greatly increased the opportunities for further education available to the few people who will seek it has, therefore, little direct compensatory bearing on the fact that concurrent changes are bringing about an increased trivialization in productions for the majority. Most readers of a popular modern newspaper/magazine are unlikely ever to read a 'quality' paper, but they used to read an old-style weekly which was in some respects better than their newspaper/magazine. The new-style popular publications fail not because they are poor substitutes for *The Times* but because they are

only bloodless imitations of what they purport to be, because they are pallid but slicked-up extensions even of nineteenth-century sensationalism, and a considerable decline from the sneaky sensationalism of Elizabethan vernacular writers. They can be accused (as can all else for which they stand as examples: the thin *bonhomie* of many television programmes, the popular film, much in commercial radio), not of failing to be highbrow, but of not being truly concrete and personal. The quality of life, the kind of response, the rootedness in a wisdom and maturity which a popular and non-highbrow art can possess may be as valuable in their own ways as those of a highbrow art. These productions do not contribute to a sounder popular art but discourage it. They make their audience less likely to arrive at a wisdom derived from an inner, felt discrimination in their sense of people and their attitude to experience. It is easier to kill the old roots than to replace them with anything comparable. Popular publicists always tell their audience that they need not be ashamed of not being highbrow, that they have their own kinds of maturity. This is true, but it becomes false the moment such people say it, because of the way they say it; that is, because their manner of approach seriously distorts the assumption.

Every tendency I have analysed in popular publications is to be found in some forms of broadcasting – especially in those with commercial connexions – and in some ways more strikingly than in publications. There is the appeal to old decencies, as in programmes with titles like 'For Your Feeling Heart'; there are the new emphases, the stress on the acquisitive and the novel – 'For Your Feeling Heart' – in this programme 'You may Make Your Pile'. There is the high-powered modern combination of these two, in programmes where intimate personal problems are exposed before an immense audience and the person afflicted 'wins' some money for his participation. There is the lowbrow-gang-spirit of some gramophone-record features in which young men, accompanying their items with a stream of pally patter, offer programmes whose

whole composition assumes that whatever the greatest number like most is best and the rest are the aberrations of 'eggheads'. Always the apologists for these programmes make the usual defence – that they are 'in good taste – homely – full of the pathos and joy of ordinary lives'; and that they are also 'new-arresting – startling – sensational – full of gusto – and handsomely endowed with prizes'.

Most mass-entertainments are in the end what D. H. Lawrence described as 'anti-life'. They are full of a corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions. To recall instances: they tend towards a view of the world in which progress is conceived as a seeking of material possessions, equality as a moral levelling, and freedom as the ground for endless irresponsible pleasure. These productions belong to a vicarious, spectators' world; they offer nothing which can really grip the brain or heart. They assist a gradual drying-up of the more positive, the fuller, the more cooperative kinds of enjoyment, in which one gains much by giving much. They have intolerable pretensions; and pander to the wish to have things both ways, to do as we want and accept no consequences. A handful of such productions reaches daily the great majority of the population: their effect is both widespread and uniform.

They tend towards uniformity rather than towards anonymity. I have suggested that working-people are not so much visited by a feeling of anonymity as might appear to those who observe them from outside. Nor do I think that working-people have yet a strong *sense* of uniformity: they are nevertheless being presented continually with encouragements towards an unconscious uniformity. This has not yet been found hollow by most people because it is expressed most commonly as an invitation to share in a kind of palliness, even though in a huge and centralized palliness. Most people will respond to such an appeal the more readily because it seems to have much in common with some older working-class attitudes. The result is a high degree of passive acceptance, an acceptance often only

apparent and often qualified at present, but which is a ground for more dangerous extensions. From this point of view it sometimes appears that the type of emerging common man will be one who tends, by three simple gestures, a highly complicated machine, and who keeps in a centrally-heated locker a copy of the latest mass-produced sex-and-violence novel – *Some Dames Don't Strip Easy*, to coin a characteristic title – for reading in those parts of the allotted intervals when he is not listening to a radio 'gang' show.

