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The
MAKING
of the
ENGLISH
WORKING
CLASS

by E. P. Thompson



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PREFACE

THIS BOOK HAS a clumsy title, but it is one which meets its purpose. *Making*, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.

Class, rather than classes, for reasons which it is one purpose of this book to examine. There is, of course, a difference. "Working classes" is a descriptive term, which evades as much as it defines. It ties loosely together a bundle of discrete phenomena. There were tailors here and weavers there, and together they make up the working classes.

By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasise that it is an *historical* phenomenon. I do not see class as a "structure", nor even as a "category", but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.

More than this, the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure. The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context. Moreover, we cannot have two distinct classes, each with an independent being, and then bring them *into* relationship with each other. We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers. And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily.

Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in *just* the same way.

There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx's meaning, in his own historical writing, yet the error vitiates much latter-day "Marxist" writing. "It", the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically—so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which "it" ought to have (but seldom does have) if "it" was properly aware of its own position and real interests. There is a cultural superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural "lags" and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be.

But a similar error is committed daily on the other side of the ideological divide. In one form, this is a plain negative. Since the crude notion of class attributed to Marx can be faulted without difficulty, it is assumed that any notion of class is a pejorative theoretical construct, imposed upon the evidence. It is denied that class has happened at all. In another form, and by a curious inversion, it is possible to pass from a dynamic to a static view of class. "It"—the working class—exists, and can be defined with some accuracy as a component of the social structure. Class-consciousness, however, is a bad thing, invented by displaced intellectuals, since everything which disturbs the harmonious co-existence of groups performing different "social rôles" (and which thereby retards economic growth) is to be deplored as an "unjustified disturbance-symptom".¹ The problem is to determine how best "it" can be conditioned to accept its social rôle, and how its grievances may best be "handled and channelled".

¹ An example of this approach, covering the period of this book, is to be found in the work of a colleague of Professor Talcott Parsons: N. J. Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (1959).

If we remember that class is a relationship, and not a thing, we can not think in this way. "It" does not exist, either to have an ideal interest or consciousness, or to lie as a patient on the Adjustor's table. Nor can we turn matters upon their heads, as has been done by one authority who (in a study of class obsessively concerned with methodology, to the exclusion of the examination of a single real class situation in a real historical context) has informed us:

Classes are based on the differences in legitimate power associated with certain positions, i.e. on the structure of social rôles with respect to their authority expectations. . . . An individual becomes a member of a class by playing a social rôle relevant from the point of view of authority. . . . He belongs to a class because he occupies a position in a social organisation; i.e. class membership is derived from the incumbency of a social rôle.¹

The question, of course, is how the individual got to be in this "social rôle", and how the particular social organisation (with its property-rights and structure of authority) got to be there. And these are historical questions. If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.

If I have shown insufficient understanding of the methodological preoccupations of certain sociologists, nevertheless I hope this book will be seen as a contribution to the understanding of class. For I am convinced that we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period. This book can be seen as a biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its early manhood. In the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers. This ruling class was itself much divided, and in fact only gained in cohesion over the same years because certain antagonisms were resolved (or faded into relative insignificance) in the face of an insurgent working class.

¹ R. Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), pp. 148-9.

Thus the working-class presence was, in 1832, the most significant factor in British political life.

The book is written in this way. In Part One I consider the continuing popular traditions in the 18th century which influenced the crucial Jacobin agitation of the 1790s. In Part Two I move from subjective to objective influences—the experiences of groups of workers during the Industrial Revolution which seem to me to be of especial significance. I also attempt an estimate of the character of the new industrial work-discipline, and the bearing upon this of the Methodist Church. In Part Three I pick up the story of plebeian Radicalism, and carry it through Luddism to the heroic age at the close of the Napoleonic Wars. Finally, I discuss some aspects of political theory and of the consciousness of class in the 1820s and 1830s.

This is a group of studies, on related themes, rather than a consecutive narrative. In selecting these themes I have been conscious, at times, of writing against the weight of prevailing orthodoxies. There is the Fabian orthodoxy, in which the great majority of working people are seen as passive victims of *laissez faire*, with the exception of a handful of far-sighted organisers (notably, Francis Place). There is the orthodoxy of the empirical economic historians, in which working people are seen as a labour force, as migrants, or as the data for statistical series. There is the “Pilgrim’s Progress” orthodoxy, in which the period is ransacked for forerunners—pioneers of the Welfare State, progenitors of a Socialist Commonwealth, or (more recently) early exemplars of rational industrial relations. Each of these orthodoxies has a certain validity. All have added to our knowledge. My quarrel with the first and second is that they tend to obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history. My quarrel with the third is that it reads history in the light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as in fact it occurred. Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten.

I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new

industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.

Our only criterion of judgement should not be whether or not a man’s actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure. Moreover, this period now compels attention for two particular reasons. First, it was a time in which the plebeian movement placed an exceptionally high valuation upon egalitarian and democratic values. Although we often boast our democratic way of life, the events of these critical years are far too often forgotten or slurred over. Second, the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialisation, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.

Finally, a note of apology to Scottish and Welsh readers. I have neglected these histories, not out of chauvinism, but out of respect. It is because class is a cultural as much as an economic formation that I have been cautious as to generalising beyond English experience. (I have considered the Irish, not in Ireland, but as immigrants to England.) The Scottish record, in particular, is quite as dramatic, and as tormented, as our own. The Scottish Jacobin agitation was more intense and more heroic. But the Scottish story is significantly different. Calvinism was not the same thing as Methodism, although it is difficult to say which, in the early 19th century, was worse. We had no peasantry in England comparable to the Highland migrants. And the popular culture was very different. It is possible, at least until the 1820s, to regard the English and Scottish experiences as distinct, since trade union and political links were impermanent and immature.

This book was written in Yorkshire, and is coloured at times by West Riding sources. My grateful acknowledgements

CHAPTER SIX

EXPLOITATION

JOHN THELWALL WAS not alone in seeing in every "manufactory" a potential centre of political rebellion. An aristocratic traveller who visited the Yorkshire Dales in 1792 was alarmed to find a new cotton-mill in the "pastoral vale" of Aysgarth—"why, here now is a great flaring mill, whose back stream has drawn off half the water of the falls above the bridge":

With the bell ringing, and the clamour of the mill, all the vale is disturb'd; treason and levelling systems are the discourse; and rebellion may be near at hand.

The mill appeared as symbol of social energies which were destroying the very "course of Nature". It embodied a double threat to the settled order. First, from the owners of industrial wealth, those upstarts who enjoyed an unfair advantage over the landowners whose income was tied to their rent-roll:

If men thus start into riches; or if riches from trade are too easily procured, woe to us men of middling income, and settled revenue; and woe it has been to all the Nappa Halls, and the Yeomanry of the land.

Second, from the industrial working population, which our traveller regarded with an alliterative hostility which betrays a response not far removed from that of the white racist towards the coloured population today:

The people, indeed, are employ'd; but they are all abandon'd to vice from the thron. . . . At the times when people work not in the mill, they issue out to poaching, profligacy and plunder. . . .¹

The equation between the cotton-mill and the new industrial society, and the correspondence between new forms of productive and of social relationship, was a commonplace among observers in the years between 1790 and 1850. Karl Marx was

¹ *The Torrington Diaries*, ed. C. B. Andrews (1936), III, pp. 81-2.

only expressing this with unusual vigour when he declared: "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist." And it was not only the mill-owner but also the working population brought into being within and around the mills which seemed to contemporaries to be "new". "The instant we get near the borders of the manufacturing parts of Lancashire," a rural magistrate wrote in 1808, "we meet a fresh race of beings, both in point of manners, employments and subordination . . ."; while Robert Owen, in 1815, declared that "the general diffusion of manufactures throughout a country generates a new character in its inhabitants . . . an essential change in the general character of the mass of the people."

Observers in the 1830s and 1840s were still exclaiming at the novelty of the "factory system". Peter Gaskell, in 1833, spoke of the manufacturing population as "but a Hercules in the cradle"; it was "only since the introduction of steam as a power that they have acquired their paramount importance". The steam-engine had "drawn together the population into dense masses" and already Gaskell saw in working-class organisations an "imperium in imperio" of the most obnoxious description".¹ Ten years later Cooke Taylor was writing in similar terms:

The steam-engine had no precedent, the spinning-jenny is without ancestry, the mule and the power-loom entered on no prepared heritage: they sprang into sudden existence like Minerva from the brain of Jupiter.

But it was the human consequence of these "novelties" which caused this observer most disquiet:

As a stranger passes through the masses of human beings which have accumulated round the mills and print works . . . he cannot contemplate these "crowded hives" without feelings of anxiety and apprehension almost amounting to dismay. The population, like the system to which it belongs, is NEW; but it is hourly increasing in breadth and strength. It is an aggregate of masses, our conceptions of which clothe themselves in terms that express something portentous and fearful . . . as of the slow rising and gradual swelling of an ocean which must, at some future and no distant time, bear all the elements of society aloft upon its bosom, and float them Heaven

¹ P. Gaskell, *The Manufacturing Population of England* (1833), p. 6; Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-century England", in *Essays in Labour History*, ed. Briggs and Saville (1960), p. 63.

knows whither. There are mighty energies slumbering in these masses. . . . The manufacturing population is not new in its formation alone: it is new in its habits of thought and action, which have been formed by the circumstances of its condition, with little instruction, and less guidance, from external sources. . . .¹

For Engels, describing the *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* it seemed that "the first proletarians were connected with manufacture, were engendered by it . . . the factory hands, eldest children of the industrial revolution, have from the beginning to the present day formed the nucleus of the Labour Movement."

However different their judgements of value, conservative, radical, and socialist observers suggested the same equation: steam power and the cotton-mill = new working class. The physical instruments of production were seen as giving rise in a direct and more-or-less compulsive way to new social relationships, institutions, and cultural modes. At the same time the history of popular agitation during the period 1811-50 appears to confirm this picture. It is as if the English nation entered a crucible in the 1790s and emerged after the Wars in a different form. Between 1811 and 1813, the Luddite crisis; in 1817 the Pentridge Rising; in 1819, Peterloo; throughout the next decade the proliferation of trade union activity, Owenite propaganda, Radical journalism, the Ten Hours Movement, the revolutionary crisis of 1831-2; and, beyond that, the multitude of movements which made up Chartism. It is, perhaps, the scale and intensity of this multiform popular agitation which has, more than anything else, given rise (among contemporary observers and historians alike) to the sense of some *catastrophic* change.

Almost every radical phenomenon of the 1790s can be found reproduced tenfold after 1815. The handful of Jacobin sheets gave rise to a score of ultra-Radical and Owenite periodicals. Where Daniel Eaton served imprisonment for publishing Paine, Richard Carlile and his shopmen served a total of more than 200 years imprisonment for similar crimes. Where Corresponding Societies maintained a precarious existence in a score of towns, the post-war Hampden Clubs or political unions struck root in small industrial villages. And when this popular agitation is recalled alongside the dramatic pace of change in the

¹ W. Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842), pp. 4-6.

cotton industry, it is natural to assume a direct causal relationship. The cotton-mill is seen as the agent not only of industrial but also of social revolution, producing not only more goods but also the "Labour Movement" itself. The Industrial Revolution, which commenced as a description, is now invoked as an explanation.

From the time of Arkwright through to the Plug Riots and beyond, it is the image of the "dark, Satanic mill" which dominates our visual reconstruction of the Industrial Revolution. In part, perhaps, because it is a dramatic visual image—the barrack-like buildings, the great mill chimneys, the factory children, the clogs and shawls, the dwellings clustering around the mills as if spawned by them. (It is an image which forces one to think first of the industry, and only secondly of the people connected to it or serving it.) In part, because the cotton-mill and the new mill-town—from the swiftness of its growth, ingenuity of its techniques, and the novelty or harshness of its discipline—seemed to contemporaries to be dramatic and portentous: a more satisfactory symbol for debate on the "condition-of-England" question than those anonymous or sprawling manufacturing *districts* which figure even more often in the Home Office "disturbance books". And from this both a literary and an historical tradition is derived. Nearly all the classic accounts by contemporaries of conditions in the Industrial Revolution are based on the cotton industry—and, in the main, on Lancashire: Owen, Gaskell, Ure, Fielden, Cooke Taylor, Engels, to mention a few. Novels such as *Michael Armstrong* or *Mary Barton* or *Hard Times* perpetuate the tradition. And the emphasis is markedly found in the subsequent writing of economic and social history.

But many difficulties remain. Cotton was certainly the pace-making industry of the Industrial Revolution,¹ and the cotton-mill was the pre-eminent model for the factory-system. Yet we should not assume any automatic, or over-direct, correspondence between the dynamic of economic growth and the dynamic of social or cultural life. For half a century after the "break-through" of the cotton-mill (around 1780) the mill workers remained as a minority of the adult labour force in the cotton industry itself. In the early 1830s the cotton hand-loom weavers alone still outnumbered all the men and women in spinning

¹ For an admirable restatement of the reasons for the primacy of the cotton industry in the Industrial Revolution, see E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution* (1962), Ch. 2.

and weaving mills of cotton, wool, and silk combined.¹ Still, in 1830, the adult male cotton-spinner was no more typical of that elusive figure, the "average working man", than is the Coventry motor-worker of the 1960s.

The point is of importance, because too much emphasis upon the newness of the cotton-mills can lead to an underestimation of the continuity of political and cultural traditions in the making of working-class communities. The factory hands, so far from being the "eldest children of the industrial revolution", were late arrivals. Many of their ideas and forms of organisation were anticipated by domestic workers, such as the woollen workers of Norwich and the West Country, or the small-ware weavers of Manchester. And it is questionable whether factory hands—except in the cotton districts—"formed the nucleus of the Labour Movement" at any time before the late 1840s (and, in some northern and Midland towns, the years 1832-4, leading up to the great lock-outs). Jacobinism, as we have seen, struck root most deeply among artisans. Luddism was the work of skilled men in small workshops. From 1817 onwards to Chartism, the outworkers in the north and the Midlands were as prominent in every radical agitation as the factory hands. And in many towns the actual nucleus from which the labour movement derived ideas, organisation, and leadership, was made up of such men as shoemakers, weavers, saddlers and harnessmakers, booksellers, printers, building workers, small tradesmen, and the like. The vast area of Radical London between 1815 and 1850 drew its strength from no major heavy industries (shipbuilding was tending to decline, and the engineers only made their impact later in the century) but from the host of smaller trades and occupations.²

Such diversity of experiences has led some writers to question both the notions of an "industrial revolution" and of a "working class". The first discussion need not detain us here.³ The term is serviceable enough in its usual connotations. For the second, many writers prefer the term working classes, which emphasises the great disparity in status, acquisitions, skills, conditions, within the portmanteau phrase. And in this they echo the complaints of Francis Place:

¹ Estimates for U.K., 1833. Total adult labour force in all textile mills, 191,671. Number of cotton hand-loom weavers, 213,000. See below, p. 311.

