THE USES OF LITERACY

Changing Patterns in English Mass Culture

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CHAPTER III

'THEM' AND 'US'

A. 'THEM': 'SELF-RESPECT'

PRESUMABLY most groups gain some of their strength from their exclusiveness, from a sense of people outside who are not 'Us'. How does this express itself in working-class people? I have emphasised the strength of home and neighbourhood, and have suggested that this strength arises partly from a feeling that the world outside is strange and often unhelpful, that it has most of the counters stacked on its side, that to meet it on its own terms is difficult. One may call this, making use of a word commonly used by the working-classes, the world of 'Them'. 'Them' is a composite dramatic figure, the chief character in modern urban forms of the rural peasant-big-house relationships. The world of 'Them' is the world of the bosses, whether those bosses are private individuals or, as is increasingly the case today, public officials. 'Them' may be, as occasion requires, anyone from the classes outside other than the few individuals from those classes whom working-people know as individuals. A general practitioner, if he wins his way by his devotion to his patients, is not, as a general practitioner, one of 'Them'; he and his wife, as social beings, are. A parson may or may not be regarded as one of 'Them', according to his behaviour. 'Them' includes the policemen and those civil servants or local-authority employees whom the working-classes meet —teachers, the school attendance man, 'the Corporation', the local bench. Once the Means Test Official, the man from 'the Guardians' and the Employment Exchange officer were notable figures here. To the very poor, especially, they compose a shadowy but numerous and powerful group affecting their lives at almost every point: the world is divided into 'Them' and 'Us'.

'They' are 'the people at the top', 'the higher-ups', the people who give you your dole, call you up, tell you to go to war, fine you, made you split the family in the 'thirties to avoid a reduction in the Means Test allowance, 'get yer in the end', 'aren't really to be trusted', 'talk posh', 'are all twisters really', 'never tell yer owt' (e.g. about a relative in hospital), 'clap yer in clink', 'will do y' down if they can', 'summons yer', 'are all in a click (clique) together', 'treat y' like muck'.

There has been plenty of violent action by the authorities in

England, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. But on the whole, and particularly in this century, the sense of 'Them' among working-class people is not of a violent or harsh thing. This is not the 'Them' of some European proletariats, of secret police, open brutality and sudden disappearances. Yet there exists, with some reason, a feeling among working-class people that they are often at a disadvantage, that the law is in some things readier against them than against others, and that petty laws weigh more heavily against them than against some other groups. Their street-corner betting, it is often remarked, is a risky business; if they ran an account with a 'Commission Agent' it would not be. If they celebrate and get drunk they are likely to do so in a public bar, and run more risk of being picked up than the man who keeps his drinks at home. Their relations with the police tend to be rather different from those of the middle-classes. Often they are good, but, good or bad, they tend to regard the policeman primarily as someone who is watching them, who represents the authority which has its eye on them, rather than as a member of the public services whose job it is to help and protect them. They are close to the police and know something of the bullying and petty corruption that can sometimes exist. 'Oh, the police always look after themselves. They'll stick by one another till they're blue in the face, and the magistrates always believe them,' they have said for years, and go on saying.

Towards 'Them' generally, as towards the police, the primary attitude is not so much fear as mistrust; mistrust accompanied by a lack of illusions about what 'They' will do for one, and for the complicated way—the apparently unnecessarily complicated way —in which 'They' order one's life when it touches them. Working-class people have had years of experience of waiting at labour-exchanges, at the panel doctor's and at hospitals. They get something of their own back by always blaming the experts, with or without justification, if something goes wrong—'Ah never ought to 'ave lost that child if that doctor 'ad known what 'e was doing.' They suspect that public services are not so readily and effectively given to them as to the people who can telephone or send a stiff letter.

So often their contacts are with the minor officials, with those in the lower grades of uniformed and pensioned jobs. Again, as with the police, these may be to other classes servants, but to the working-classes they seem the agents of 'Them' and are mistrusted, even though they may be kindly and well disposed. If they are ill disposed, they can display to working-class people all the insolence of minor office, the brusqueness of the pettily uniformed;

they can be 'bosses' men'. So, when working-class people are asked to become foremen or N.C.O.s they often hesitate. Whatever their motives, they will be regarded now as on the side of 'Them'. Some minor officials have a doubleness in their attitudes. They tend to be sharp towards the working-classes because they would like to feel more securely separate from them; they know in their hearts by just how little they are separated and do not like to think of dropping back. Their deference towards the middle-classes can conceal an animosity; they would like to be one of them but realise they are not.

By all this working-class women are easily made unhappy, and so are usually more deferential than their menfolk towards small officials. A man is more likely to kick against it, and his kicking often takes the form of becoming really 'vulgar'. He is liable, if driven, to offer to 'knock 'is bloody block off if 'e doesn't cut out 'is bloody chelp'.

Perhaps no place so well illustrates the division into 'Them' and 'Us' as a typical North Country Magistrates' Court. It so often has an air of sour, scrubbed, provincial puritanism and mortification, from the stench of carbolic which meets you at the door, past the lavatories still marked MALES and FEMALES, to the huge pitch-pine bench lighted by high and narrow windows. The policemen may themselves feel nervously under the eye of superior officials, but to the working-class people in the well of the court they look like the hired and menacing—the more menacing because now on their own ground, with their helmets off—assistants of that anonymous authority which the bench symbolises. The magistrates' clerk may be one who likes to 'run people around a bit'; the figures on the bench seem to peer down from a distant world of middle-class security and local importance. Listening to a series of cases I usually find myself admiring the success of the bench in seeing through the incapacity and often evasiveness of working-class witnesses to a genuinely human view of the cases. They have to make most of the allowances, since the working-class people involved are aware of almost nothing but the vast apparatus of authority which has somehow got hold of them, and which they cannot understand.