The fact that illiteracy as it is normally measured has been largely removed only points towards the next and probably more difficult problem. A new word is needed to describe the nature of the response invited by the popular material I have discussed, a word indicating a social change which takes advantage of and thrives on basic literacy. All this needs to be considered with special urgency today because it is in continuous and increasingly rapid development. The analysis of changes in some popular publications during the last thirty or forty years should have illustrated the dubious quality of the life such things promote, their greatly increased powers of dissemination, and the accelerated speed of their development. The arrival of television is only the latest goad to popular publications; there is not likely to be any halt if matters are left to take their normal commercial course. The General Council of the Press regrets what it calls 'immoderate condemnation' of popular papers, and continues, speaking of the general situation:

To maintain the circulations on which their existence depends, newspapers have to flavour themselves according to their public's requirements and to compete hourly with others catering for a similar public . . . with millions of the less cultivated in the land now buying a paper there is a proper and important place for what, without priggishness, can be termed a vulgar press.

Such sonorous generalization, meant to serve as a partial justification for much of the process described in this book, surely deserves to be called 'immoderate apologetics'.

I have continually stressed the way in which newer forces are adapting and modifying elements in what was a fairly distinctive working-class culture. No doubt something similar could be demonstrated in the culture of other classes, if only because the newer productions appeal to more than working-class people. This throws further light on the claim to an emerging classlessness which I questioned at the very beginning of this essay. We may now see that in at least one sense we are indeed becoming classless – that is, the great majority of us are being merged into one class. We are becoming culturally classless. The newer women's magazines are in this sense 'classless' whereas the older kind belonged to particular social groups. Mass publications cannot reach an audience of the size they need by cutting across class boundaries. No doubt many of them have a special warmth for the 'little folk' – the working- and lower middle-classes. This is not because they belong to their audience in the way that older working-class publications often did, nor simply because their producers subscribe to one of the more flattering democratic assumptions, but because that audience forms the majority of their potential readers, because, though they would like to attract many others, they must have this group as the basis of their sales.

From one point of view the old social-class distinction still has some force. It is possible to say that the new mass audience is roughly formed of the total of twenty million or so adults who read the most popular daily newspapers: and then to point out that nevertheless these papers are in some things different, that they can loosely be called either working-class or lower middle- to middle-class. Though this may be true it serves only to underline the general trend. Before the war one could reasonably speak of six or eight popular papers as though they were all more or less level in their effectiveness. If the present trend continues, we shall soon be able to speak only of two or three. Concentration has gone a long way but has had to pause at the rough boundaries of the present most important division in social class, that between the working-classes and the middle-

classes. But from reading these papers it is plain that their differences are largely superficial, that they are chiefly differences of tone and 'properties'. Indisputably, these differences are important to the readers; as to the wider effects which the papers will have, the differences are less important than the similarities, than the fact that the kinds of culture which each paper embodies, the assumptions and appeals, are largely the same. The emerging classless class is likely to be a compound of these two audiences; at present it is held in a separation which is becoming less meaningful from year to year. Many factors are helping to make it less significant. To those already discussed another may be added, a further instance of a possible interplay between material improvement and cultural loss: that it is probably easier to merge working-class people into a larger, culturally characterless class when they no longer have such strong economic pressure as makes them feel the great importance of loyal membership of their known groups. No doubt many of the old barriers of class should be broken down. But at present the older, the more narrow but also more genuine class culture is being eroded in favour of the mass opinion, the mass recreational product, and the generalized emotional response. The world of club-singing is being gradually replaced by that of typical radio dance-music and crooning, television cabaret and commercial-radio variety. The uniform national type which the popular papers help to produce is writ even larger in the uniform international type which the film-studios of Hollywood present. The old forms of class culture are in danger of being replaced by a poorer kind of classless, or by what I was led earlier to describe as a 'faceless', culture, and this is to be regretted.

Finally, it has been clear to me throughout this essay, as it must have been to a reader, that issues much more difficult than those I have directly treated were being approached – issues in philosophy, to name only one example. These are issues I am not qualified to pursue. In order to be able to till my own part

of the field I felt I could reasonably take for granted a general agreement on certain assumptions, an agreement sufficient to allow me to use, without closer definition than emerges from the detailed illustrations, words such as 'decent', 'healthy', 'serious', 'valuable', 'poor', 'weakening', 'hollow', and 'trivial'. This is one individual view of some trends in the present cultural situation, based partly on personal experience and partly on specialist interests, and can only be a contribution to a much wider discussion, a single diagnosis offered for scrutiny.

There arise also many questions of a more specific kind, questions about possible direct action in the present situation; for instance, as to the extent and nature of permissible official interference with cultural matters in a democracy, and so on. These are not easy to answer, and perhaps they can best be discussed pragmatically, when from time to time decisions of this kind have to be made (as with commercial television). It would be pointless for me to try to enunciate general principles here. But there may be some point in putting forward two considerations about common attitudes to such questions today.