² Cf. Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, Ch. 11.

³ There is a summary of this controversy in E. E. Lampard, *Industrial Revolution*, (American Historical Association, 1957). See also Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, Ch. 2.

If the character and conduct of the working-people are to be taken from reviews, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, reports of the two Houses of Parliament and the Factory Commissioners, we shall find them all jumbled together as the 'lower orders', the most skilled and the most prudent workman, with the most ignorant and imprudent labourers and paupers, though the difference is great indeed, and indeed in many cases will scarce admit of comparison.¹

Place is, of course, right: the Sunderland sailor, the Irish navy, the Jewish costermonger, the inmate of an East Anglian village workhouse, the compositor on *The Times*—all might be seen by their "betters" as belonging to the "lower classes" while they themselves might scarcely understand each others' dialect.

* Nevertheless, when every caution has been made, the outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of "the working class". This is revealed, first, in the growth of class-consciousness: the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes. And, second, in the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organisation. By 1832 there were strongly-based and self-conscious working-class institutions—trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements, political organisations, periodicals—working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community-patterns, and a working-class structure of feeling.

The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history. It was not the spontaneous generation of the factory-system. Nor should we think of an external force—the "industrial revolution"—working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, and turning it out at the other end as a "fresh race of beings". The changing productive relations and working conditions of the Industrial Revolution were imposed, not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman—and the free-born Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him. The factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions. He was the object of massive religious indoctrination and the creator of new political traditions. The working class made itself as much as it was made.

¹ Cit. M. D. George, *London Life in the 18th Century* (1930). p. 210.

To see the working class in this way is to defend a "classical" view of the period against the prevalent mood of contemporary schools of economic history and sociology. For the territory of the Industrial Revolution, which was first staked out and surveyed by Marx, Arnold Toynbee, the Webbs and the Hammonds, now resembles an academic battlefield. At point after point, the familiar "catastrophic" view of the period has been disputed. Where it was customary to see the period as one of economic disequilibrium, intense misery and exploitation, political repression and heroic popular agitation, attention is now directed to the rate of economic growth (and the difficulties of "take-off" into self-sustaining technological reproduction). The enclosure movement is now noted, less for its harshness in displacing the village poor, than for its success in feeding a rapidly growing population. The hardships of the period are seen as being due to the dislocations consequent upon the Wars, faulty communications, immature banking and exchange, uncertain markets, and the trade-cycle, rather than to exploitation or cut-throat competition. Popular unrest is seen as consequent upon the unavoidable coincidence of high wheat prices and trade depressions, and explicable in terms of an elementary "social tension" chart derived from these data.¹ In general, it is suggested that the position of the industrial worker in 1840 was better in most ways than that of the domestic worker of 1790. The Industrial Revolution was an age, not of catastrophe or acute class-conflict and class oppression, but of improvement.²

The classical catastrophic orthodoxy has been replaced by a new anti-catastrophic orthodoxy, which is most clearly distinguished by its empirical caution and, among its most notable exponents (Sir John Clapham, Dr. Dorothy George, Professor Ashton) by an astringent criticism of the looseness of certain writers of the older school. The studies of the new orthodoxy have enriched historical scholarship, and have qualified and revised in important respects the work of the classical school. But as the new orthodoxy is now, in its turn, growing old and entrenched in most of the academic centres,

¹ See W. W. Rostow, *British Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (1948), esp. pp. 122-5.

² Some of the views outlined here are to be found, implicitly or explicitly, in T. S. Ashton, *Industrial Revolution* (1948) and A. Radford, *The Economic History of England* (2nd edn. 1960). A sociological variant is developed by N. J. Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (1959), and a knockabout popularisation is in John Vaizey, *Success Story* (W.E.A., n.d.).

so it becomes open to challenge in its turn. And the successors of the great empiricists too often exhibit a moral complacency, a narrowness of reference, and an insufficient familiarity with the actual movements of the working people of the time. They are more aware of the orthodox empiricist postures than of the changes in social relationship and in cultural modes which the Industrial Revolution entailed. What has been lost is a sense of the whole process—the whole political and social context of the period. What arose as valuable qualifications have passed by imperceptible stages to new generalisations (which the evidence can rarely sustain) and from generalisations to a ruling attitude.

The empiricist orthodoxy is often defined in terms of a running critique of the work of J. L. and Barbara Hammond. It is true that the Hammonds showed themselves too willing to moralise history, and to arrange their materials too much in terms of “outraged emotion”.¹ There are many points at which their work has been faulted or qualified in the light of subsequent research, and we intend to propose others. But a defence of the Hammonds need not only be rested upon the fact that their volumes on the labourers, with their copious quotation and wide reference, will long remain among the most important source-books for this period. We can also say that they displayed throughout their narrative an understanding of the political context within which the Industrial Revolution took place. To the student examining the ledgers of one cotton-mill, the Napoleonic Wars appear only as an abnormal influence affecting foreign markets and fluctuating demand. The Hammonds could never have forgotten for one moment that it was also a war against Jacobinism. “The history of England at the time discussed in these pages reads like a history of civil war.” This is the opening of the introductory chapter of *The Skilled Labourer*. And in the conclusion to *The Town Labourer*, among other comments of indifferent value, there is an insight which throws the whole period into sudden relief:

At the time when half Europe was intoxicated and the other half terrified by the new magic of the word citizen, the English nation was in the hands of men who regarded the idea of citizenship as a challenge to their religion and their civilisation; who deliberately sought to make the inequalities of life the basis of the state, and to emphasise and perpetuate the position of the workpeople as a subject class. Hence it happened that the French Revolution has divided the

¹ See E. E. Lampard, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

people of France less than the Industrial Revolution has divided the people of England. . . .

“Hence it happened . . .”. The judgement may be questioned. And yet it is in this insight—that the revolution which did *not* happen in England was fully as devastating, and in some features more divisive, than that which did happen in France—that we find a clue to the truly catastrophic nature of the period. Throughout this time there are three, and not two, great influences simultaneously at work. There is the tremendous increase in population (in Great Britain, from 10·5 millions in 1801 to 18·1 millions in 1841, with the greatest rate of increase between 1811-21). There is the Industrial Revolution, in its technological aspects. And there is the political *counter-revolution*, from 1792-1832.

In the end, it is the political context as much as the steam-engine, which had most influence upon the shaping consciousness and institutions of the working class. The forces making for political reform in the late 18th century—Wilkes, the city merchants, the Middlesex small gentry, the “mob”—or Wyvill, and the small gentry and yeomen, clothiers, cutlers, and tradesmen—were on the eve of gaining at least some piecemeal victories in the 1790s: Pitt had been cast for the rôle of reforming Prime Minister. Had events taken their “natural” course we might expect there to have been some show-down long before 1832, between the oligarchy of land and commerce and the manufacturers and petty gentry, with working people in the tail of the middle-class agitation. And even in 1792, when manufacturers and professional men were prominent in the reform movement, this was still the balance of forces. But, after the success of *Rights of Man*, the radicalisation and terror of the French Revolution, and the onset of Pitt’s repression, it was the plebeian Corresponding Society which alone stood up against the counter-revolutionary wars. And these plebeian groups, small as they were in 1796, did nevertheless make up an “underground” tradition which ran through to the end of the Wars. Alarmed at the French example, and in the patriotic fervour of war, the aristocracy and the manufacturers made common cause. The English *ancien régime* received a new lease of life, not only in national affairs, but also in the perpetuation of the antique corporations which misgoverned the swelling industrial towns. In return, the manufacturers received important concessions: and notably the abrogation or repeal

of "paternalist" legislation covering apprenticeship, wage-regulation, or conditions in industry. The aristocracy were interested in repressing the Jacobin "conspiracies" of the people, the manufacturers were interested in defeating their "conspiracies" to increase wages: the Combination Acts served both purposes.

Thus working people were forced into political and social *apartheid* during the Wars (which, incidentally, they also had to fight). It is true that this was not altogether new. What was new was that it was coincident with a French Revolution: with growing self-consciousness and wider aspirations (for the "liberty tree" had been planted from the Thames to the Tyne): with a rise in population, in which the sheer sense of numbers, in London and in the industrial districts, became more impressive from year to year (and as numbers grew, so deference to master, magistrate, or parson was likely to lessen): and with more intensive or more transparent forms of economic exploitation. More intensive in agriculture and in the old domestic industries: more transparent in the new factories and perhaps in mining. In agriculture the years between 1760 and 1820 are the years of wholesale enclosure, in which, in village after village, common rights are lost, and the landless and—in the south—pauperised labourer is left to support the tenant-farmer, the landowner, and the tithes of the Church. In the domestic industries, from 1800 onwards, the tendency is widespread for small masters to give way to larger employers (whether manufacturers or middlemen) and for the majority of weavers, stockingers, or nail-makers to become wage-earning outworkers with more or less precarious employment. In the mills and in many mining areas these are the years of the employment of children (and of women underground); and the large-scale enterprise, the factory-system with its new discipline, the mill communities—where the manufacturer not only made riches out of the labour of the "hands" but could be *seen* to make riches in one generation—all contributed to the transparency of the process of exploitation and to the social and cultural cohesion of the exploited.

* We can now see something of the truly catastrophic nature of the Industrial Revolution; as well as some of the reasons why the English working class took form in these years. The people were subjected simultaneously to an intensification of two intolerable forms of relationship: those of economic exploitation

and of political oppression. Relations between employer and labourer were becoming both harsher and less personal; and while it is true that this increased the potential freedom of the worker, since the hired farm servant or the journeyman in domestic industry was (in Toynbee's words) "halted half-way between the position of the serf and the position of the citizen", this "freedom" meant that he felt his *unfreedom* more. But at each point where he sought to resist exploitation, he was met by the forces of employer or State, and commonly of both.

For most working people the crucial experience of the Industrial Revolution was felt in terms of changes in the nature and intensity of exploitation. Nor is this some anachronistic notion, imposed upon the evidence. We may describe some parts of the exploitive process as they appeared to one remarkable cotton operative in 1818—the year in which Marx was born. The account—an Address to the public of strike-bound Manchester by "A Journeyman Cotton Spinner"—commences by describing the employers and the workers as "two distinct classes of persons":

"First, then, as to the employers: with very few exceptions, they are a set of men who have sprung from the cotton-shop without education or address, except so much as they have acquired by their intercourse with the little world of merchants on the exchange at Manchester; but to counterbalance that deficiency, they give you enough of appearances by an ostentatious display of elegant mansions, equipages, liveries, parks, hunters, hounds, &c. which they take care to shew off to the merchant stranger in the most pompous manner. Indeed their houses are gorgeous palaces, far surpassing in bulk and extent the neat charming retreats you see round London . . . but the chaste observer of the beauties of nature and art combined will observe a woeful deficiency of taste. They bring up their families at the most costly schools, determined to give their offspring a double portion of what they were so deficient in themselves. Thus with scarcely a second idea in their heads, they are literally petty monarchs, absolute and despotic, in their own particular districts; and to support all this, their whole time is occupied in contriving how to get the greatest quantity of work turned off with the least expence. . . . In short, I will venture to say, without fear of contradiction, that there is a greater distance observed between the master there and the spinner, than there is between the first merchant in London

and his lowest servant or the lowest artisan. Indeed there is no comparison. I know it to be a fact, that the greater part of the master spinners are anxious to keep wages low for the purpose of keeping the spinners indigent and spiritless . . . as for the purpose of taking the surplus to their own pockets.

"The master spinners are a class of men unlike all other master tradesmen in the kingdom. They are ignorant, proud, and tyrannical. What then must be the men or rather beings who are the instruments of such masters? Why, they have been for a series of years, with their wives and their families, patience itself—bondmen and bondwomen to their cruel taskmasters. It is in vain to insult our common understandings with the observation that such men are free; that the law protects the rich and poor alike, and that a spinner can leave his master if he does not like the wages. True; so he can: but where must he go? why to another, to be sure. Well: he goes; he is asked where did you work last: 'did he discharge you?' No; we could not agree about wages. Well I shall not employ you nor anyone who leaves his master in that manner. Why is this? Because there is an abominable *combination existing amongst the masters*, first established at Stockport in 1802, and it has since become so general, as to embrace all the great masters for a circuit of many miles round Manchester, though not the little masters: they are excluded. They are the most obnoxious beings to the great ones that can be imagined. . . . When the combination first took place, one of their first articles was, that no master should take on a man until he had first ascertained whether his last master had discharged him. What then is the man to do? If he goes to the parish, that grave of all independence, he is there told—We shall not relieve you; if you dispute with your master, and don't support your family, we will send you to prison; so that the man is bound, by a combination of circumstances, to submit to his master. He cannot travel and get work in any town like a shoe-maker, joiner, or taylor; he is confined to the district.

"The workmen in general are an inoffensive, unassuming, set of well-informed men, though how they acquire their information is almost a mystery to me. They are docile and tractable, if not goaded too much; but this is not to be wondered at, when we consider that they are trained to work from six years old, from five in a morning to eight and nine at night. Let one of the advocates for obedience to his master take his stand in

an avenue leading to a factory a little before five o'clock in the morning, and observe the squalid appearance of the little infants and their parents taken from their beds at so early an hour in all kinds of weather; let him examine the miserable pittance of food, chiefly composed of water gruel and oatcake broken into it, a little salt, and sometimes coloured with a little milk, together with a few potatoes, and a bit of bacon or fat for dinner; would a London mechanic eat this? There they are, (and if late a few minutes, a quarter of a day is stopped in wages) locked up until night in rooms heated above the hottest days we have had this summer, and allowed no time, except three-quarters of an hour at dinner in the whole day: whatever they eat at any other time must be as they are at work. The negro slave in the West Indies, if he works under a scorching sun, has probably a little breeze of air sometimes to fan him: he has a space of ground, and time allowed to cultivate it. The English spinner slave has no enjoyment of the open atmosphere and breezes of heaven. Locked up in factories eight stories high, he has no relaxation till the ponderous engine stops, and then he goes home to get refreshed for the next day; no time for sweet association with his family; they are all alike fatigued and exhausted. This is no over-drawn picture: it is literally true. I ask again, would the mechanics in the South of England submit to this?