To these major attitudes towards 'Them' may be added one or two minor but recurrent ones. The 'Orlick' spirit first, the 'I ain't a gentleman, you see' attitude; a dull dog-in-the-manger refusal to accept anything higher than one's own level of response, which throws out decent attempts at using authority and debases them with the rest. Or the peculiarly mean form of trickery which goes with some forms of working-class deference, the kind of

obvious 'fiddling' of someone from another class which accompanies an over-readiness to say 'sir', but assumes—in the very obviousness with which it is practised—that it is all a contemptuous game, that one can rely on the middle-class distaste for a scene to allow one to cheat easily. Or the attitude which grows when self-respect is low, and results in a series of 'They oughts'. Like primitive kings, 'They ought' to bring rain when it is needed, and are to be blamed if rain comes inopportunely; after all, 'that's what They're there for'. 'They' ought to look after you when you are in trouble, to 'do something about it', to 'take care that sort of thing doesn't happen', to 'lock 'em up'. The contrast is sharp with that much more common attitude which causes working-class people only to make use of 'Them' when absolutely forced: if things go wrong, people feel then, put up with them: don't get into the hands of authority, and, if you must have help, only 'trust yer own sort'.

The 'Them/Us' attitudes seem to me strongest in those over thirty-five, those with memories of unemployment in the 'thirties and of all the 'Thems' of those days. Younger people, even if they are not active in the unions, here inhabit a different atmosphere from that their fathers grew up in: at least, the atmosphere has a different emotional temperature. At bottom the division is still there, and little changed in its sharpness. Young people are likely to be less actively hostile, or contemptuous or fearful towards the bosses' world; nor are they likely to be deferential. But this is not always because they are better able than their parents to cope with that world, that they have come to terms with the great outside in a way their parents have not: they often seem to be simply ignoring it, to have 'contracted out' of any belief in its importance; they have gone into their own worlds, supported now by a greater body of entertaining and flattering provision than their parents knew. When they have to meet the other world sharply, as on many occasions after marriage, they often do their best to go on ignoring it, or draw upon attitudes similar to those of their parents. Ask at a baby clinic what proportion of working-class mothers can even now be persuaded to take full advantage of the services. I know some who will not 'go near' the clinic, not even for their orange juice; they mistrust anything authority provides and prefer to go to the chemists', even though this is more expensive.

Behind all this is a problem of which we are acutely conscious today—that everyone is expected to have a double eye, one for his duties as an individual person, and another for those as a citi-

zen in a democracy. Most of us, even the more-or-less intellectual, find it difficult to relate these worlds to each other. Working-class people, with their roots so strongly in the homely and personal and local, and with little training in more general thinking, are even less likely to be able to bring the two worlds into focus. They are, if they think of it, ill at ease; this second and complex world cannot easily be dramatised, is too vast, too much 'beyond' them. They do much to bring it within their own scope, usually by simplification: for the rest they continue to say, as their grandparents said, 'I don't know what the world's coming to.'

One traditional release of working-class people in their dealings with authority is more positive than this. I mean their debunking-art, their putting-a-finger-to-the-nose at authority by deflating it, by guying it. The policeman may sometimes be a trouble; he can also have songs written about his feet. My impression is that this reaction is less strong than it used to be. No doubt the change is due in part to the greatly improved position of working-class people in society. It can also be an expression of the 'contracting-out' mentioned earlier, of a feeling that 'we get on alright as we are'; we ask 'Them' for nothing and feel no particular resentment towards them. Such an attitude may be encouraged by the great quantity of entertainment offered today. These entertainments are of such a kind that they render their consumers less likely to make the ironically vigorous protest contained in debunking-art.

The old manner survives to some degree in the Services, where the division between 'Them' and 'Us' is still clear and formal. Most of the debunking songs heard there are at least forty years old. I have in mind songs such as, 'Left, left. I had a good job when I left', 'When this bloody war is over', and 'I don't want to be a soldier'.

More than a vigour, there is a clear dignity in that reaction to the pressures of the outside world which takes the form of insisting on 'keeping y' self-respect'. And the moment this idea of 'self-respect' and 'self-reliance' comes to mind, it begins to flower into related ideas: into that of 'respectability' first, which itself spreads outwards and upwards from some thin-lipped forms, through the pride of a skilled workman, to the integrity of those who have practically nothing except a determination not to allow themselves to be dragged down by circumstances. At the centre is a resolution to hold on to that of which one can be rightly proud; in a world which puts so many stum-

bling-blocks in the way, to hold on at least to 'self-respect'. 'At least, ah've got me self-respect'; the right to be able to say that, though it can be said meanly, makes up for a lot. It is at work constantly in the hatred of 'going on the parish', in the worry to keep up sick payments, in the big insurances to avoid a parish burial, in thrift and the cult of cleanliness. There is, I think, a tendency among some writers on the working-classes to think of all those who aim at thrift and cleanliness as imitators of the lower middle-classes, as in some way traitors to their own class, anxious to get out of it. Conversely, those who do not make this effort tend to be regarded as more honest and less servile than those who do. But cleanliness, thrift and self-respect arise more from a concern not to drop down, not to succumb to the environment, than from an anxiety to go up; and among those who altogether ignore these criteria, the uninhibited, generous and carefree spirits are outnumbered by the slovenly and shiftless whose homes and habits reflect their inner lack of grip. Even the urge for children to 'get on' and the respect for the value of 'book-learning' is not most importantly produced by the wish to reach another class out of snobbery. It is associated much more with the thought of a reduction in the numerous troubles which the poor have to meet, simply because they are poor:

> I have seen him that is beaten, him that is beaten: thou art to set thine heart on books. I have beheld him that is set free from forced labour: behold, nothing surpasseth books.

'How narrow the gap, how slight the chance', for keeping the raft afloat and being able to 'look people in the face'. It is therefore important to have that sense of independence which arises from a respect for oneself, because that is what no one can physically take away. 'Ah've worked 'ard all me life,' people will say, 'and ah owe no man anything.' They own nothing either, except a few sticks of furniture, but they never expected to own more. Hence the survival of all kinds of apparent oddities, especially among those now over fifty. I know several families which have elected to keep their electricity supply on the shilling-in-the-slot system. They pay more that way and frequently find themselves in the dark because no one has a shilling; they have enough money coming in now to pay quarterly bills easily. But they cannot bear the thought of having a debt outstanding longer than a week. (Clothing club 'draws' and the grocery bill often come in another category—they do not seem like debts owed to 'Them'.)