It often seems to me that many of the people who do know something of the process described here have too easy a tolerance towards it. There are many who feel that they 'know all the arguments about cultural debasement', and yet can take it all remarkably easily. Sometimes they confess to a rather pleasant ability to go culturally slumming, to 'enjoy looking at the — now and again'. I wonder how often this ease arises from the fact that, though they may know all the arguments, they do not really know the material, are not closely and consistently acquainted with the mass-produced entertainment which daily visits most people. In this way it is possible to live in a sort of clever man's paradise, without any real notion of the force of the assault outside.

Again, to define the limits of freedom in any single case is, I have admitted, extremely difficult. But many of us seem so anxious to avoid the charge of authoritarianism that we will

think hardly at all about the problem of definition. Meanwhile, the freedom from official interference enjoyed in this kind of society, coupled with the tolerance we ourselves are so happy to show, seems to be allowing cultural developments as dangerous in their own way as those we are shocked at in totalitarian societies.

It seems best to end on a note that has occurred throughout, on the peculiarly inner and individual nature of this crisis. This is illustrated most briefly in the recurrent observation that working-class people, though they are being in a sense exploited today, at least have now to be approached for their consent. The force of environment and the powers of persuasion count for a great deal but are not irresistible, and there are many instances of the power of free action. Working-people may in much give their consent easily, but that is often because they think themselves assenting to certain key-ideas which they have traditionally known as the informing ideas for social and spiritual improvement. These ideas have a moral origin, and that part of them is still not altogether dead. Democratic egalitarianism has one source in the assumption that all are of equal worth in a much more valuable sense; overweening freedom owes much to the idea that we must try to be responsible for our own fate and decisions; the apparent valuelessness of the permanent open mind rests in part on a refusal to be fanatic, to let the heart ('the feeling heart') become 'enchanted to a stone'. The choice today should therefore be clearer than it was before: it begins from a somewhat freer ground, one less cluttered with material hindrances.

So much is profoundly encouraging. And it may be that a concentration of false lights is unavoidable at this stage of development in a democracy which from year to year becomes more technologically competent and centralized, and yet seeks to remain a free and 'open' society. Yet the problem is acute and pressing — how that freedom may be kept as in any sense a meaningful thing whilst the processes of centralization and technological development continue. This is a particularly

intricate challenge because, even if substantial inner freedom were lost, the great new classless class would be unlikely to know it: its members would still regard themselves as free and be told that they were free.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

### A. *Quoted Speech*

The problem was to come close to the sound of urban working-class speech without either puzzling a reader or giving a misleadingly quaint air. Phonetic spelling would have had the first disadvantage and dialect the second. I have therefore used forms of spelling which roughly approximate to the spoken sound and should be immediately intelligible. Thus 'you' is usually shown as 'y', though probably a nearer spelling of the sound required would be 'yè' or 'yü'. 'Yer' is used where the following word begins with a vowel. Again, in working-class speech 'I' sounds like æ (as in 'apple'). 'Ah' has the disadvantage of slightly suggesting the Deep South, but is less puzzling than æ and more accurate than 'I', and so has had to serve. Almost every aitch has been dropped, and some readers will protest that not everyone in the working-classes drops the aitch. Yet almost everyone does, and it is more accurate to omit it in general than to include it. But here, as with 'you' and 'I', I have deliberately been inconsistent and used the normal forms occasionally.

### B. *Details of Readership*

Unless otherwise described, all details of readership, in both the text and the notes, are drawn directly from or are based on the tables in the *Hulton Readership Survey*.

The *Hulton Readership Survey (HRS)* employs a socio-economic division into five groups. The compilers are particularly careful to point out (1955) that 'the division is primarily a social rather than an economic one. However, there is some correlation between social class and income and so we offer the following very rough guides to the range of income typical of a head of household in each class.' The groups are:

- A. The well-to-do, 4% of all informants (probably more than £1300 p.a.).
- B. The middle-class, 8% of all informants (probably between £800 and £1300 p.a.).
- C. The lower middle-class, 17% of all informants (probably between £450 and £800 p.a.).
- D. The working-class, 64% of all informants (probably between £250 and £450 p.a.).
- E. The poor, 7% of all informants (probably less than £250 p.a.).