"When the spinning of cotton was in its infancy, and before those terrible machines for superseding the necessity of human labour, called steam engines, came into use, there were a great number of what were then called *little masters*; men who with a small capital, could procure a few machines, and employ a few hands, men and boys (say to twenty or thirty), the produce of whose labour was all taken to Manchester central mart, and put into the hands of brokers. . . . The brokers sold it to the merchants, by which means the master spinner was enabled to stay at home and work and attend to his workmen. The cotton was then always given out in its raw state from the bale to the wives of the spinners at home, when they heat and cleansed it ready for the spinners in the factory. By this they could earn eight, ten, or twelve shillings a week, and cook and attend to their families. But none are thus employed now; for all the cotton is broke up by a machine, turned by the steam engine, called a devil: so that the spinners wives have no employment, except they go to work in the factory all day at

what can be done by children for a few shillings, four or five per week. If a man then could not agree with his master, he left him, and could get employed elsewhere. A few years, however, changed the face of things. Steam engines came into use, to purchase which, and to erect buildings sufficient to contain them and six or seven hundred hands, required a great capital. The engine power produced a more marketable (though not a better) article than the little master could at the same price. The consequence was their ruin in a short time; and the overgrown capitalists triumphed in their fall; for they were the only obstacle that stood between them and the complete controul of the workmen.

“Various disputes then originated between the workmen and masters as to the fineness of the work, the workmen being paid according to the number of hanks or yards of thread he produced from a given quantity of cotton, which was always to be proved by the overlooker, whose interest made it imperative on him to lean to his master, and call the material coarser than it was. If the workman would not submit *he must summon his employer before a magistrate*; the whole of the acting magistrates in that district, with the exception of two worthy clergymen, being gentlemen who have sprung from the *same* source with the master cotton spinners. The employer generally contented himself with sending his overlooker to answer any such summons, thinking it beneath him to meet his servant. The magistrate’s decision was generally in favour of the master, though on the statement of the overlooker only. The workman dared not appeal to the sessions on account of the expense. . . .

“These evils to the men have arisen from that dreadful monopoly which exists in those districts where wealth and power are got into the hands of the few, who, in the pride of their hearts, think themselves the lords of the universe.”¹

This reading of the facts, in its remarkable cogency, is as much an *ex parte* statement as is the “political economy” of Lord Brougham. But the “Journeyman Cotton Spinner” was describing facts of a different order. We need not concern ourselves with the soundness of all his judgements. What his address does is to itemise one after another the grievances felt by working people as to changes in the character of capitalist exploitation: the rise of a master-class without traditional authority or obligations: the growing distance between master

¹ *Black Dwarf*, 30 September 1818.

and man: the transparency of the exploitation at the source of their new wealth and power: the loss of status and above all of independence for the worker: the loss of status and above all of independence for the worker, his reduction to total dependence on the master’s instruments of production: the partiality of the law: the disruption of the traditional family economy: the discipline, monotony, hours and conditions of work: loss of leisure and amenities: the reduction of the man to the status of an “instrument”.

That working people felt these grievances at all—and felt them passionately—is itself a sufficient fact to merit our attention. And it reminds us forcibly that some of the most bitter conflicts of these years turned on issues which are not encompassed by cost-of-living series. The issues which provoked the most intensity of feeling were very often ones in which such values as traditional customs, “justice”, “independence”, security, or family-economy were at stake, rather than straightforward “bread-and-butter” issues. The early years of the 1830s are aflame with agitations which turned on issues in which wages were of secondary importance; by the potters, against the Truck System; by the textile workers, for the 10-Hour Bill; by the building workers, for co-operative direct action; by all groups of workers, for the right to join trade unions. The great strike in the north-east coalfield in 1831 turned on security of employment, “tommy shops”, child labour.

The exploitive relationship is more than the sum of grievances and mutual antagonisms. It is a relationship which can be seen to take distinct forms in different historical contexts, forms which are related to corresponding forms of ownership and State power. The classic exploitive relationship of the Industrial Revolution is depersonalised, in the sense that no lingering obligations of mutuality—of paternalism or deference, or of the interests of “the Trade”—are admitted. There is no whisper of the “just” price, or of a wage justified in relation to social or moral sanctions, as opposed to the operation of free market forces. Antagonism is accepted as intrinsic to the relations of production. Managerial or supervisory functions demand the repression of all attributes except those which further the appropriation of the maximum surplus value from labour. This is the political economy which Marx anatomised in *Das Kapital*. The worker has become an “instrument”, or an entry among other items of cost.

In fact, no complex industrial enterprise could be conducted

according to such a philosophy. The need for industrial peace, for a stable labour-force, and for a body of skilled and experienced workers, necessitated the modification of managerial techniques—and, indeed, the growth of new forms of paternalism—in the cotton-mills by the 1830s. But in the overstocked outwork industries, where there was always a sufficiency of unorganised “hands” competing for employment, these considerations did not operate. Here, as old customs were eroded, and old paternalism was set aside, the exploitive relationship emerged supreme.

← This does not mean that we can lay all the “blame” for each hardship of the Industrial Revolution upon “the masters” or upon *laissez faire*. The process of industrialisation must, in any conceivable social context, entail suffering and the destruction of older and valued ways of life. Much recent research has thrown light upon the particular difficulties of the British experience; the hazards of markets; the manifold commercial and financial consequences of the Wars; the post-war deflation; movements in the terms of trade; and the exceptional stresses resulting from the population “explosion”. Moreover, 20th-century preoccupations have made us aware of the overarching problems of economic growth. It can be argued that Britain in the Industrial Revolution was encountering the problems of “take-off”; heavy long-term investment—canals, mills, railways, foundries, mines, utilities—was at the expense of current consumption; the generations of workers between 1790 and 1840 sacrificed some, or all, of their prospects of increased consumption to the future.¹

These arguments all deserve close attention. For example, studies of the fluctuations in the demand of the South American market, or of the crisis in country banking, may tell us much about the reasons for the growth or retardation of particular industries. The objection to the reigning academic orthodoxy is not to empirical studies *per se*, but to the fragmentation of our comprehension of the full historical process. First, the empiricist segregates certain events from this process and examines them in isolation. Since the conditions which gave rise to these events are assumed, they appear not only as explicable in their own terms but as inevitable. The Wars had to be paid for out of heavy taxation; they accelerated growth in this way and

¹ See S. Pollard, “Investment, Consumption, and the Industrial Revolution,” *Econ. Hist. Review*, 2nd Series, XI (1958), pp. 215-26.

retarded it in that. Since this can be shown, it is also implied that this was *necessarily* so. But thousands of Englishmen at the time agreed with Thomas Bewick’s condemnation of “this superlatively wicked war”.¹ The unequal burden of taxation, fund-holders who profited from the National Debt, paper-money—these were not accepted as given data by many contemporaries, but were the staple of intensive Radical agitation.

But there is a second stage, where the empiricist may put these fragmentary studies back together again, constructing a model of the historical process made up from a multiplicity of interlocking inevitabilities, a piecemeal processional. In the scrutiny of credit facilities or of the terms of trade, where each event is explicable and appears also as a self-sufficient cause of other events, we arrive at a *post facto* determinism. The dimension of human agency is lost, and the context of class relations is forgotten.

It is perfectly true that what the empiricist points to was there. The Orders in Council had in 1811 brought certain trades almost to a standstill; rising timber prices after the Wars inflated the costs of building; a passing change of fashion (lace for ribbon) might silence the looms of Coventry; the power-loom competed with the hand-loom. But even these open-faced facts, with their frank credentials, deserve to be questioned. Whose Council, why the Orders? Who profited most from corners in scarce timber? Why should looms remain idle when tens of thousands of country girls fancied ribbons but could not afford to buy. By what social alchemy did inventions for saving labour become engines of immiseration? The raw fact—a bad harvest—may seem to be beyond human election. But the way that fact worked its way out was in terms of a particular complex of human relationships: law, ownership, power. When we encounter some sonorous phrase such as “the strong ebb and flow of the trade cycle” we must be put on our guard. For behind this trade cycle there is a structure of social relations, fostering some sorts of expropriation (rent, interest, and profit) and outlawing others (theft, feudal dues), legitimising some types of conflict (competition, armed warfare) and inhibiting others (trades unionism, bread riots, popular political organisation)—a structure which may appear, in the eyes of the future, to be both barbarous and ephemeral.

It might be unnecessary to raise these large questions, since

¹ T. Bewick, *Memoir* (1961 edn.), p. 151.

the historian cannot always be questioning the credentials of the society which he studies. But all these questions were, in fact, raised by contemporaries: not only by men of the upper classes (Shelley, Cobbett, Owen, Peacock, Thompson, Hodgskin, Carlyle) but by thousands of articulate working men. Not the political institutions alone, but the social and economic structure of industrial capitalism, were brought into question by their spokesmen. To the facts of orthodox political economy they opposed their own facts and their own arithmetic. Thus as early as 1817 the Leicester framework-knitters put forward, in a series of resolutions, an under-consumption theory of capitalist crisis:

That in proportion as the Reduction of Wages makes the great Body of the People poor and wretched, in the same proportion must the consumption of our manufactures be lessened.

That if liberal Wages were given to the Mechanics in general throughout the Country, the Home Consumption of our Manufactures would be immediately more than doubled, and consequently every hand would soon find full employment.

That to Reduce the Wage of the Mechanic of this Country so low that he cannot live by his labour, in order to undersell Foreign Manufacturers in a Foreign Market, is to gain one customer abroad, and lose two at home. . . .¹

If those in employment worked shorter hours, and if child labour were to be restricted, there would be more work for hand-workers and the unemployed could employ themselves and exchange the products of their labour directly—short-circuiting the vagaries of the capitalist market—goods would be cheaper and labour better-rewarded. To the rhetoric of the free market they opposed the language of the “new moral order”. It is because alternative and irreconcilable views of human order—one based on mutuality, the other on competition—confronted each other between 1815 and 1850 that the historian today still feels the need to take sides.

It is scarcely possible to write the history of popular agitations in these years unless we make at least the imaginative effort to understand how such a man as the “Journeyman Cotton Spinner” read the evidence. He spoke of the “masters”, not as an aggregate of individuals, but as a class. As such,

¹ H.O. 42.160. See also Hammonds, *The Town Labourer*, p. 303, and Oastler's evidence on the hand-loom weavers, below, p. 298.

“they” denied him political rights. If there was a trade recession, “they” cut his wages. If trade improved, he had to fight “them” and their state to obtain any share in the improvement. If food was plentiful, “they” profited from it. If it was scarce, some of “them” profited more. “They” conspired, not in this or that fact alone, but in the essential exploitive relationship within which all the facts were validated. Certainly there were market fluctuations, bad harvests, and the rest; but the experience of intensified exploitation was constant, whereas these other causes of hardship were variable. The latter bore upon working people, not directly, but through the refraction of a particular system of ownership and power which distributed the gains and losses with gross partiality.

These larger considerations have been, for some years, overlaid by the academic exercise (through which all students must march and counter-march) known as the “standard-of-living controversy”. Did the living standards of the bulk of the people rise or fall between 1780 and 1830—or 1800 and 1850?¹ To understand the significance of the argument, we must look briefly at its development.

The debate on values is as old as the Industrial Revolution. The controversy on the standard-of-living is more recent. The ideological *muddle* is more recent still. We may start at one of the more lucid points of the controversy. Sir John Clapham, in his Preface to the first edition of his *Economic History of Modern Britain* (1926) wrote:

The legend that everything was getting worse for the working man, down to some unspecified date between the drafting of the People's Charter and the Great Exhibition [1837 and 1851: E.P.T.], dies hard. The fact that, after the price fall of 1820-1, the purchasing power of wages in general—not, of course, of everyone's wages—was definitely greater than it had been just before the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, fits so ill with the tradition that it is very seldom mentioned, the work of statisticians on wages and prices being constantly ignored by social historians.

To this, J. L. Hammond offered a reply in the *Economic History Review* (1930) of two kinds: first, he criticised Clapham's statistics of agricultural earnings. These had been based on totting up the country averages, and then dividing them

¹ The futility of one part of this discussion is shown by the fact that if different datum-lines are taken, different answers may come up. 1780-1830 favours the “pessimists”; 1800-1850 favours the “optimists”.

by the number of counties in order to reach a national average; whereas the population in the low wage-earning counties of the south was more numerous than that of the high wage-earning counties (where agricultural earnings were inflated by the proximity of industry) so that Hammond was able to show that the "national average" concealed the fact that 60% of the labouring population was in counties where wages were below the "average" figure. The second part of his reply consisted in a switch to discussions of value (happiness) in his most cloudy and unsatisfactory manner. The first part of this reply Clapham, in his Preface to his second edition (1930), accepted; the second part he met with dry caution ("a curve in words", "higher matters") but nevertheless acknowledged: "I agree most profoundly . . . that statistics of material well-being can never measure a people's happiness." Moreover, he asserted that when he had criticised the view that "everything was getting worse"—"I did not mean that everything was getting better. I only meant that recent historians have too often . . . stressed the worsenings and slurred over or ignored the betterings." The Hammonds, for their part, in a late revision of *The Bleak Age* (1947 edition), made their own peace: "statisticians tell us that . . . they are satisfied that earnings increased and that most men and women were less poor when this discontent was loud and active than they were when the eighteenth century was beginning to grow old in a silence like that of autumn. The evidence, of course, is scanty, and its interpretation not too simple, but this general view is probably more or less correct." The explanation for discontent "must be sought outside the sphere of strictly economic conditions".