Here, too, lies the origin of the clinging, whatever straits people

have reached, to the 'little bit of something' which speaks of a time when they had tastes of their own and the freedom to make gestures. No doubt these things are better arranged now, but when I was a boy our area was shocked by the clumsiness of a Board of Guardians visitor who suggested to an old woman that, since she was living on charity, she ought to sell a fine teapot she never used but always had on show. 'Just fancy', people went around saying, and no further analysis was needed. Everyone knew that the man had been guilty of an insensitive affront to human dignity . . . 'Oh, reason not the need; . . . / . . . Allow not nature more than nature needs,/Man's life is cheap as beast's.'

We may understand why working-class people often seem not 'oncoming' to social workers, seem evasive and prepared to give answers designed to put off rather than to clarify. At the back of the announcement that 'Ah keep meself to meself' there can be a hurt pride. It is difficult to believe that a visitor from another class could ever realise imaginatively all the ins-and-outs of one's difficulties—there is an anxiety not to 'show y'self up', to defend oneself against patronage.

It is still important to 'have a trade in your hands', and this not merely because a skilled tradesman has, until recently, almost always earned more. The skilled workman can say more firmly than the unskilled labourer that he is 'as good as the next chap'. He is out of the ruck of those who receive the first shock of large labour cuts; he has remnants of a journeyman's pride. He may never seriously think of moving, but at the back of his mind is the idea that he is at liberty to pack his tools and go. Fathers who are anxious to 'do right' by their boys still try to have them apprenticed.

B. 'US'—THE BEST AND THE WORST OF IT

In any discussion of working-class attitudes much is said about the group-sense, that feeling of being not so much an individual with 'a way to make' as one of a group whose members are all roughly level and likely to remain so. I avoid the word 'community' at this stage because its overtones seem too simply favourable; they may lead to an under-estimation of the harsher tensions and sanctions of working-class groups.

Certainly working-class people have a strong sense of being members of a group, and just as certainly that sense involves the assumption that it is important to be friendly, co-operative, neighbourly. 'We are all in the same boat'; 'it is no use fighting one another'; but 'in unity is strength'. One's mind goes back to the

movements of the last century, to the hundreds of 'Friendly' societies, to the mottoes of the unions: the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, with 'Be United and Industrious'; the Provisional Committee of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers choosing, in the late 'nineties, 'Love, Unity and Fidelity'. And the 'Love' in the last recalls the strength which this sense of unity acquired from a Christian background.

The friendly group tradition seems to me to have its strength initially from the ever-present evidence, in the close, huddled, intimate conditions of life, that we are, in fact, all in the same position. You are bound to be close to people with whom, for example, you share a lavatory in a common yard. That 'luv' which is still the most common form of address, and not only to people in their own class, by tram and bus conductors and by shop-keepers, is used automatically, but still indicates something. To call anyone 'neighbourly' or 'right sociable' is to offer a high compliment; a club may be praised because it is a 'real sociable place'; the most important recommendation for lodgings or seaside 'digs' is that they are 'sociable', and this outweighs overcrowding; and a church is just as likely to be weighed in the same scales. 'Ar' Elsie got married at All Saints',' they will say, of the church they chose from several nearby, not one of which can claim them as parishioners—'it's a nice friendly church.' The story of a Christmas party at the local will end, 'It was a luvly night. Everybody got real friendly.' Good neighbourliness consists not just in 'doing fair by each other', but in being 'obliging' or 'always ready to oblige'. If the neighbours in a new area seem to lack the right kind of neighbourliness, the newcomer will insist that she 'just can't settle'.

The sense of a group warmth exercises a powerful hold, and continues to be missed when individuals have moved, financially and probably geographically, out of the working-classes. I have noticed that self-made men now living in villas—grocers who have done well and own a small chain of local shops; jobbing builders who have advanced so far as to be putting up fields of private 'semis'—like to join the crowd at football matches. They drive up in a car now and wear shaggily prosperous Harris tweed, but many of them still go on the terraces rather than in the stands. I imagine they enjoy recapturing something of the mateyness of the ranks, much as a commissioned Q.M. will usually be found in the non-commissioned bar at a unit dance.

This is not a very self-conscious sense of community; it is worlds away from the 'fellowship in service' of some of the socially purposive movements. It does not draw its main strength

from—indeed, it precedes, and is more elementary than—the belief in the need to improve each other's lot jointly which gave rise to such organisations as the Co-operative movement. It arises chiefly from a knowledge, born of living close together, that one is inescapably part of a group, from the warmth and security that knowledge can give, from the lack of change in the group and from the frequent need to 'turn to a neighbour' since services cannot often be bought. It starts from the feeling that life is hard, and that 'our sort' will usually get 'the dirty end of the stick'. In most people it does not develop into a conscious sense of being part of 'the working-class movement' : the 'Co-ops' are today less typical of the outlook of the majority in the working-classes than the small privately-owned corner-shops serving a couple of streets. The attitude finds expression in a great number of formal phrases—'Y've got to share and share alike' ; 'y've got to 'elp one another out' ; 'y've got to 'elp lame dogs' ; 'we must all pull together' ; 'it's sink or swim together'. But for the most part these are actually spoken only on special occasions, at singsongs and festivals.

The solidarity is helped by the lack of scope for the growth of ambition. After the age of eleven, when the scholarship boys and girls go off to the grammar-school, the rest look increasingly outward to the real life which will begin at fifteen, to the life with the group of older men and women which, for the first few years after school, forms the most powerfully educative force they know. Once at work there is for most no sense of a career, of the possibilities of promotion. Jobs are spread around horizontally, not vertically; life is not seen as a climb, nor work as the main interest in it. There is still a respect for the good craftsman. But the man on the next bench is not regarded as an actual or potential competitor. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, the strong emotional hold of the 'go slow—don't put the other man out of a job' attitude. Working-class people number several vices among their occupational attitudes, but not those of the 'go-getter' or the 'livewire', nor those of 'the successful smilers the city can use' ; 'keen types' are mistrusted.

Whatever one does, horizons are likely to be limited; in any case, working-class people add quickly, money doesn't seem to make people happier, nor does power. The 'real' things are the human and companionable things—home and family affection, friendship and being able to 'enjoy y'self' : 'money's not the real thing', they say, and 'Life isn't worth living if y'sweating for extra money all t' time.' Working-class songs often ask for love, friends, a good home ; they always insist that money does not matter.