So far, so good. The most fertile—but loose—social historians of the period had encountered the astringent criticism of a notable empiricist; and in the result both sides had given ground. And, despite the heat which has subsequently been generated, the actual divergence between the hard economic conclusions of the protagonists is slight. If no serious scholar is now willing to argue that everything was getting worse, no serious scholar will argue that everything was getting better. Both Dr. Hobsbawm (a "pessimist") and Professor Ashton (an "optimist") agree that real wages declined during the Napoleonic Wars and in their immediate aftermath. Dr. Hobsbawm will not vouch for any marked general rise in the

standard-of-living until the mid-1840s; whereas Professor Ashton notes a "more genial" economic climate after 1821—a "marked upward movement broken only by the slumps of 1825-6 and 1831"; and in view of increasing imports of tea, coffee, sugar, etc., "it is difficult to believe that the workers had no share in the gain". On the other hand his own table of prices in the Oldham and Manchester districts show that "in 1831 the standard diet of the poor can hardly have cost much less than in 1791", while he offers no corresponding wage-tables. His conclusion is to suggest two main groups within the working class—"a large class raised well above the level of mere subsistence" and "masses of unskilled or poorly skilled workers—seasonally employed agricultural workers and handloom weavers in particular—whose incomes were almost wholly absorbed in paying for the bare necessities of life". "My guess would be that the number of those who were able to share in the benefits of economic progress was larger than the number of those who were shut out from these benefits and that it was steadily growing."¹

In fact, so far as the period 1790-1830 goes, there is very little in it. The condition of the majority was bad in 1790: it remained bad in 1830 (and forty years is a long time) but there is some disagreement as to the size of the relative groups within the working class. And matters are little clearer in the next decade. There were undoubted increases in real wages among organised workers during the burst of trade union activity between 1832-4: but the period of good trade between 1833 and 1837 was accompanied by the smashing of the trade unions by the concerted efforts of Government, magistrates, and employers; while 1837-42 are depression years. So that it is indeed at "some unspecified date between the drafting of the People's Charter and the Great Exhibition" that the tide begins to turn; let us say, with the railway boom in 1843. Moreover, even in the mid-40s the plight of very large groups of workers remains desperate, while the railway crash led to the depression years of 1847-8. This does not look very much like a "success story"; in half a century of the fullest development of industrialism, the standard-of-living still remained—for very large but indeterminate groups—at the point of subsistence.

¹ My italics. T. S. Ashton, "The Standard of Life of the Workers in England, 1790-1830", in *Capitalism and the Historians* (ed. F. A. Hayek), pp. 127 ff.; E. J. Hobsbawm, "The British Standard of Living, 1790-1850", *Economic History Review*, X, August 1957.

This is not, however, the impression given in much contemporary writing. For, just as an earlier generation of historians who were also social reformers (Thorold Rogers, Arnold Toynbee, the Hammonds) allowed their sympathy with the poor to lead on occasions to a confusion of history with ideology, so we find that the sympathies of some economic historians today for the capitalist entrepreneur have led to a confusion of history and apologetics.¹ The point of transition was marked by the publication, in 1954, of a symposium on *Capitalism and the Historians*, edited by Professor F. A. Hayek, itself the work of a group of specialists "who for some years have been meeting regularly to discuss the problems of the preservation of a free society against the totalitarian threat". Since this group of international specialists regarded "a free society" as by definition a capitalist society, the effects of such an admixture of economic theory and special pleading were deplorable; and not least in the work of one of the contributors, Professor Ashton, whose cautious findings of 1949 are now transmuted—without further evidence—into the flat statement that "generally it is now agreed that for the majority the gain in real wages was substantial".² It is at this stage that the controversy degenerated into a muddle. And despite more recent attempts to rescue it for scholarship,³ in many respects it is as a muddle of assertion and special pleading that the controversy remains.

The controversy falls into two parts. There is, first, the very real difficulty of constructing wage-series, price-series, and statistical indices from the abundant but patchy evidence. We shall examine some of the difficulties in interpreting such evidence when we come to the artisans. But at this point a further series of difficulties begins, since the term "standard"

¹ Lest the reader should judge the historian too harshly, we may record Sir John Clapham's explanation as to the way in which this selective principle may order the evidence. "It is very easy to do this unawares. Thirty years ago I read and marked Arthur Young's *Travels in France*, and taught from the marked passages. Five years ago I went through it again, to find that whenever Young spoke of a wretched Frenchman I had marked him, but that many of his references to happy or prosperous Frenchmen remained unmarked." One suspects that for ten or fifteen years most economic historians have been busy marking up the happy and prosperous evidence in the text.

² T. S. Ashton, "The Treatment of Capitalism by Historians", in *Capitalism and the Historians*, p. 41. Professor Ashton's essay on "The Standard of Life of the Workers in England", reprinted in this volume, originally appeared in the *Journal of Economic History*, 1949.

³ The most constructive appraisal of the controversy is in A. J. Taylor's "Progress and Poverty in Britain, 1780-1850", *History*, February 1960.

leads us from data amenable to statistical measurement (wages or articles of consumption) to those satisfactions which are sometimes described by statisticians as "imponderables". From food we are led to homes, from homes to health, from health to family life, and thence to leisure, work-discipline, education and play, intensity of labour, and so on. From standard-of-life we pass to way-of-life. But the two are not the same. The first is a measurement of quantities: the second a description (and sometimes an evaluation) of qualities. Where statistical evidence is appropriate to the first, we must rely largely upon "literary evidence" as to the second. A major source of confusion arises from the drawing of conclusions as to one from evidence appropriate only to the other. It is at times as if statisticians have been arguing: "the indices reveal an increased *per capita* consumption of tea, sugar, meat and soap, *therefore* the working class was happier", while social historians have replied: "the literary sources show that people were unhappy, *therefore* their standard-of-living must have deteriorated".

This is to simplify. But simple points must be made. It is quite possible for statistical averages and human experiences to run in opposite directions. A *per capita* increase in quantitative factors may take place at the same time as a great qualitative disturbance in people's way of life, traditional relationships, and sanctions. People may consume more goods and become less happy or less free at the same time. Next to the agricultural workers the largest single group of working people during the whole period of the Industrial Revolution were the domestic servants. Very many of them were household servants, living-in with the employing family, sharing cramped quarters, working excessive hours, for a few shillings' reward. Nevertheless, we may confidently list them among the more favoured groups whose standards (or consumption of food and dress) improved on average slightly during the Industrial Revolution. But the hand-loom weaver and his wife, on the edge of starvation, still regarded their status as being superior to that of a "flunkey". Or again, we might cite those trades, such as coal-mining, in which real wages advanced between 1790 and 1840, but at the cost of longer hours and a greater intensity of labour, so that the breadwinner was "worn out" before the age of forty. In statistical terms, this reveals an upward curve. To the families concerned it might feel like immiseration.

Thus it is perfectly possible to maintain two propositions which, on a casual view, appear to be contradictory. Over the period 1790-1840 there was a slight improvement in average material standards. Over the same period there was intensified exploitation, greater insecurity, and increasing human misery. By 1840 most people were "better off" than their fore-runners had been fifty years before, but they had suffered and continued to suffer this slight improvement as a catastrophic experience. In order to explore this experience, out of which the political and cultural expression of working-class consciousness arose, we shall do these things. First, we shall examine the changing life-experience of three groups of workers: the field labourers, the urban artisans, and the hand-loom weavers.¹ Second, we shall discuss some of the less "ponderable" elements in the people's standard-of-life. Third, we shall discuss the inner compulsions of the industrial way of life, and the bearing upon them of Methodism. Finally, we shall examine some of the elements in the new working-class communities.

¹ These groups have been selected because their experience seems most to colour the social consciousness of the working class in the first half of the century. The miners and metal-workers do not make their influence fully felt until later in the century. The other key group—the cotton-spinners—are the subject of an admirable study in the Hammonds, *The Skilled Labourer*.

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CHAPTER TEN

STANDARDS AND EXPERIENCES

i. *Goods*

THE CONTROVERSY AS to living standards during the Industrial Revolution has perhaps been of most value when it has passed from the somewhat unreal pursuit of the wage-rates of hypothetical average workers and directed attention to articles of consumption: food, clothing, homes: and, beyond these, health and mortality. Many of the points at issue are complex, and all that can be attempted here is to offer comments upon a continuing discussion. When we consider measurable quantities, it seems clear that over the years 1790-1840 the national product was increasing more rapidly than the population. But it is exceedingly difficult to assess how this product was distributed. Even if we leave other considerations aside (how much of this increase was exported owing to unfavourable terms of trade? how much went in capital investment rather than articles of personal consumption?) it is not easy to discover what share of this increase went to different sections of the population.

The debate as to the people's diet during the Industrial Revolution turns mainly upon cereals, meat, potatoes, beer, sugar and tea. It is probable that *per capita* consumption of wheat declined from late 18th-century levels throughout the first four decades of the 19th century. Mr. Salaman, the historian of the potato, has given a convincing blow by blow account of the "battle of the loaf", by which landowners, farmers, parsons, manufacturers, and the Government itself sought to drive labourers from a wheaten to a potato diet. The critical year was 1795. Thereafter war-time necessity took second place to the arguments as to the benefits of reducing the poor to a cheap basic diet. The rise in potato acreage during the Wars cannot be attributed to wheat shortage alone: "some deficiency there was, but unequal division between the different classes of society consequent on inflated prices was a

far more potent factor . . .". The great majority of the English people, even in the north, had turned over from coarser cereals to wheat by 1790; and the white loaf was regarded jealously as a symbol of their status. The southern rural labourer refused to abandon his diet of bread and cheese, even when near the point of starvation; and for nearly fifty years a regular dietary class-war took place, with potatoes encroaching on bread in the south, and with oatmeal and potatoes encroaching in the north. Indeed, Mr. Salaman finds in the potato a social stabiliser even more effective than Halévy found in Methodism:

. . . the use of the potato . . . did, in fact, enable the workers to survive on the lowest possible wage. It may be that in this way the potato prolonged and encouraged, for another hundred years, the impoverishment and degradation of the English masses; but what was the alternative, surely nothing but bloody revolution. That England escaped such a violent upheaval in the early decades of the nineteenth century . . . must in large measure be placed to the credit of the potato.¹

Nutritional experts now advise us that the potato is full of virtue, and certainly whenever standards rose sufficiently for the potato to be an *added* item, giving variety to the diet, it was a gain. But the substitution of potatoes for bread or oatmeal was felt to be a degradation. The Irish immigrants with their potato diet (Ebenezer Elliott called them, "Erin's root-fed hordes") were seen as eloquent testimony, and very many Englishmen agreed with Cobbett that the poor were victims of a conspiracy to reduce them to the Irish level. Throughout the Industrial Revolution the price of bread (and of oatmeal) was the first index of living standards, in the estimation of the people. When the Corn Laws were passed in 1815, the Houses of Parliament had to be defended from the populace by troops. "NO CORN LAWS" was prominent among the banners at Peterloo, and remained so (especially in Lancashire) until the anti-Corn Law agitation of the 1840s.

Meat, like wheat, involved feelings of status over and above its dietary value. The Roast Beef of Old England was the artisan's pride and the aspiration of the labourer. Once again, *per capita* consumption probably fell between 1790 and 1840, but the figures are in dispute. The argument turns mainly upon

¹ R. N. Salaman, *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Cambridge, 1949), esp. pp. 480, 495, 506, 541-2. J. C. Drummond and A. Wilbraham, the historians of *The Englishman's Food* (1939), also see this as a period of decline.

the number and weight of beasts killed in London slaughter-houses. But even if these figures are established, we still cannot be sure as to which sections of the people ate the meat, and in what proportions. Certainly, meat should be a sensitive indicator of material standards, since it was one of the first items upon which any increase in real wages will have been spent. The seasonal workers did not plan their consumption meticulously over fifty-two Sunday dinners, but, rather, spent their money when in full work and took what chance offered for the rest of the year. "In the long fine days of summer," Henry Mayhew was told,

the little daughter of a working brickmaker used to order chops and other choice dainties of a butcher, saying, "Please, sir, father don't care for the price just a-now; but he must have his chops good; line-chops, sir, and tender, please—'cause he's a brickmaker." In the winter, it was, "O please, sir, here's a fourpenny bit, and you must send father something cheap. He don't care what it is, so long as it's cheap. It's winter, and he hasn't no work, sir—'cause he's a brick-maker."¹

Londoners tended to have higher standards of expectation than labourers in the provinces. In the depth of the 1812 depression, it was the impression of an observer that the London poor fared better than those of the north and the west:

The Poor of the Metropolis, notwithstanding the enormous price of the necessaries of life, are really living comparatively in comfort. The humblest labourer here frequently gets meat (flesh meat) and always bread and cheese, with beer of some sort, for his meals, but a West Country peasant can obtain for his family no such food.²

There was, of course, a variety of inferior "meats" on sale: red herrings and bloaters, cow-heel, sheep's trotters, pig's ear, fagots, tripe and black pudding. The country weavers of Lancashire despised town food, and preferred "summat at's deed ov a knife"—a phrase which indicates both the survival of their own direct pig-keeping economy and their suspicion that town meat was diseased—if forced to eat in town "every mouthful went down among painful speculations as to what the quadruped was when alive, and what particular reason it had for departing this life".³ It was not a new thing for town dwellers

¹ Mayhew, *op. cit.*, II, p. 368.

² *Examiner*, 16 August 1812.

³ E. Waugh, *Lancashire Sketches*, pp. 128-9.

to be exposed to impure or adulterated food; but as the proportion of urban workers grew, so the exposure became worse.¹

There is no doubt that *per capita* beer consumption went down between 1800 and 1830, and no doubt that *per capita* consumption of tea and of sugar went up; while between 1820 and 1840 there was a marked increase in the consumption of gin and whiskey. Once again, this is a cultural as well as dietetic matter. Beer was regarded—by agricultural workers, coal-whippers, miners—as essential for any heavy labour (to "put back the sweat") and in parts of the north beer was synonymous with "drink". The home-brewing of small ale was so essential to the household economy that "if a young woman can bake oatcake and brew well, it is thought she will make a good wife": while "some Methodist class-leaders say they could not lead their classes without getting a 'mugpot' of drink".² The decline was directly attributed to the malt tax—a tax so unpopular that some contemporaries regarded it as being an incitement to revolution. Remove the malt tax, one clerical magistrate in Hampshire argued in 1816, and the labourer—

would go cheerfully to his daily employ, perform it with manly vigour and content, and become attached to his house, his family, and, *above all*, his country, which allows him to share, in common with his superiors, in a plain wholesome beverage, which a poor man looks up to, more, indeed, than to any thing that could possibly be granted them by a British Parliament.³

The additional duty upon strong beer led to widespread evasion: and "hush-shops" sprang up, like that in which Samuel Bamford was nearly murdered as a suspected excise-man until he was recognised by one of the drinkers as a *bona fide* radical "on the run".

The effect of the taxes was undoubtedly to reduce greatly the amount of home-brewing and home-drinking; and, equally, to make drinking less of a part of normal diet and more of an extra-mural activity. (In 1830 the duty on strong beer was repealed and the Beer Act was passed, and within five years 35,000 beer-shops sprang up as if out of the ground.) The increase in tea-drinking was, in part, a replacement of beer and, perhaps also, of milk; and, once again, many contemporaries—with Cobbett well to the fore—saw in this evidence of

¹ See J. Burnett, "History of Food Adulteration in Great Britain in the 19th Century", *Bulletin of Inst. of Historical Research*, 1959, pp. 104-7.