There are exceptions : those who still hold to the line Matthew

Arnold satirised—'Ever remember, my dear Dan, that you should look forward to being one day manager of that concern.' Among some of the more avidly respectable this shows in the way boys are urged to 'get on', to pass that scholarship, to be careful of their 'penmanship' since gentlemen in offices like 'a neat hand'. And there are sharp-eyed little men whom the rest regard with charity as wrong-headed, who 'never let a penny go'. They take on extra work at nights and weekends and are always anxious to make an extra bob-or-two at the hour when others are having a good time. These people are not usually moving upward or out of their class ; they are running agitatedly round inside it, amassing the unconsidered trifles which are always about.

The attitude to bachelors probably shows as well as anything the tolerance which is extended to established exceptions within the group. The occasional bachelor in any neighbourhood is likely to be living at home with a widowed mother or in the family of a married sister. Such a bachelor can usually be found on most nights in a fixed corner of the local pub or club, since he is likely to be quiet and regular in his habits. Perhaps a certain kind of shyness has helped to make him a bachelor ; he is in some ways a lone bird, but he cannot be called lonely. He is respected in the neighbourhood. He is not thought of as a man-on-the-loose and therefore as a potential Don Juan. He probably figures, rather, as a harmless uncle of indeterminate age, one who is 'always very polite' and 'quiet-spoken' and is said to be good to his mother or sister. There is sometimes a touch of amusement in this attitude, as though behind it is a feeling that old So-and-so has been a little scared of the physical relations with a woman which marriage entails. But this is not normally an expression of scorn ; nor is such a bachelor likely to be regarded as selfish or queer or anti-social. Some men, it is felt, are born bachelors ; they are therefore a real part of the neighbourhood.

That minority who become conscious of their class-limitations and take up some educational activity—so as to 'work for their class' or 'improve themselves'—tend to be ambiguously regarded. The respect for the 'scholar' (like the doctor and the parson) to some extent remains. I remember sitting, not long after I had won a scholarship, next to a middle-aged bachelor miner in a working-men's club. Whenever he paid for his rum-and-hot-milk he passed me a half-crown from the change. I tried to refuse : 'Tek it, lad, and use it for thee education,' he said. 'Ah'm like all miners. Ah only waste t'bluddy stuff.' On the other hand, there is often a mistrust of 'book-learning'. What good does it do you? Are you any better off (i.e. happier) as a clerk? or as a teacher? Parents who

refuse, as a few still do, to allow their children to take up scholarships are not always thinking of the fact that they would have to be fed and clothed for much longer; at the back is this vaguely formulated but strong doubt of the value of education. That doubt acquires some of its force from the group-sense itself: for the group seeks to conserve, and may impede an inclination in any of its members to make a change, to leave the group, to be different.

The group, I suggested, works against the idea of change. It does more than this: it imposes on its members an extensive and sometimes harsh pressure to conform. Those who become different, through education and in one or two other ways, may often be allowed for, and I do not want to suggest a strong automatic hostility to any departure at all from the group or its attitudes. Indeed, one of the marked qualities of working-class groups is a wide tolerance in some things; but it is a tolerance which works freely only if the chief class assumptions are shared.

The group is close: it is likely to regard someone originally from a town forty miles away as 'not one of us' for years; and I have seen it unconsciously and insensitively cruel for a long time —and kind, too, in many things—towards a foreign wife. The group watches, often with a low unallowingness, an unimaginative cruelty which can make for much unhappiness. 'Ah wunder what she meant by that?'; 'Ooh, don't things get about!'; 'It doesn't do to let others know too much' are common phrases. Wondering what the neighbours will say is as common here as elsewhere; perhaps more common, in its own way. Working-class people watch and are watched in a manner which, because horizons are limited, will often result in a mistaken, and lowering, interpretation of what the neighbours do. A working-class woman may be known to act as a 'sitter-in' at the place where she cleans all day; but if she is brought home at the end of the evening she is likely to ask to be left a couple of streets away. What would the neighbours say if they saw her coming home with a man?

The group does not like to be shocked or attacked from within. There may be little of the competitive urge to keep up with the Joneses, but just as powerful can be the pressure to keep down with the Atkinses. Hence the frequent use, long before advertisers made so much of its value, of the appeal to the ordinary and the unextreme, 'any decent man would . . .', 'it's not natural', 'I like 'im; 'e's always the same'. If you want to be one of the group you must not try to 'alter people's ways', and you will be disliked if

you imply a criticism of their ways by acting differently yourself; if you infringe the taboos you will run into disfavour:

> There's such a thing as mass thought, you know. If you think the same as the man next to you, you're all right. But if you don't, if you're seen bringing in a book [i.e. into work] or anything like that, you're not. It's very difficult to stand up to ridicule.

All classes require conformity to some degree; it needs to be stressed here because there is a tendency to stress upper- and middle-class conformity and to regard the working-classes as more free from it.

Acting beyond the ideas of the group, 'acting posh', 'giving y'self airs', 'getting above y'self', 'being lah-de-dah', 'thinking y'self too good for other people', 'being stuck-up', 'turning y'nose up at other people', 'acting like Lady Muck'—all these are much disliked and not very sensitively discriminated. The genuine 'toff' might be found amusing, as he was fifty years ago, and the 'real gentleman' (who will talk to you 'just like I'm talking to you now') is still likely to be admired, even though he is obviously one of 'Them'. Neither inspires a feeling as strong as that aroused by the person who is putting on 'posh' airs because he thinks they are better than working-class airs. 'Ay, and what do you dislike most, then?' asks Wilfred Pickles. 'Stuck-up fowk.' Roars of applause. 'Jolly good! and will you just tell me what you like most?' 'Good neighbourly fowk.' Increased applause. '. . . and very right too. Give her the money.'

Whatever their origins, Gracie Fields and Wilfred Pickles hardly qualify as members of the working-classes now. But both are still warmly 'alright' because they remain of them in spirit and have conquered the 'moneyed classes' with their working-class wit and attitudes. 'They love Wilfred Pickles down South,' working-class people will say, meaning that people not of their class love him: there is some pride that their values, those of the unpolished and 'straight', are appreciated by other classes. Their 'comics' have stormed the posh citadels; 'good luck to 'em!'

We frequently hear that the English working-classes are gentle, gentler than those of almost any other country, gentler today than their own parents and grandparents. Undoubtedly there has been a decrease in the amount of sheer brutality in the towns during the last fifty years, a decline in the rough and savage stuff which sometimes made the streets at night and particularly at weekends places to avoid. The hooliganism and rowdyism which caused the

police to work in pairs in several areas of many towns have almost gone. We no longer hear, except very occasionally, of bare-fist fights on bits of waste-ground, of broken-bottle fights inside bars, of regular assaults by gangs on girls at fairgrounds, of so much animal drunkenness.

It would be a deluding and foolish archaism which regretted the loss of all this, which assumed that its decline meant the loss of some gusto among the working-classes, that the gentleness is merely a passivity. But that same generation which was often coarse and savage could also be gentle: I think again of my grandmother, who saw brutalities which would shock a woman of almost any class today and was herself often harshly crude. But she, in common with many of her generation, had in some things an admirable gentleness and fineness of discrimination. Perhaps the gentleness we notice is not so much a new feature as an old strain which is more evident, has been allowed more room to operate today. It must have taken generations to develop, is the product of centuries in which people got along pretty well together, were not persistently harassed by the more violent evidences of the powers above them, and felt—however severe their troubles—that law was fairly generally applicable and authority not hopelessly corrupt. I have not forgotten the experiences of the 'Hungry Forties' of the last century; but I think also of the Russian serfs and of the Italian attitude towards civil servants even today. All this has no doubt bred a reasonableness, a remarkably quiet assumption that violence is the last ditch.

If I draw further attention, then, to the strain of coarseness and insensitivity running through working-class life, I do so not to infer that other classes have not their own forms, nor to deny all that is usually said about gentleness, but to restore a balance which we have been inclined to lose during the last twenty years. The evidence must be chosen with unusual care, must not include habits which simply seem coarse by the usage of other classes. Thus, working-class speech and manners in conversation are more abrupt, less provided with emollient phrases than those of other groups: their arguments are often conducted in so rude a way that a stranger might well think that after this, at the worst, fighting would follow, and at the best a permanent ending of relations. I find that even now, if I am not to be misunderstood, I have to modify a habit of carrying on discussion in an 'unlubricated' way, in short sharp jabs that are meant to go home—and yet not meant really to hurt. Neither the phrasing nor the rhythms of working-class speech have the easing and modified quality which, in varying degrees, is characteristic of other classes. The pattern of their

speech follows more closely the pattern of emotions they are feeling at the time, whether it be exasperation, as in the rows, or gaiety, as in that occasional shrieking of working-class housewives out for a day at the sea which dismays some who sit in the front gardens of private hotels. There is, of course, a 'calling a spade a spade' arrogance which makes a few working-class people overdo the rougher elements in their speech when with others from a different class.

But working-class life, whatever changes there may have been, is still closer to the ground than that of most other people. The prevalent grime, the closeness and the difficulties of home life, I have sufficiently described; we have to remember as well that the physical conditions of the working-lives of men, and of some women, are often noisy, dirty and smelly. We all know this in our heads, but realise it freshly only if we have to pass through some of those deep caverns in Leeds where the engines clang and hammer ceaselessly and the sparks fly out of huge doorways and men can be seen, black to the shoulders, heaving and straining at hot pieces of metal: or through the huge area in Hull which has a permanent pall of cooking fish-meal over it, seeping through the packed houses. The heavy, rough and beast-of-burden work is still there to be done and working-class people do it. These are not conditions which produce measured tones or the more padded conversational allowances.

Thus the rows which are so much a part of the life of any working-class neighbourhood, and of many working-class families, can be easily misinterpreted. They are understandably a part of the neighbourhood's life: in narrow, terraced streets, with thin party-walls, they could hardly be kept private anyhow, unless they were conducted in very subdued voices. They certainly are not quietly conducted, and so they become one of the interests of the neighbourhood. Children, hearing that 'Old So-and-so's up t'street are 'aving a right row', will gather in a group as near as they can. And if a row goes on too long or too noisily for the patience of a neighbour, he can always hammer on the party-wall or rattle a poker on the fire-back.

It would be wrong to assume from this that working-class people are congenitally quarrelsome and continually rowing. Some rows are nasty and distressing, and some families are known to be 'always 'aving rows', and these will probably not be regarded as the most respectable. Many families—perhaps most—will have an occasional row. All this will not be automatically regarded as bringing disrepute to the neighbourhood. It is accepted that disputes—perhaps about the amount of money

spent on drinking, perhaps among womenfolk about the sharing of household duties, perhaps about 'another woman'—will arise from time to time, and that they will erupt into vivid, quick, noisy war. In my experience, rows about drinking are the most common, and those about the 'other woman' (or man) the least common.

If I may digress for a moment on this latter aspect: these affairs, as I knew them, seemed generally to concern a man in his late thirties or early forties, a man who was slightly more dapper than his acquaintances, though in the same sort of work. His wife would have lost her physical appeal, so he sought interest elsewhere. Yet the woman he 'took up with' was likely enough to be married herself and of roughly the same age as his own wife—and to a stranger no more attractive physically. The two would probably become drinking companions in a known place. The wife would soon learn what was going on and fierce rows would blow up (on more than one occasion I remember a much more serious development—an early-morning 'bashing' of the man by the injured husband on a piece of waste-ground). The oddest feature of all was that sometimes the two women became friendly, and settled into a relationship which the connections of the husband with each of the women not only did not preclude but seemed to nourish.

Most of the rows I experienced were not thought of as shocking occurrences. Rows of that kind took place in the truly slummy areas, with drunken fights between the menfolk or, worse, between men and women or, worst of all, between women alone. Such events would really shock an ordinary working-class neighbourhood.