² J. Lawson, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 10.

³ *Agricultural State of the Kingdom* (1816), p. 95.

deterioration. Tea was seen as a poor substitute, and (with the increased consumption of spirits) as an indication of the need for stimulants caused by excessive hours of labour on an inadequate diet. But by 1830 tea was regarded as a necessity: families that were too poor to buy it begged once-used tea-leaves from neighbours, or even simulated its colour by pouring boiling water over a burnt crust.¹

All in all, it is an unremarkable record. In fifty years of the Industrial Revolution the working-class share of the national product had almost certainly fallen relative to the share of the property-owning and professional classes. The "average" working man remained very close to subsistence level at a time when he was surrounded by the evidence of the increase of national wealth, much of it transparently the product of his own labour, and passing, by equally transparent means, into the hands of his employers. In psychological terms, this felt very much like a decline in standards. His own share in the "benefits of economic progress" consisted of more potatoes, a few articles of cotton clothing for his family, soap and candles, some tea and sugar, and a great many articles in the *Economic History Review*.

ii. Homes

The evidence as to the urban environment is little easier to interpret. There were farm labourers at the end of the 18th century who lived with their families in one-roomed hovels, damp and below ground-level: such conditions were rarer fifty years later. Despite all that can be said as to the unplanned jerry-building and profiteering that went on in the growing industrial towns, the houses themselves were better than those to which many immigrants from the countryside had been accustomed. But as the new industrial towns grew old, so problems of water supply, sanitation, over-crowding, and of the use of homes for industrial occupations, multiplied, until we arrive at the appalling conditions revealed by the housing and sanitary enquiries of the 1840s. It is true that conditions in rural villages or weaving hamlets may have been quite as bad as conditions in Preston or Leeds. But the size of the problem was certainly worse in the great towns, and the multiplication of bad conditions facilitated the spread of epidemics.

¹ For an indication of some of the points at issue here, see the articles on the standard-of-living by T. S. Ashton, R. M. Hartwell, E. Hobsbawm, and A. J. Taylor cited above.

Moreover, conditions in the great towns were—and were *felt* to be—more actively offensive and inconvenient. Water from the village well, rising next to the graveyard, might be impure: but at least the villagers did not have to rise in the night and queue for a turn at the only stand-pipe serving several streets, nor did they have to pay for it. The industrial town-dweller often could not escape the stench of industrial refuse and of open sewers, and his children played among the garbage and privy middens. Some of the evidence, after all, remains with us in the industrial landscape of the north and of the Midlands today.

This deterioration of the urban environment strikes us today, as it struck many contemporaries, as one of the most disastrous of the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, whether viewed in aesthetic terms, in terms of community amenities, or in terms of sanitation and density of population. Moreover, it took place most markedly in some of the "high-wage" areas where "optimistic" evidence as to improving standards is most well based. Common sense would suggest that we must take both kinds of evidence together; but in fact various arguments in mitigation have been offered. Examples have been found of improving mill-owners who attended to the housing conditions of their employees. These may well lead us to think better of human nature; but they do no more than touch the fringe of the general problem, just as the admirable charity hospitals probably affected mortality rates by only a decimal point. Moreover, most of the serious experiments in model communities (New Lanark apart) date from after 1840—or from after public opinion was aroused by the enquiries into the Sanitary Conditions of the Working Classes (1842) and the Health of Towns (1844), and alerted by the cholera epidemics of 1831 and 1848. Such experiments as ante-date 1840, like that of the Ashworths at Turton, were in self-sufficient mill villages.

It is also suggested that worsening conditions may be somehow discounted because they were no one's fault—and least of all the fault of the "capitalist". No villain can be found who answers to the name of "Jerry". Some of the worst building was undertaken by small jobbers or speculative small tradesmen or even self-employed building workers. A Sheffield investigator allocated blame between the landowner, the petty capitalist (who offered loans at a high rate of interest), and petty building

speculators "who could command only a few hundred pounds", and some of whom "actually cannot write their names".¹ Prices were kept high by duties on Baltic timber, bricks, tiles, slates; and Professor Ashton is able to give an absolute discharge to all the accused: "it was emphatically not the machine, not the Industrial Revolution, not even the speculative bricklayer or carpenter that was at fault".² All this may be true: it is notorious that working-class housing provides illustrations of the proverb as to every flea having "lesser fleas to bite 'em". In the 1820s, when many Lancashire weavers went on rent-strike, it was said that some owners of cottage property were thrown on the poor-rate. In the slums of the great towns publicans and small shopkeepers were among those often quoted as owners of the worst "folds" or human warrens of crumbling mortar. But none of this mitigates the actual conditions by one jot; nor can debate as to the proper allocation of responsibility exonerate a process by which some men were able to prey upon other's necessities.

A more valuable qualification is that which stresses the degree to which, in some of the older towns, improvements in paving, lighting, sewerage and slum clearance may be dated to the 18th century. But, in the often-cited example of London, it is by no means clear whether improvements in the centre of the City extended to the East End and dockside districts, or how far they were maintained during the Wars. Thus the sanitary reformer, Dr. Southwood Smith, reported of London in 1839:

While systematic efforts, on a large scale, have been made to widen the streets . . . to extend and perfect the drainage and sewerage . . . in the places in which the wealthier classes reside, nothing whatever has been done to improve the condition of the districts inhabited by the poor.³

Conditions in the East End were so noisome that doctors and parish officers risked their lives in the course of their duties. Moreover, as the Hammonds pointed out, it was in the boom towns of the Industrial Revolution that the worst conditions were to be found: "what London suffered [in the Commercial Revolution] Lancashire suffered at the end of the eighteenth

¹ G. C. Holland, *The Vital Statistics of Sheffield* (1843), pp. 56-8.

² *Capitalism and the Historians*, pp. 43-51.

³ *Fifth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (1839), p. 170. See also *Fourth Report* (1838), Appendix A, No. 1.

and at the beginning of the nineteenth century"¹ Sheffield, an old and comparatively prosperous town with a high proportion of skilled artisans, almost certainly—despite the jerry-builders—saw an improvement in housing conditions in the first half of the 19th century, with an average, in 1840, of five persons per house, most artisans renting a family cottage on their own, with one day room and two sleeping rooms. It was in the textile districts, and in the towns most exposed to Irish immigrations—Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Preston, Bolton, Bradford—that the most atrocious evidence of deterioration—dense overcrowding, cellar-dwellings, unspeakable filth—is to be found.²

Finally, it is suggested, with tedious repetition, that the slums, the stinking rivers, the spoliation of nature, and the architectural horrors may all be forgiven because all happened so fast, so haphazardly, under intense population pressure, without premeditation and without prior experience. "It was ignorance rather than avarice that was often the cause of misery."³ As a matter of fact, it was demonstrably both; and it is by no means evident that the one is a more amiable characteristic than the other. The argument is valid only up to a point—to the point in most great towns, in the 1830s or 1840s, when doctors and sanitary reformers, Benthamites and Chartists, fought repeated battles for improvement against the inertia of property-owners and the demagoguery of "cheap government" rate-payers. By this time the working people were virtually segregated in their stinking enclaves, and the middle-classes demonstrated their real opinions of the industrial towns by getting as far out of them as equestrian transport made convenient. Even in comparatively well-built Sheffield,

All classes, save the artisan and the needy shopkeeper, are attracted by country comfort and retirement. The attorney—the manufacturer—the grocer—the draper—the shoemaker and the tailor, fix their commanding residences on some beautiful site. . . .

Of sixty-six Sheffield attorneys in 1841, forty-one lived in the country, and ten of the remaining twenty-five were newcomers

¹ See M. D. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, Ch. II; *England in Transition* (Penguin edn.), p. 72; Hammond, *The Town Labourer*, Ch. III and Preface to 2nd edition; Dr. R. Willan, "Observations on Disease in London", *Medical and Physical Journal*, 1800, p. 299.

² G. C. Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 46 *et passim*. An excellent account of the working man's urban environment in mid-century Leeds is in J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living* (1961), pp. 7-20.

³ R. M. Hartwell, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

to the town. In Manchester the poor in their courts and cellars lived,

... hidden from the view of the higher ranks by piles of stores, mills, warehouses, and manufacturing establishments, less known to their wealthy neighbours—who reside chiefly in the open spaces of Cheetham, Broughton, and Chorlton—than the inhabitants of New Zealand or Kamtschatka.

“The rich lose sight of the poor, or only recognise them when attention is forced to their existence by their appearance as vagrants, mendicants, or delinquents.” “We have improved on the proverb, ‘One half of the world does not know how the other half lives,’ changing it into ‘One half of the world *does not care* how the other half lives.’ Ardwick knows less about Ancoats than it does about China. . . .”¹

Certainly, the unprecedented rate of population growth, and of concentration in industrial areas, would have created major problems in any known society, and most of all in a society whose *rationale* was to be found in profit-seeking and hostility to planning. We should see these as the problems of industrialism, aggravated by the predatory drives of *laissez faire* capitalism. But, however the problems are defined, the definitions are no more than different ways of describing, or interpreting, the same events. And no survey of the industrial heartlands, between 1800 and 1840, can overlook the evidence of visual devastation and deprivation of amenities. The century which rebuilt Bath was not, after all, devoid of aesthetic sensibility nor ignorant of civic responsibility. The first stages of the Industrial Revolution witnessed a decline in both; or, at the very least, a drastic lesson that these values were not to be extended to working people. However appalling the conditions of the poor may have been in large towns before 1750, nevertheless the town in earlier centuries usually embodied some civic values and architectural graces, some balance between occupations, marketing and manufacture, some sense of variety. The “Coketowns” were perhaps the first towns of above 10,000 inhabitants ever to be dedicated so single-mindedly to work and to “fact”.

iii. Life

The questions of health and longevity present even greater

¹ G. C. Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 51; W. Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842), pp. 12-13, 160.

difficulties in interpretation. Until recently it was widely accepted that the main factor in Britain's population “explosion” between 1780 and 1820 was in the declining death-rate, and in particular the decline in the rate of infant mortality. It was therefore reasonable to assume that this was effected by improvements in medical knowledge, nutrition (the potato), hygiene (soap and the cotton shirt), water supplies or housing. But this whole line of argument has now been called in question. The population “explosion” can be seen as an European phenomenon, taking place simultaneously in Britain and in France, and in Spain and Ireland where many of these factors did not operate to the same degree. Second, demographers are now disputing the accepted evidence: and able arguments have been put forward which place renewed emphasis on the rise in the birth-rate, rather than a decline in the death-rate, as the causative factor.¹

If we accept Dr. Krause's view that the birth-rate rose after 1781 and declined after 1831 and that “no important change in the death-rate is indicated”, this by no means provides evidence as to the improving health and longevity of the working class. It is interesting to note that the fertility ratio (that is, the number of children aged 0-4 per 1,000 women in the child-bearing age-groups) was highest in 1821; first, in the heartland of the Industrial Revolution (Lancashire, the West Riding, Cheshire, Staffordshire): second, in the worst hit “Poor Law counties” of the south. On the face of it, this would appear to provide confirmation for the Malthusian arguments—so widely held at the time, and so much disliked by Cobbett—that Speenhamland relief and the opportunities for employment in the mills (including child labour) boosted the birth-rate. We do not have to suppose that parents consciously decided to have more children in order to provide additional wage-earners or claims on the poor-rate. A rise in the birth-rate might be explicable in terms of the break-up of traditional patterns of community and family life (both Speenhamland and the mills could weaken taboos against early and “improvident” marriage), the decline in “living-in” among farm servants and apprentices, the impact of the Wars, concentration in new towns, or even genetic selection of the most fertile. Moreover, a rise in

¹ See especially J. T. Krause, “Changes in English Fertility and Mortality, 1781-1850”, *Econ. Hist. Review*, 2nd Series, XI, No. 1, August 1958, and “Some Neglected Factors in the English Industrial Revolution”, *Journal of Economic History*, XIX, 4 December, 1959.

the birth-rate is certainly not to be taken as evidence of rising living standards.¹ It was a continual theme of observers in the early 19th century that the poorest and most "improvident" among the workers had the largest families; while in Ireland it took the searing experience of the Great Famine to alter the entire marriage-pattern of Irish peasant life.²

The arguments are complex, and are best left, for the time being, with the demographers. But we have reached a point where the evidence—which has customarily been interpreted upon the assumption that the death-rate was declining—needs looking at afresh. It would seem that medical advances can only have had a minimal influence upon the life expectation of working people before 1800. It is possible that some real decline took place in the mid-18th century in London and other older "artisan" towns, to which the decline in gin-drinking, and early efforts at sanitary improvement and enlightenment contributed. It is also possible that the beginnings of the population "explosion" date from the mid-century, and arise from the decline in epidemics resulting upon "changes in virulence and resistance upon which human effort had no influence".³ The initial population increase was supported by a long run of good harvests, and by an improvement in living standards which belongs, not to the later, but to the earliest years of the Industrial Revolution. As the Revolution gathered pace, and as we encounter the classic conditions of over-crowding and demoralisation in the rapidly-growing great towns—swollen by a host of uprooted immigrants—so there is a serious deterioration in the health of the urban populations. The infant mortality rate in the first three or four decades of the 19th century was very much higher—and at times twice as high—in the new industrial towns as it was in rural areas. "Not 10% of the inhabitants of large towns enjoy full health," declared Dr. Turner Thackrah of Leeds;⁴ and there is abundant literary evidence, much of it

¹ See J. T. Krause, "Some Implications of Recent Work in Historical Demography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, I, 2, January 1959.

² K. H. Connell, "The Land Legislation and Irish Social Life," *Econ. Hist. Review*, XI, 1 August 1958.

³ T. McKeown and R. G. Brown, "Medical Evidence Related to English Population Changes in the Eighteenth Century," *Population Studies*, November 1955. See also J. H. Habakkuk, "English Population in the Eighteenth Century," *Econ. Hist. Review*, VI, 2, 1953; G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (1962), Ch. III; and, for a thorough examination of economic and demographic data in one region, J. D. Chambers, *The Vale of Trent, 1670-1800* (Economic History Society, Supplement, 1957).