I remember too that in our neighbourhood we accepted suicides as a moderately common occurrence. Every so often one heard that So-and-so had 'done 'erself in', or 'done away with 'imself', or 'put 'er 'ead in the gas-oven', since the gas-oven was the most convenient means of self-destruction. I do not know whether suicide took place more often in the sort of groups I am speaking of than in middle-class groups. It did not happen monthly or even every season, and not all attempts succeeded; but it happened sufficiently often to be part of the pattern of life. Among the working-classes it could not be concealed, of course, any more than a row could; everyone quickly knew about it. The fact I want to stress is that suicide was not felt to be simply a personal matter or one confined to the family concerned, but that it was felt to be bound up with the conditions of the common life. Sometimes the cause was that a girl had 'got 'erself into trouble' and

for one reason or another could not go through with it: just as often it was that, for those who put their heads on a pillow inside the oven-door, life had become unendurable; they were ill and treatment seemed to be doing no good; they were out of work; or, whatever they did, the debts piled up. This was not long ago. The fact that suicide could be accepted—pitifully but with little suggestion of blame—as a part of the order of existence shows how hard and elemental that life could be.

Does this altogether explain, for example, the way many working-class men speak when no women are present? In part, perhaps; but one has to be careful of special pleading here. George Orwell, noting that working-class men use four-letter words for natural functions freely, says they are obscene but not immoral. But there are degrees and kinds of obscenity, and this sort of conversation is often obscene and nothing else, obscene for the sake of obscenity in a dull, repetitive and brute way. And there are kinds of immorality; such men may use short and direct words about sex which at first are a relief after the allusion of cabaret shows and the literature of sexual sophistication. But they use those words so indiscriminately and talk so preponderantly about sex as often to reveal a calloused sensibility. Listen to them speaking of their sexual adventures and plans; you are likely to feel smothered by the boring animality, the mongrel-dogs-rutting-in-alleyways quality. It is a quality which owes as much to an insensitivity in relations as to a freedom from hypocrisy. To each class its own forms of cruelty and dirt; that of working-class people is sometimes of a gratuitously debasing coarseness.

C. 'PUTTING UP WITH THINGS': 'LIVING AND LETTING LIVE'

I have spoken of a world and a life whose main lines are almost predictable, of work for a man which is probably not interesting, of years of 'making-do' for a woman, of the lack in most people of any feeling that some change can, or indeed ought to, be made in the general pattern of life.

By and large, seems to be the note that is struck, we are not asked to be the great doers in this world; our kind of life offers little of splendour or of calls for the more striking heroisms, and its tragedies are not of the dramatic or rhetorical kind. At least, that is the sort of view this world seems to invite us to take: to do its heavier work, with sights fixed at short distance.

When people feel that they cannot do much about the main elements in their situation, feel it not necessarily with despair or

disappointment or resentment but simply as a fact of life, they adopt attitudes towards that situation which allow them to have a liveable life under its shadow, a life without a constant and pressing sense of the larger situation. The attitudes remove the main elements in the situation to the realm of natural laws, the given and raw, the almost implacable, material from which a living has to be carved. Such attitudes, at their least-adorned a fatalism or plain accepting, are generally below the tragic level; they have too much of the conscript's lack of choice about them. But in some of their forms they have dignity.

At the lowest is the acceptance of life as hard, with nothing to be done about it: put up with it and don't aggravate the situation: 'what is to be, will be'; 'if y' don't like it, y' mun lump it'; 'that's just the way things are'; 'it's no good kicking against the pricks'; 'what can't be mended must be made do with'; 'y've got to tek life as it cums—day in, day out'. In many of these is a note of dull fatalism; life is always like that for people like us. But the really flat ones are a minority among the phrases of roughly cognate type: in most the note is of a cheerful patience: 'y've got to tek life as it cums', yes; but also 'y've got to get on wi' it best way y' can'; 'grin and bear it'; 'ah well, least said, soonest mended'; 'oh, it'll all be the same in a hundred years' time'; 'all such things are sent to try us' (here, as in some others, the connection with religion is evident); 'it isn't always dark at six'; 'we're short o' nowt we've got'; 'worse things 'appen at sea'; 'ah well, we live in 'opes'. It's all bound to be ups-and-downs, the rough with the smooth, roundabouts and swings: 'it's no good moaning'; 'mek the best of it . . . stick it . . . soldier on . . .'; 'don't meet trouble 'alf-way'. You may sort-of-hope for a windfall or a sudden, wonderful surprise, but not really; you've got to go on and 'mek yer own life'; 'keep yer end up'; 'life is what y' mek it'. 'Mek shift and fadge' and you'll be 'alright'—as private soldiers were when they knocked up something like a living-space out of the most unpromising conditions.

This is not so much the cheerfulness of the stiff upper lip as of the unexpecting, partly stoic, partly take-life-as-it-comes 'lower orders'. T. S. Eliot says somewhere that stoicism can be a kind of arrogance, a refusal to be humble before God: working-class stoicism is rather a self-defence, against being altogether humbled before men. There may be little you can do about life; there is at any rate something you can be. A working-class housewife, if she finds over a period that she has a shilling a week spare from housekeeping for emergencies, can say that she is 'quite happy'; and the adverb does not modify the adjective, but makes it absolute.

So to tolerance, to 'living and letting live'; a tolerance bred both from a charity, in that all are in the same lower situation together, and from the larger unidealism which that situation creates. The larger unexpectancy encourages a slowness to moral indignation: after all, it's no good creating problems; there are plenty as it is: 'anything for a quiet life'. The tolerance exists along with the conservatism and conformity already described; they clash only rarely. They co-exist, are drawn upon at different times and for different purposes, and people know instinctively which is relevant at any time. Far from contradicting, they thus mutually reinforce each other.

The stress on tolerance arises, then, chiefly from the unexpectant, unfanatic, unidealistic group sense, from the basic acceptance by most people of the larger terms of their life. Working-class people are generally suspicious of principles before practice (in the more articulate this occasionally becomes a thrusting brass-tacks 'realism' which is in fact a self-glorification, masking a disinclination to probe uncomfortably—'let's get on with the job. All this theory gets you nowhere'). Most are likely to assume that you will lie rather than disappoint or hurt; you may thereby be going against a principle, but that is something outside, and people are here and now. You have to get along with them, to 'rub along' and 'mind yer own business' as you expect other people to mind theirs. Life is never perfect: avoid extremes; most things are 'alright up to a point', or 'alright if y' don't go too far'; and, after all, 'it all depends'. You may have views, but should never 'push them down people's throats'. Views never matter enough, but people do: you should not judge by rules but by facts, not by creed but by character. 'Y' can't change 'uman nature'; 'it teks all sorts to mek a world'; you should 'tek people as y' find 'em'; 'there's good and bad wherever y' go'; ''uman nature's the same wherever y' go', and 'a man's a man wherever y' go': 'everyone's got a right to live'.

All this supports the general lack of patriotism, the mistrust of the public or official things. The 'fear of freedom' may have tempted the middle-classes towards authoritarianism; it affects the working-classes differently. They still feel in their bones that the public and the generalised life is wrong. This rudimentary internationalism can co-exist with anti-Semitism or with strong feeling against Roman Catholicism (as representing Authoritarianism in its 'worst' form); but such intolerance comes out only occasionally, and the two worlds do not often meet.

We know that the pressure to conform expresses itself in an intricate network not of ideas but of prejudices which seek to

impose a rigid propriety. They gain strength from the remains of the puritanism which once so strongly affected the working-classes, and which still rules fairly strictly a number of working-class lives. On most the puritanism, buttressing itself against the hard facts of working-class conditions, even now has some effect, lives to some degree among those in whom can be found the wider forms of tolerance. We may see this better by looking at attitudes towards drink and, more fully, sex.

On the one hand, drinking is accepted as part of the normal life, or at least of the normal man's life, like smoking. 'A man needs 'is pint'; it helps to make life worth while; if one can't have a bit of pleasure like that, then what is there to live for? It is 'natural' for a man to like his beer. Women seem to be drinking more easily now than they did a generation ago; even as late as my adolescence the 'gin-and-It' woman was regarded as a near-tart. But still, after the children have arrived, women's drinking is not usually considerable; the weekends are their big 'let-out'. Just how much beer-drinking a man may be allowed without incurring disapproval depends on his circumstances; there is a finely-graded scale of allowances. A widower might be expected to drink more than most, since he has not got a wife and comfortable home to go back to. A man and wife with no children can be allowed regular drinking, since they are not taking the bread from their children's mouths, and home without kids is not very inviting. A husband with a family should drink 'within reason', that is, should know when he has had enough, and should always 'provide'. There are occasions—festivals, celebrations, cup-ties, trips—when anyone might be expected to drink quite a lot. It is understandable that certain situations might 'drive anyone to drink'. On the whole, the emphasis is a double one: on the rightness of drinking in itself, and on the realisation that, if it once 'gets hold', complete collapse—a near-literal home-breaking as the furniture is sold—may well follow.

It was clearly this latter side which gave such force to the anti-drink movement during the last century and in the first decade or so of this. It was easy to see how even a family which had had as good food as it wished and a few extras could be down to bread-and-scrape off an orange-box inside a month if the 'demon drink' took hold. Economically a working-class home has always been, and to a large extent remains, a raft on the sea of society. So the Temperance Movement was still going strong as late, at least, as the early 'thirties, when I signed the pledge twice at intervals of

a year or so. I was between ten and twelve at the time, and signed with the rest of my Sunday school acquaintances; we felt in an obscure way that it affected our eligibility for places on the Whitsuntide 'treat'. I had a drunken uncle, the last of a line which stretched well back to the 'seventies, and had its counterpart in many of the families round us. We did not by then sing songs like, 'Please sell no more drink to my Father', or, 'Don't go out tonight, dear Father', or, 'Father, dear Father, come home with me now', or—my own favourite—'My drink is water bright' (which went something like this: 'Merry Dick, you soon would know,/ If you lived in Jackson's Row/My drink is water bright,/ My drink is water bright,/From the crystal spring'). We heard those only as amusement from our elders, who had been taught them as children: but we saw their point. We knew that too much drinking, even as little as three shillings a week more than a family could afford, meant quick poverty, 'tick' mounting until the final bust-up, clothing rapidly and obviously deteriorating, desperately worried mothers, lost jobs, rows of increasing force and frequency. 'Thank goodness, 'e's never been a drinker', housewives will still say regularly. There is little violent drunkenness nowadays, and much less drinking of all kinds, but drink is still regarded as the main pitfall for a working-class husband. Drink, then, is 'alright', is 'natural', in moderation. Once the boundary, which varies with different kinds of family, is crossed, disaster may follow. On the other hand, the man who does not drink at all is a bit unusual—most working-class people would not ask for a majority of men like that, whatever the perils of drink.

A friend of mine from a nearby street was an only child and seemed to have no father; his mother was a tailoress, but always able to dress him well, and he had more pocket-money than the rest of us. He went to the pictures a couple of times a week, and could usually produce a penny for some chips. It was only in my teens that I discovered that his mother was a prostitute, operating in the city centre. She needed more money to bring up the boy than tailoring offered. (I think her husband had simply disappeared). More, she was anxious that he should not 'suffer' because he had 'no father behind him', and the way of ensuring this which presented itself to her imagination was to provide him with the financial superiority which counts so much among boys. Much of what has been said already may go some way towards explaining why she thought so little of the sale of her body; my particular concern here is to point out that she was not ostracised, except by a

few who talked of 'giving the street a bad name'. Most nodded at or talked to her as to anyone else, even though they would never have had recourse to prostitution, would indeed have been horrified at the thought for themselves. 'After all, she's got to live', they used to say; they understood the pressure of the situation, and could see how some people were led to this solution. They did not 'turn against them' because of it: and although I heard from such people many a judgment on what they regarded in others as wanton and dirty behaviour, I do not remember hearing a moral judgment on this woman.

A few years later she was joined, on another 'beat' in the same area, by the younger daughter in a family of six children whose father had brought them up after his wife's death. They lived not far from the first woman, and often came in for adverse comment. But it was inspired more by the fact that the father did not clothe or feed them as well as the neighbours thought possible, even in his difficult circumstances, than because one of the girls went out to prostitution.