⁴ *The Effects of Arts, Trade and Professions . . . on Health and Longevity* (1832), ed. A. Meiklejohn (1957), p. 24.

from medical men, as to the incidence of disease, malnutrition, infant mortality and occupational malformations in the working population. The evidence is sometimes contradictory, especially as to the effects of child labour in the mills, since when the 10 Hour agitation was at its height in the 1830s doctors sometimes argued from opposing briefs. But it is time that an end was put to the tendency of "optimistic" historians to dismiss as "biased" the evidence of doctors favourable to the demands of reformers, while accepting as "objective" and authoritative the evidence of medical witnesses called in to support the employers' case.¹

The First Report of the Registrar-General (1839) showed that about 20% of the total death-rate was attributed to consumption: a disease normally associated with poverty and over-crowding, as prevalent in the countryside as in the urban areas. Of ninety-two deaths of adult and juvenile workers in a Leeds woollen mill between the years 1818-27, no fewer than fifty-two were attributed to consumption or "decline", the next two categories being "worn out" or "too old" (9) and asthma (7). It is interesting to examine the more detailed figures presented by Dr. Holland, physician to the Sheffield General Infirmary, covering causes of death in the Sheffield registration district in the five years between 1837 and 1842. Out of 11,944 deaths in this period (including infants) the following complaints were each cited as causing the deaths of more than 100 persons in the five-year period:

1. Consumption	1,604
2. Convulsions	919
3. Inflammation of Lungs	874
4. Decay of Nature	800
5. Accidents (returned by Coroner)	618
6. Fever, Scarlet	550
7. Debility	519
8. Dentition	426
9. Inflammation of Bowels	397
10. Inflammation of Brain	351
11. Decline	346
12. Measles	330
13. Small Pox	315

¹ The only support for this way of reading the evidence would appear to be the highly unsatisfactory and impressionistic discussion of the medical evidence on child labour in W. H. Hutt, "The Factory System in the Early Nineteenth Century", *Economica*, March 1926; reprinted in *Capitalism and the Historians*, pp. 166 ff. See below p. 336.

14. Hooping Cough	287
15. Inflammations not distinguished	280
16. Fever, Common	255
17. Asthma	206
18. Croup	166
19. Paralysis	107
20. Disease of the liver	106

We do not need to point to the evident inadequacy in diagnosis (neither gastro-enteritis nor diphtheria are listed). Dr. Holland commented that the returns were "not much to be depended upon": "decline", as well as many cases of "asthma", should be attributed to consumption. As for the registration of only one death from "want of food":

The observation of any medical practitioner must indeed be very limited, that has not led him to the conclusion, that the deaths of hundreds in this town are to be traced to a deficiency of the necessities of life. They may die of disease, but this is induced by poor living, conjoined with laborious exertion.

The Sheffield figures, however, show only sixty-four deaths in the five years in childbirth (where errors in diagnosis are scarcely likely). This represents a dramatic improvement over the previous 100 years, to which the diminution of puerperal fever, improved hygiene and midwifery could have substantially contributed. But if maternal mortality was falling in all classes, working-class mothers were surviving only to give birth to more children whose chances of life, in the industrial centres, were diminishing. And if infant mortality was high, we must remember that the critical period in a child's life was not 0-1 but 0-5. Thus, of the 11,944 deaths in Sheffield in this period, the age-distribution is as follows:

Under 1	2,983
1	1,511
2 to 4	1,544

This gives us 6,038 deaths under the age of five, and the remaining 5,906 deaths distributed over the other age-groups. Thus, the infant mortality (0-1) rate is about 250 in 1,000, while the 0-5 mortality rate is 506 in 1,000. Much the same is true of Manchester where (Dr. Kay noted) "more than one-half of the off-spring of the poor . . . die before they have completed their fifth year", and where the Registrar-General's Report (1839) showed deaths in the 0-5 age-group of 517 in

1,000. But these figures underestimate—and perhaps seriously underestimate—the actual child mortality rate, because the industrial centres were constantly swelled with adult immigrants. Thus the 1851 Census (which recorded birthplaces) showed that "in almost all the great towns the migrants from elsewhere outnumbered the people born in the town"; and the deaths of immigrants would have the effect of continually diluting the true facts of child mortality. The growth of the great towns cannot be attributed, before 1840, to a greater rate of natural increase than in the countryside. If the traditional view is true, and the bulk of the population, in the older centres, market towns and villages, benefited in some degree in their health from the products (and sanitary enlightenment) of the Industrial Revolution, those who produced those goods did not. The thought occurs to one that in the "high-wage" industrial centres generation after generation of children were bred, more than half of whom died before they could scarcely speak; while in the "low-wage" countryside children were kept alive by the poor-rates to supplement, by migration, the heavy adult labour force of the towns.¹

There is no reason to suppose that the health of adult factory operatives was below average, and some evidence to indicate that the health of adult cotton-spinners improved between 1810 and 1830 and more rapidly thereafter, as hours were limited, machinery boxed in, and space, ventilation and whitewashing improved. But their children appear to have suffered with the rest of the labour force. In a survey undertaken on behalf of the employers in Manchester in 1833, it was found that the married spinners investigated had had 3,166 children (an average of four and a half to each marriage): "of these children, 1,922, or 60½ per cent. of the whole, were alive, and 1,244, or 39½ per cent., were dead".² One may reasonably assume that the 39½% might rise towards 50% by the time that children who were infants at the time of the survey reached the age of five, or failed to reach it. This heavy child mortality among the children of workers who are often cited as beneficiaries of the Industrial Revolution may be attributed in part to the general environmental health conditions. It may also have been due to the characteristic deformation and narrowing of the pelvic

¹ G. C. Holland, op. cit., Ch. VIII; J. P. Kay, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes employed in the Cotton Manufacture of Manchester* (1832); *First Annual Report of the Registrar-General* (1839), *passim*; A. Redford, op. cit., p. 16.

² W. Cooke Taylor, op. cit., p. 261.

bones in girls who had worked since childhood in the mills, which made for difficult births:¹ the weakness of infants born to mothers who worked until the last week of pregnancy: but above all to the lack of proper child care. Mothers, for fear of losing their employment, returned to the mill three weeks or less after the birth: still, in some Lancashire and West Riding towns, infants were carried in the 1840s to the mills to be suckled in the meal-break. Girl-mothers, who had perhaps worked in the mill from the age of eight or nine, had no domestic training: medical ignorance was appalling: the parents were a prey to fatalistic superstitions (which the churches sometimes encouraged): opiates, notably laudanum, were used to make the crying baby quiet. Infants and toddlers were left in the care of relatives, old baby-farming crones, or children too small to find work at the mill. Some were given dirty rag-dummies to suck, "in which is tied a piece of bread soaked in milk and water", and toddlers of two and three could be seen "running about with these rags in their mouths, in the neighbourhood of factories".²

"A factory labourer," one who was himself a cripple wrote:

can be very easily known as he is going along the streets; some of his joints are almost sure to be wrong. Either the knees are in, the ankles swelled, one shoulder lower than the other, or he is round-shouldered, pigeon-breasted, or in some other way deformed.³

But the same was true of many industrial occupations, whether conducted within or without a factory. If cotton-spinners were rarely employed after forty (and those who were had been through the long selective process which weeded out the weak), there were also few old miners or old cutlers. Dr. Thackrah found a higher incidence of occupational disease among shoddy-workers and rag pickers, while Dr. Holland wrote a detailed treatise on the diseases and accidents among Sheffield grinders. We have seen the evil working conditions of domestic woolcombers, while weavers were also subject to deformities. The same is true of glass-workers in the Mendips, of bakery workers, and of many of the London sweated trades. Tailors had a characteristic deformity of the shoulders and chest which

¹ See the evidence of Dr. S. Smith, of Leeds, in *Poor Man's Advocate*, 5 May 1832. The low incidence in Sheffield of maternal deaths in childbirth may perhaps be related to the fact that fewer girls were employed there in occupations which required standing for twelve or fourteen hours a day.

² W. Dodd, *The Factory System Illustrated* (1842), p. 149.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-13.

came from sitting for many hours each day "cross-legged on a board".

Dr. Turner Thackrah saw little to chose between the worst domestic employments and the cotton-mills. The children leaving the Manchester cotton-mills appeared to him:

... almost universally ill-looking, small, sickly, barefoot and ill-clad. Many *appeared* to be no older than seven. The men, generally from sixteen to twenty-four, and none aged, were almost as pallid and thin as the children. The women were the most respectable in appearance. . . .

He contrasted them with the workers in the smaller-scale mills and finishing-shops of the West Riding: "the stout fullers, the hale slubbers, the dirty but merry rosy-faced pieceners." In the cotton-operatives,

I saw, or thought I saw, a degenerate race,—human beings stunted, enfeebled, and depraved,—men and women that were not to be aged—children that were never to be healthy adults.

He questioned the evidence on health collected by the cotton employers, since most male operatives were laid off in early manhood, and the cotton-spinner whose strength failed would die in some other trade. In both the new mills and many of the older domestic trades, old workers appeared "vastly inferior in strength and appearance to old peasants".¹

We have to see the multiplier and the multiplied at the same time. Against the undoubtedly large number of children who were factory cripples we have to set the toll of rickets among the children of weavers and of the outworkers in general. (The two should not be confused. Factory cripples *were* factory cripples, while rickets—Dr. Smith, a surgeon at Leeds Infirmary, explained—"commences in infancy, and has generally run through its course, and the deformities completed, before the age at which children are sent into a factory.")² By 1830 it was taken for granted that the "average" urban industrial worker was stunted in growth and unfitted by reason of his weak physique for the heavy manual labour reserved to the Irish poor; when out of work the cotton-spinner was helpless, or at the best might hope to be employed "in going errands, waiting upon the market-people, selling pins and needles, ballads, tapes and laces, oranges, gingerbread. . . ."³

¹ Thackrah, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 27-31, 146, 203-5.

² *Poor Man's Advocate*, 5 May 1832.

³ W. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

So long as the essential demographic statistics are in dispute, any conclusion must be tentative. Nothing should lead us to underestimate the appalling mortality rates of London during the gin "epidemic" of the early 18th century. But it would seem that the living and working conditions of artisans and of some rural labourers were rather healthier in the second half of the 18th century than that of factory operatives or out-workers in the first half of the 19th. If London and Birmingham show a declining death-rate in these years, this was perhaps because they remained to a high degree "artisan" cities, with higher standards of child care and slightly less unhealthy working conditions. In the industrial north, in the Potteries and in most coalfields, infant mortality increased, and life became shorter and more painful. Perhaps in consequence the consumption of alcohol, and the use of opiates, increased, adding to the hazards of occupational disease. And sheer misery may have contributed to raising the rate of reproduction. Dr. Holland found "the most dissipated, reckless and improvident" among the worst paid and least organised Sheffield workers: "we speak from extensive enquiries when we assert, that the more wretched the condition of the artisans and the earlier do they marry".¹

If we accept that the national death-rate—and more particularly infant mortality rate—showed a slight decline over the first four decades of the 19th century, we must still ask of the statistics exactly the same questions as we have asked of wages and articles of consumption. There is no reason to suppose that dying children or disease were distributed more equitably than clothes or meat. In fact, we know that they were not. The moneyed man might—as Oastler noted—rarely wear two coats at once, but his family had tenfold the chances of diagnosis, medicine, nursing, diet, space, quiet. Attempts were made to assess the average age at death according to different social groups in various centres in 1842:

	<i>Gentry</i>	<i>Tradesmen</i>	<i>Labourers</i>
Rutlandshire	52	41	38
Truro	40	33	28
Derby	49	38	21
Manchester	38	20	17
Bethnal Green	45	26	16
Liverpool	35	22	15

¹ G. C. Holland, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-15.

At Leeds, where the figures were estimated at 44, 27, 19 the aggregate average of the three groups was 21. In Halifax, a large dispersed parish which compared favourably in its death-rate with more concentrated centres, a local doctor calculated the average age at death of "gentry, manufacturers and their families" at 55: shopkeepers, 24: operatives, 22.¹

Demographers would be right to consider this as "literary" rather than statistical evidence. But it indicates that a substantial decline in infant mortality and increase in life expectation among several millions in the middle classes and aristocracy of labour would mask, in national averages, a worsening position in the working class generally. And in this view, Dr. Holland of Sheffield has anticipated us:

We have no hesitation in asserting, that the sufferings of the working classes, and consequently the rate of mortality, are greater now than in former times. Indeed, in most manufacturing districts the rate of mortality in these classes is appalling to contemplate, when it can be studied in reference to them alone, and not in connexion with the entire population. The supposed gain on the side of longevity, arises chiefly from . . . a relatively much more numerous middle class than formerly existed. . . .

"We may be deceived," he continued, by the "gross returns":

. . . into the belief, that society is gradually improving in its physical and social condition, when indeed the most numerous class may be stationary, or in the process of deterioration.²

iv. *Childhood*

We have touched already on child labour: but it deserves further examination. In one sense it is curious that the question can be admitted as controversial: there was a drastic increase in the intensity of exploitation of child labour between 1780 and 1840, and every historian acquainted with the sources knows that this is so. This was true in the mines, both in inefficient small-scale pits where the roadways were sometimes so narrow that children could most easily pass through them; and in several larger coalfields, where—as the coal face drew further away from the shaft—children were in demand as "hurryers"

¹ *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Classes* (1842), p. 153; G. C. Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 128; for Halifax, Dr. Alexander, cited in W. Ranger, *Report on . . . Halifax* (1851), pp. 100 ff.; for later figures, see James Hole, *The Homes of the Working Classes* (1866), pp. 18 ff.

² G. C. Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

and to operate the ventilation ports. In the mills, the child and juvenile labour force grew yearly; and in several of the out-worker or "dishonourable" trades the hours of labour became longer and the work more intense. What, then, is left in dispute?

But "optimists" have, since the time of the Hammonds, surrounded the question with so many qualifications that one might almost suspect a conspiracy to explain child labour away. There was "nothing new" about it; conditions were as bad in the "old" industries as in the new: much of the evidence is partisan and exaggerated: things were already improving before the outcry of the 1830s was made: the operatives themselves were the worst offenders in the treatment of children: the outcry came from "interested" parties—landowners hostile to the manufacturers, or adult trade unionists wanting limitation of hours for themselves—or from middle-class intellectuals who knew nothing about it: or (paradoxically) the whole question reveals, not the hardship and insensitivity, but the growing humanity of the employing classes. Few questions have been so lost to history by a liberal admixture of special pleading and ideology.

Child labour was not new. The child was an intrinsic part of the agricultural and industrial economy before 1780, and remained so until rescued by the school. Certain occupations—climbing boys or ship's boys—were probably worse than all but the worst conditions in the early mills: an orphan "apprenticed" by the parish to a Peter Grimes or to a drunken collier at a small "day-hole" might be subject to cruelty in an isolation even more terrifying.¹ But it is wrong to generalise from such extreme examples as to prevalent attitudes before the Industrial Revolution; and, anyway, one of the points of the story of Peter Grimes is his ostracism by the women of the fishing community, and the guilt which drives him towards his grave.