Later, I served a spell as overnight dispatch-clerk to a long-distance transport firm, taking over from a youth who lived a couple of streets away from us. About four times a night the big lorries and their trailers pulled in from Newcastle, dropped some goods, and perhaps a road 'floozie', re-loaded, and headed for London. For the rest of the night-shift I was alone in the back streets of the city centre, except for the policemen, the night-watchmen and an occasional late prostitute. As I took over, my predecessor told me that he was sometimes visited, about half-past eleven, by a prostitute called Irene, who liked to have a cup of tea. She was a good sort and would occasionally 'give you a blow-through' in the furniture-van at the back, if she were not too tired. I met her only once, and she talked most of the time about the pain in her feet. She was almost completely unselfconscious about her occupation and might have been selling papers, so matter-of-fact and dull did she find it. I suppose my rock-climbing-undergraduate look put her off, for she made no offers and came back no more whilst I was there. Later, I used to see her looking into the windows of the posh corner-shops, when I passed through town occasionally at night. The poor girl must have had customers—young bloods from the better districts, visiting commercial travellers, students proving their manhood, broken-down salesmen, young labourers with money and ale inside them, or those homeless labourers who move from town to town following the big jobs—but I never saw her with one. I remember she told me of a sister on the stage—'she's luvly to look at'. There seemed to be a steady

trickle of good-looking working-class girls into the choruses of the travelling revues.

I do not mean to suggest, in relating these incidents, that working-class people are sexually more licentious than others: I think it doubtful whether they are. But sexual matters do seem nearer the surface, and sexual experience in the working-classes is probably more easily and earlier acquired than in other social groups. The nearness to the surface accompanies, as social workers sometimes point out, a great shyness about some aspects of sex—about discussing it 'sensibly', about being seen naked, or even about undressing for the act of sex, or about sophistications in sexual behaviour. Even today few working-class parents seem to tell their children anything about sex. They know they will quickly pick it all up from the street-corner. But they are not deliberately leaving it aside because they know the street-gang will do the work for them; indeed, they are likely to be greatly upset if they find their children talking or acting 'dirty'. They leave it, I think, partly because they are not good teachers, are neither competent in nor fond of exposition, prefer knowledge to come incidentally, by means of apophthegm and proverb; and partly because of this shyness about bringing sex to the conscious and 'sensible' level. And this will apply as much to the man who, in a suitable context, will talk sex as freely as his mates, as to his perfectly 'clean-mouthed' wife.

But children after the age of ten, and especially boys, learn from the older ones in their groups and later at work. With boys the emphasis is, inevitably, on both the enjoyment of sexual experience and on its dreadful and exciting dangers; and particularly in the early stages, on the pleasures and dangers of masturbation. For many, masturbation soon gives place to some actual hetero-sexual experience. Obviously this is where a working-class boy's pattern in sexual life is likely to differ from that of, say, a public-schoolboy, living until he is eighteen largely in an all-boy community. From thirteen onwards working-class boys' talk, then, is very often of sex adventures, of how easy such and such a girl is to 'feel' or to 'get down' and so on. By eighteen those who wish it can have had a great deal of sexual experience. A group of bricklayers for whom I acted as labourer during a University vacation quickly elicited the information that I was virgin and thereafter regarded me, in a friendly way, as less than a man, as another kind of monk, dedicated to books rather than to religion. They all claimed to be 'getting it regular', though I am sure there was much exaggeration. The married men joined in the frequent sex talk as

readily as the rest and regularly lamented their lost freedom, but in an expected kind of way.

How would one sum up the attitude of such men, in general, to their irregular sexual experiences? I should perhaps add that there are, of course, many men to whom the foregoing does not apply. They have little sense of guilt or sin in connection with their sex-life; they make much of sex, but not because underneath they feel lost and anonymous in the great urban mass. That would be to attribute the attitudes of other kinds of people to them. They are not indulging in the bravado of immorality about which much was heard in the behaviour of some groups during the 'twenties. Yet they do feel vaguely that 'scientific discovery' has made it all more legitimate as well as, with cheap contraceptives, easier. They are not happily amoral savages disporting in some slumland Marquesas Melville never knew. They take their sex-life easily, but do not rollick through it like citified versions of the 'apples be ripe' bucolics of T. F. Powys, or like contemporary versions of the great tuppers of the past. In some respects their attitude towards promiscuous sex activity does come from a long way back. But for them it is all rather scrabbily hole-and-corner. In most cases such activity does not seem to be continued after marriage, or to affect strongly the likelihood of a good marriage relationship.

My impression, though here I may be falling into a romantic error myself, is that more girls than boys escape altogether this bitty, promiscuous sexual experience. The names of the same girls who are willing crop up again and again; the easy ones are soon well known. Of course, the girls have much more to lose at the game; they are liable to 'get caught'.

To me the surprising thing is that so many girls are able to remain unaffected, to retain both an ignorance about the facts of sex and an air of inviolability towards its whole atmosphere that would not have been unbecoming in a mid-nineteenth-century young lady of the middle-classes. It is wonderful how, without evident prudishness or apparent struggle, many of them can walk through the howling valley of sex-approaches from the local lads and probably of sex-talk at work, and come through to the boy they are going to marry quite untouched mentally and physically. Their best light has been the implicit assurance that they would marry, that they were 'keeping themselves for one man', and this not in a merely calculating sense.

My experience suggests, then, that most girls do not move from man to man, picking up fragmentary experience on the way, but that they begin courting early and go on steadily until an early

marriage. Some still 'get into trouble' from fifteen onwards, but they are the exceptions. Many have had some sexual experience before marriage, but usually with the boy they eventually marry; they have not been promiscuous. Nor are they sheltered: from sixteen they are regarded as in most respects adult; they meet the boy they 'fall for' and start courting. They are probably almost completely ignorant of the practice of sex. They feel romantically towards the boy; he presses; it does not seem all that important to wait until marriage, and they yield. He will perhaps take precautions, but a proportion of the men will not, being unprepared or inexpert. If a baby is conceived, the marriage takes place sooner than was expected, but the girl is unlikely to feel that she has been caught. My impression is that most of the girls who lose their virginity before marriage lose it in this way—with boys they are genuinely fond of, when circumstances conspire—rather than from any deliberate passing from boy to boy 'for the fun of it'.

On the whole, once they are 'going steady', loyalty is assumed on each side, and there is little infidelity. The girls are not likely to regard themselves as wicked in anticipating the marriage. They are following a line which will quite soon land them with the attitudes and habits of their mothers, as 'decent' working-class housewives. Meanwhile, one may as well allow it: 'it 'urts nobody. It's only natural, i'n't it?'