The most prevalent form of child labour was in the home or within the family economy. Children who were scarcely toddlers might be set to work, fetching and carrying. One of Crompton's sons recollected being put to work "soon after I was able to walk":

My mother used to bat the cotton on a wire riddle. It was then put into a deep brown mug with a strong ley of soap suds. My mother then tucked up my petticoats about my waist, and put me into the

¹ See M. D. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, Ch. V.

tub to tread upon the cotton at the bottom. . . . This process was continued until the mug became so full that I could no longer safely stand in it, when a chair was placed besides it, and I held on to the back. . . .

Another son recollected "being placed, when seven years of age, upon a stool to spread cotton upon a breaker preparatory to spinning, an elder brother turning the wheel to put the machine in motion".¹ Next came the winding of bobbins: and, when ten or eleven, spinning or—if the legs were long enough to reach the treadles—a turn in the loom. So deeply-rooted was child labour in the textile industries that these were often held up to the envy of labourers in other occupations where children could not find employment and add to the family earnings; while the early hand-loom "factories" in the woollen industry met with opposition on the grounds that they would lead to child unemployment. If the factory system were to prevail, declared one witness in 1806,

it will call all the poor labouring men away from their habitations and their homes into Factories, and there . . . they will not have the help and the advantage from their families which they have had at home. Supposing I was a parent and had four or five or six children, and one of them was 14, another 12, another 10; if I was working with my family at home, I could give them employment, one to wind bobbins, another to work at the loom and another at the jenny; but if I go to the Factory they will not allow me to take those boys, but I must leave them to the wide world to perish. . . .²

By contemporary standards this was arduous, even brutal. In all homes girls were occupied about the baking, brewing, cleaning and chores. In agriculture, children—often ill-clothed—would work in all weathers in the fields or about the farm. But, when compared with the factory system, there are important qualifications. There was some variety of employment (and monotony is peculiarly cruel to the child). In normal circumstances, work would be intermittent: it would follow a cycle of tasks, and even regular jobs like winding bobbins would not be required all day unless in special circumstances (such as one or two children serving two weavers). No infant had to tread cotton in a tub for eight hours a day and for a six-day week. In short, we may suppose a graduated introduction to work, with some relation to the child's capacities and

¹ G. F. French, *Life of Samuel Crompton* (1859), pp. 58-9, 72; see also B. Brierley, *Home Memories* (Manchester, 1886), p. 19.

² *Committee of the Woollen Trade* (1806), p. 49.

age, interspersed with running messages, blackberrying, fuel-gathering or play. Above all, the work was within the family economy and under parental care. It is true that parental attitudes to children were exceptionally severe in the 18th century. But no case has been made out for a general sadism or lack of love.

This interpretation is validated by two other circumstances: the persistence, in the 18th century, of games, dances and sports which would have been scarcely possible if children had been confined for factory hours; and the resistance of the hand workers to sending their children into the early mills, which was one cause for the employment in them of pauper apprentices. But it was not the factory only—nor, perhaps, mainly—which led to the intensification of child labour between 1780 and 1830. It was, first, the fact of specialisation itself, the increasing differentiation of economic rôles, and the break-up of the family economy. And, second, the breakdown of late 18th-century humanitarianism; and the counter-revolutionary climate of the Wars, which nourished the arid dogmatisms of the employing class.

We shall return to the second point. As to the first, nearly all the vices known to the 18th century were perpetuated in the early decades of the 19th, but in an intensified form. As Dickens knew, Peter Grimes was as likely to be found in early Victorian London as in Georgian Aldeburgh. The reports of the Children's Employment Commissions of 1842 showed new-model Boards of Guardians, in Staffordshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, still getting rid of pauper boys of six, seven and eight, by apprenticing them to colliers, with a guinea thrown in "for clothes". The boys were "wholly in the power of the butties" and received not a penny of pay; one boy in Halifax who was beaten by his master and had coals thrown at him ran away, slept in disused workings, and ate "for a long time the candles that I found in the pits that the colliers left overnight".¹ The mixture of terror and of fatalism of the children comes through in the laconic reports. An eight-year-old girl, employed for thirteen hours a "day", to open and close traps: "I have to trap without a light, and I'm scared. . . . Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then." Or seventeen-year-old Patience Kershaw, who discussed the merits of different employments:

¹ *Children's Employment Commission. Mines* (1842), p. 43.

. . . the bald place upon my head is made by thrusting the corves; my legs have never swelled, but sisters' did when they went to mill; I hurry the corves a mile and more under ground and back; they weigh 3 cwt. . . . the getters that I work for are naked except their caps . . . sometimes they beat me, if I am not quick enough. . . . I would rather work in mill than in coalpit.¹

This is no more than the worst 18th-century conditions multiplied. But specialisation and economic differentiation led to children outside the factories being given special tasks, at piece-rates which demanded monotonous application for ten, twelve or more hours. We have already noted the card-setting village of Cleckheaton, where "little toddling things of four years old . . . were kept hour after hour at the monotonous task of thrusting the wires into cards with their tiny fingers until their little heads were dazed, their eyes red and sore, and the feebler ones grew bent and crooked". This might still be done at home, and the evidence suggests that sweated child labour of this sort was if anything increasing throughout the early decades of the century in most outwork industries, in rural industries (straw-plaiting, lace), and in the dishonourable trades.² The crime of the factory system was to inherit the worst features of the domestic system in a context which had none of the domestic compensations: "it systematized child labour, pauper and free, and exploited it with persistent brutality . . .".³ In the home, the child's conditions will have varied according to the temper of parents or of master; and to some degree his work will have been scaled according to his ability. In the mill, the machinery dictated environment, discipline, speed and regularity of work and working hours, for the delicate and the strong alike.

We do not have to rehearse the long and miserable chronicle of the child in the mill, from the early pauper apprentice mills to the factory agitation of the 1830s and 1840s. But, since comforting notions are now abroad as to the "exaggerated" stories of contemporaries and of historians, we should discuss some of the qualifications. Most of them are to be found in a provocative, almost light-hearted, article published by Professor Hutt in 1926. A spoonful of lemon-juice is sometimes good for the system, but we cannot live on lemon-juice for ever.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 71, 80.

² It is to be noted that some of the worst examples in Marx's *Capital* are taken from the Children's Employment Commission of the 1860s.

³ H. L. Beales, *The Industrial Revolution* (1928), p. 60.

This slight, scarcely documented, and often directly misleading article, has appeared in footnotes until this day, and has been republished in *Capitalism and the Historians*.¹ Nearly every point which it makes was anticipated and met in the arguments of the 10 Hour advocates; and notably in John Fielden's restrained and well-documented *The Curse of the Factory System* (1836), whose republication would be a more useful service to scholarship.

It would be tedious to go over all the points. It is true that some of the worst atrocities were inflicted upon pauper apprentices at the end of the 18th century, and that the parish apprenticeship system gave way increasingly to "free" labour in the 19th. It is true—and it is heartening to know—that some employers, like Samuel Oldknow and the Gregs, provided fairly decent conditions for their apprentices. It is true that some reformers dug up the worst cases, and quoted them many years after the event. But it is by no means true that this provides evidence as to the extinction of the same abuses in the 1830s. (The reformers often encountered the greatest difficulty in securing sworn evidence of contemporary abuses, for the simple reason that the workers were in fear of losing their employment.) It is true that Peel's two Acts, of 1802 and 1819, indicate both a stirring of humanity and an attempt on the part of some of the larger masters to enforce regulation upon their smaller or most unscrupulous rivals. It is true also that there was a general improvement in conditions in Manchester, Stockport and environs by 1830. But this improvement did not extend to remoter areas or country districts nor outside the cotton industry. And since the first three decades of the 19th century see a great expansion in country mills, as well as the introduction of the full factory system to worsted-spinning, and its expansion in silk and flax, the gains of Manchester are offset by the abuses of Bradford, Halifax, Macclesfield, and the Lancashire uplands.

It is true—and a point which is frequently cited—that the evidence brought before Sadler's Committee of 1832 was partisan; and that historians such as the Hammonds, and Hutchins and Harrison (but not Fielden or Engels), may be criticised for drawing upon it too uncritically. With Oastler's help, Short-Time Committees of the workers organised the

¹ W. H. Hutt, "The Factory System of the Early Nineteenth Century", *Economica*, March 1926.

collection of evidence—notably from the West Riding—for presentation to this Committee; its Chairman, Michael Sadler, was the leading parliamentary champion of the 10 Hour Bill; and its evidence was published before any evidence had been taken from the employers. But it does not follow that the evidence before Sadler's Committee can therefore be assumed to be untrue. In fact, anyone who reads the bulk of the evidence will find that it has an authenticity which compels belief, although care must be taken to discriminate between witnesses, and to note the differences between some of the worst conditions in small mills in smaller centres (for example, Keighley and Dewsbury) as compared with conditions in the larger mills in the great cotton towns. There is no basis for Professor Hutt's assertions that the Factory Commission appointed—on the master's insistence—in the following year provided "effective answers to nearly all the charges made before [Sadler's] committee"; nor that the charges of systematic cruelty to children were "shown to have been entirely without foundation"; nor that "such deliberate cruelties as did exist were practised on children by the operatives themselves, against the will and against the knowledge of the masters". Much of the evidence before the Commission tends towards different conclusions. Moreover, where the evidence conflicts, one is at a loss to follow the logic by which we are asked to give unhesitating preference to that adduced by the masters (and their overlookers) as against that of their employees.¹

Those who, like Professors Hutt and Smelser, exalt the evidence of the Factory Commission (1833) as opposed to that of Sadler's Committee, are guilty of the same error as that of which the Hammonds are accused. Rightly or wrongly, Oastler and the Short-Time Committees regarded the appointment of this Commission as a deliberate measure of procrastination, and the Commissioners as instruments of the employers. As a matter of policy they refused to give evidence before them. The movements of the Assistant Commissioners in the factory districts were closely watched. They were criticised for dining and wining with the mill-owners and for spending only a derisory portion of their time in inspection. It was noted that mills were specially whitewashed and cleansed, and under-age

¹ *Capitalism and the Historians*, pp. 165-6. Professor Hutt even repeats the *canaille* of the masters and of Dr. Ure, such as the baseless charge that John Doherty had been convicted of a "gross assault" on a woman.

children removed from sight, before their visits. The workers contented themselves with mounting hostile demonstrations.¹ The reports of the Commissioners were subjected to as much criticism from the workers' side as that of Sadler's Committee received from the employers.

"I was requested by one of my neighbours," declared one of Sadler's witnesses,

to recommend the Committee to come to Leeds Bridge at half past five o'clock in the morning, while the poor factory children are passing, and they would then get more evidence in one hour there than they will in seven years examination. I have seen some children running down to the mill crying, with a bit of bread in their hand, and that is all they may have till twelve o'clock at noon: crying for fear of being too late.

Even if we leave the stories of sadistic overlookers aside, there was then commenced a day, for multitudes of children, which did not end until seven or eight o'clock; and in the last hours of which children were crying or falling asleep on their feet, their hands bleeding from the friction of the yarn in "piecing", even their parents cuffing them to keep them awake, while the overlookers patrolled with the strap. In the country mills dependent upon water-power, night work or days of fourteen and sixteen hours were common when they were "thronged". If Professor Hutt does not regard this as "systematic cruelty", humane mill-owners like Fielden and Wood were in no doubt.

Nor are there any mysteries as to the attitude of the adult workers, many of whom were the parents or relatives of the children. As Professor Smelser has shown,² there is a sense in which the family economy of the domestic system was perpetuated in the factory. The child's earnings were an essential component of the family wage. In many cases, although probably not in the majority, the adult spinner or worker might be kin to the child working for him. The demand for the limitation of adult, as well as child, hours was necessitated by the fact that they worked at a common process; if children's hours only were limited, nothing could prevent evasion, or the

¹ See *The Voice of the West Riding*, 1 June 1833: "The men of Leeds—the working classes—have nobly done their duty. They have indignantly refused to co-operate with a set of men who, if they had the least spark of honesty amongst them, would have let the Tyrannical Factory Lords do their own dirty work. . . ." Also *ibid.*, 15 and 22 June 1833 and Driver, *op. cit.*, Ch. XIX.

² N. J. Smelser, *op. cit.*, esp. Chs. IX and X.

working of children in double relays (thus lengthening the adult working-day). Only the actual stoppage of the mill machinery could guarantee limitation. If the adults also stood to benefit by shorter hours, this does not mean that they were indifferent to humane considerations nor does it justify the offensive suggestion that the great pilgrimages and demonstrations on behalf of the factory child in the 1830s were hypocritical.

It is perfectly true that the parents not only needed their children's earnings, but expected them to work. But while a few of the operatives were brutal even to their own children, the evidence suggests that the factory community expected certain standards of humanity to be observed. A spinner in the Dewsbury area, noted for his evil-temper and for striking children with the billy-roller, "could not get any one to work for him in the whole town, and he went to another place . . .". Stories of parents who visited vengeance upon operatives who maltreated their children are not uncommon. Thus a witness before Sadler's Committee described how, when he was a child, he was beaten by the slubber. "One of the young men who served the carder went out and found my mother":

She came in . . . and inquired of me what instrument it was I was beaten with, but I durst not do it; some of the by-standers pointed out the instrument . . . and she seized it . . . and beat it about the fellow's head, and gave him one or two black eyes.¹

This assorts ill with loose statements sometimes made as to the general indifference of the parents. The evidence of both Reports suggests that it was the discipline of the machinery itself, lavishly supplemented by the driving of overlookers or (in small mills) of the masters, which was the source of cruelty. To say that practices common to whole industries were continued "against the will and against the knowledge of the masters" does not require refutation. Many parents certainly connived at the employment of their own children under the legal age enacted in 1819 and 1833. It is to the credit of men like Doherty and of the Short-Time Committees that they campaigned imperiously amongst the operatives against such evils, encouraging dignity among the degraded and explaining the value of education to the uneducated. The Factory Movement also involved many thousands who were not factory

¹ Against such stories we have to set the appalling accounts of sadism, employed by adult operatives themselves upon pauper apprentices, during the period of the Wars. See J. Brown, *Memoir of Robert Blincoe* (Manchester, 1832), pp. 40-1.

operatives: the weavers who wished to "muzzle the monster steam": parents displaced from the mills by juveniles, and supported by their children's earnings. Gaskell saw (in 1833) that the workers' discontent arose less from simple wage issues than from—

the separation of families, breaking up of households, the disruption of all those ties which link man's heart to the better portion of his nature,—viz. his instincts and social affections. . . .¹

The Factory Movement, in its early stages, represented less a growth of middle-class humanitarianism than an affirmation of human rights by the workers themselves.

In fact, few arguments are so specious as that which proposes that because unlimited child labour was tolerated in the 18th century but, in its new and more intense forms, became less tolerable by the 1830s, this is another sign of the growing humanitarianism of "the age". Professor Hayek has referred to "this awakening of social conscience", to this—

increasing awareness of facts which before had passed unnoticed. . . . Economic suffering both became more conspicuous and seemed less justified, because general wealth was increasing faster than ever before.

Professor Ashton has offered a variant of this argument. The Royal Commissions and parliamentary committees of inquiry of the early 19th century—

are one of the glories of the early Victorian age. They signalized a quickening of social conscience, a sensitiveness to distress, that had not been evident in any other period or any other country.

And he has shown unaccustomed strength of feeling in his defence of the parliamentary investigators:

. . . a generation that had the enterprise and industry to assemble the facts, the honesty to reveal them, and the energy to set about the task of reform has been held up to obloquy as the author, not of the Blue Books, but of the evils themselves.²

Blue Books in the early 19th century served many purposes, but reform comes low on the list. Parliamentary investigations took place as a routine response to petitions; as a means of "handling and channelling" discontent, procrastinating, or

¹ P. Gaskell, *The Manufacturing Population of England*, p. 7.

² *Capitalism and the Historians*, pp. 18-19, 35-6.

fobbing off ill-behaved M.P.s; or purely from an excess of utilitarian officiousness. Ireland's decline through misery after misery to the seemingly inevitable climax of the Great Famine was accompanied by the absence of any important measure of alleviation—and by an average of five parliamentary enquiries per year.¹ The hand-loom weavers and framework-knitters were duly enquired into as they starved. Eight enquiries in ten years preceded the establishment of the police. (The fact that action resulted in the latter, but not in the former, cases is instructive.) Mr. Gradgrind was most certainly out and about after 1815, but as Dickens knew perfectly well he stood not for an "awakening of social conscience" or "sensitiveness to distress" but for efficiency, cheap centralised government, *laissez faire*, and sound "political economy".

The Blue Books (at least until we came to the great sanitary enquiries) were not the product of "an age" or the fruit of "a generation", but a battle-ground in which reformers and obstructionists fought; and in which humanitarian causes, as often as not, were buried. As for the upper classes, what we see in the 1830s is not a new "awakening of conscience" but the almost volcanic irruption, in different places and people, of a social conscience quiescent throughout the Napoleonic Wars. This conscience is certainly evident in the second half of the 18th century. The campaign to protect the climbing-boys, in which Hanway took a part, reached the statute book, against little opposition, in 1788. Every abuse returned during the Wars, and attempts to secure new legislative protection in their aftermath met direct opposition, and were thrown out in the Lords—for, if boys had been dispensed with, their Lordships might have had to make alterations to their chimneys.² All Howard's honourable work on behalf of prisoners left little lasting impression, as conditions reverted after his death. We have noted already how the infection of class hatred and fear corrupted the humanitarian conscience. It is true that Peel's Act of 1802 stands out against this darkness; but its operation was confined to pauper apprentices, and it was less a precedent for new legislation than an attempt to extend customary apprenticeship safeguards in a new context. What is more important—and was more disastrous for the factory child—

¹ See E. Strauss, *Irish Nationalism and British Democracy* (1951), p. 80: and Mr. Strauss's comment—"Ignorance of the facts was not one of the causes of Irish misery during the nineteenth century."

² See J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Town Labourer*, pp. 176-93.

was the atrophy of the conscience of the country gentry, the only men who had the authority or the traditional duty to protect the poor.

Nothing more confirms this atrophy, and the profound moral alienation of classes, than the manner of the real "awakening" when it came. Scores of gentlemen and professional men, who gave some support to humanitarian causes in the 1830s and 1840s, appear to have been living in the 1820s in the midst of populous manufacturing districts, oblivious to abuses a few hundred yards from their gates. Richard Oastler himself lived on the edge of Huddersfield, but it was not until the Bradford manufacturer, John Wood, *told* him about child labour that he noticed it. When girls were brought half-naked out of pits, the local luminaries seem to have been genuinely astonished:

Mr. Holroyd, solicitor, and Mr. Brook, surgeon, practising in Stainland, were present, who confessed that, although living within a few miles, they could not have believed that such a system of unchristian cruelty could have existed.¹

We forget how long abuses can continue "unknown" until they are articulated: how people can look at misery and not notice it, until misery itself rebels. In the eyes of the rich between 1790 and 1830 factory children were "busy", "industrious", "useful"; they were kept out of their parks and orchards, and they were cheap. If qualms arose, they could generally be silenced by religious scruples: as one honourable Member remarked, of the climbing-boys in 1819, "the boys generally employed in this profession were not the children of poor persons, but the children of rich men, begotten in an improper manner".² This showed a fine sense of moral propriety, as well as a complete absence of class bias.

But the conscience of "the rich" in this period is full of complexity. The argument that the impassioned "Tory" attacks, in the 1830s, upon the abuses of industrialism, voiced by such men as Sadler, Shaftesbury, Oastler, Disraeli, were little more than the revenge of the landowning interest upon the manufacturers and their Anti-Corn Law League makes some sense in "party political" terms. It is true that they revealed deep sources of resentment and insecurity among traditionalists before the innovations and the growing power of the moneyed middle class. But even a hasty reading of *Sybil*, of

¹ *Children's Employment Commission. Mines* (1842), p. 80.

² Cited in *The Town Labourer*, p. 190.

the Hammond's Life of Shaftesbury or of Cecil Driver's impressive life of Oastler will reveal the shallowness of any judgement limited to these terms. We seem to be witnesses to a cultural mutation: or, as in the case of 18th-century constitutionalism, to a seemingly hollow and conventional rhetoric which took fire, in individual minds, as a deliberate and passionate belief.

Moreover, alongside the older arguments of Tory paternalism we have the newer influence of disappointed Romanticism. In their recoil from the Enlightenment, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, had reaffirmed traditional sanctities, "the instincts of natural and social man". In returning to order, authority, duty, they had not forgotten Rousseau's teaching on the child. It was in Book VIII of *The Excursion* that Wordsworth condemned the factory system in contrast to the older rural family economy:

The habitations empty! or perchance
The Mother left alone,—no helping hand
To rock the cradle of her peevish babe;
No daughters round her, busy at the wheel,
Or in dispatch of each day's little growth
Of household occupation; no nice arts
Of needle-work; no bustle at the fire,
Where once the dinner was prepared with pride;
Nothing to speed the day, or cheer the mind;
Nothing to praise, to teach, or to command!

The Father, if perchance he still retain
His old employments, goes to field or wood
No longer led or followed by the sons;
Idlers perchance they were,—but in *his* sight;
Breathing fresh air and treading the green earth:
Till their short holiday of childhood ceased,
Ne'er to return! That birthright now is lost.

The mistake, today, is to assume that paternalist feeling must be detached and condescending. It can be passionate and engaged. This current of traditionalist social radicalism, which moves from Wordsworth and Southey through to Carlyle and beyond, seems, in its origin and in its growth, to contain a dialectic by which it is continually prompting revolutionary conclusions. The starting-point of traditionalist and Jacobin was the same. "What is a huge manufactory," exclaimed Thelwall, "but a common prison-house, in which

a hapless multitude are sentenced to profligacy and hard labour, that an individual may rise to unwieldy opulence."¹ "I detest the manufacturing system" declared his fellow-Jacobin, Thomas Cooper, who had experienced the early stages of the Lancashire Industrial Revolution:

You must on this system have a large portion of the people converted into mere machines, ignorant, debauched, and brutal, that the surplus value of their labour of 12 or 14 hours a day, may go into the pockets and supply the luxuries of rich, commercial, and manufacturing capitalists.²

Southey enraged the "philosopher" of manufactures, Dr. Andrew Ure, by his even more sweeping condemnation of the manufacturing system as "a wen, a fungous excrescence from the body politic".³ Although Jacobin and Tory are at opposed political poles, sparks of feeling and of argument are continually exchanged between them. The prophets of the "march of intellect"—Brougham, Chadwick, Ure—seem to belong to a different world. Whenever the traditionalist Tory passed beyond reflective argument about the factory system, and attempted to give vent to his feelings in action, he found himself forced into an embarrassing alliance with trade unionists or working-class Radicals. The middle-class Liberal saw in this only evidence of Tory hypocrisy. When Sadler fought (and lost) his seat at Leeds in the Reform Bill election of 1832, a shopkeeper-diarist noted:

. . . nothing supporting him but a few that are under the yoake of Tyranny and a few Radicals of the lowest order, it is a Bony job that the Old Torey Party is Obligated to turn Radical on any thing and every thing to keepe their sistam. . . .⁴

Two years later, and the new Poor Law, which outraged with its Malthusian and Chadwickian provisions every "instinct of natural and social man", appeared to present to a few Tory Radicals an ultimate choice between the values of order and those of humanity. The majority drew back, and contented themselves with schemes for humanitarian amelioration of different kinds: but a few were prepared to associate, not only

¹ *Monthly Magazine*, 1 November 1799. I am indebted to Dr. D. V. Erdman for this reference.

² T. Cooper, *Some Information Respecting America* (1794), pp. 77-8.

³ R. Southey, *Sir Thomas More: or, Colloques . . .* (1829), I, p. 711; A. Ure, *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835), pp. 277-8. See also Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (Penguin edn. 1961), pp. 39 ff.

⁴ MS. Diary of Robert Ayrey, Leeds Reference Library. See p. 823 below.

with Cobbettites, but with Owenites, free-thinkers, and Chartists. Joseph Rayner Stephens actually called for arson against the "Bastilles" and Oastler stirred up civil—and, sometimes, very uncivil—disobedience and, in his rôle as protector of the factory children, even urged the use of industrial sabotage against mill-owners who violated the law:

I will in that event print a little card about *Needles and Sand and Rusty Nails*, with proper and with very explicit directions, which will make these law-breakers look about them and repent that they were ever so mad as to laugh at the Law and the King. These cards of mine shall then be the catechism of the factory children.¹

For ten years Oastler trod the edges of revolution; but the title which he gave to one of his periodicals was *The Home, the Altar, the Throne, and the Cottage*.

We can scarcely attribute this eruption of compassion to an "age" which also jailed Stephens and vilified Oastler. Many of those who really exerted themselves on behalf of the factory children in the earlier years met with abuse, ostracism by their class, and sometimes personal loss. And as Mr. Driver has shown, the crucial moment in Oastler's career was not his awakening to the fact of child labour, but the "Fixby Hall Compact" between himself and Radical trade unionists. The awakening was not, in any case, characteristic of Toryism as a whole: if we wished to anatomise the Tory conscience of 1800 or 1830, we should commence with the squire's attitude to his own labourers. The humanitarianism of the 1830s can certainly be found to have had a cultural ancestry, both in Tory paternalism and in the more subdued traditions, of service and "good works", of liberal Dissent. But, as an effective force, it crops up only here and there, in individual men and women; Oastler and Bull are no more representative of the Tory than Fielden and Mrs. Gaskell are representative of the liberal-nonconformist conscience.

If Tawney was right, and the treatment of childhood and of poverty are the two "touchstones" which reveal "the true character of a social philosophy",² then it is the liberal and Nonconformist tradition which suffers most severely, in 1830, from this test. It is true that there is a humble twilight world, half-septic, half-dissenting, from which much that is best in

¹ C. Driver, op. cit., pp. 327-8.

² R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Penguin edn.), p. 239.

early Victorian intellectual and spiritual life was to come. But it is equally true that the years between 1790 and 1830 see an appalling declension in the social conscience of Dissent. And above all, there are the proverbial Nonconformist mill-owners, with their Methodist overlookers, and their invidious reputation as week-day child-drivers, working their mills till five minutes before midnight on the Saturday and enforcing the attendance of their children at Sunday school on the Sabbath.

The picture is derived, in part, from Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* (1840), where "Messrs. Robert and Joseph Tomlins, the serious gentlemen as owns the factory . . . attends their ownselves in person every Sunday morning to see that both master and children puts the time to profit." It is a fictional and coloured picture, belonging, perhaps, more to 1820 than to 1840, more applicable to secluded country mills where the parish-apprentice system survived than to any great cotton town. But still, in the 1830s, the conditions portrayed in Mrs. Trollope's "Deep Dale" in Derbyshire might be found in many secluded valleys on both the Lancashire and Yorkshire side of the Pennines. A fact-finding tour undertaken by a 10 Hour propagandist in the Upper Calder Valley, and in which especial attention was given to the reactions of the local clergy, shows the complexity of any generalisation. At Ripponden the vicar refused his support, but the Methodist chapel was loaned for a 10 Hour meeting. At Hebden Bridge an old Methodist lay preacher declared that he was always preaching against the factory system " 'for', says he, 'we may preach while our tongues cleave to the roof of our mouths, but we shall never do any good while the system is allowed to go on as it is at present!'" But he had made himself so obnoxious that the local Methodist mill-owner at Mytholmroyd always locked the chapel when it was his turn to preach. At Sowerby Bridge the Rev. Bull, brother to Parson Bull of Bierley (Oastler's famous colleague in the 10 Hour agitation), refused his support and was confident that the benevolence of the masters "cannot be surpassed". A group of operatives, passing the Methodist chapel built by one of the mill-owners, Mr. Sutcliffe, "looked towards the chapel and wished it might sink into hell, and Mr. Sutcliffe go with it".

I said it was too bad, as Mr. Sutcliffe had built the chapel for their good. "Damn him," said another, "I know him, I have had a

swatch of him, and a corner of that chapel is mine, and it all belongs to his workpeople."¹

Cragg Dale, an isolated off-shoot of the Calder, was a veritable "Deep Dale". A Minister of unidentified affiliations declared:

If there was one place in England that needed legislative interference, it was this place, for they work 15 and 16 hours a day frequently, and sometimes all night:—Oh! it is a murderous system, and the mill-owners are the pest and disgrace of society. Laws human and divine are insufficient to restrain them; they take no notice of Hobhouse's Bill, and they say "Let Government make what laws they think fit, they can drive a coach and six through them in that valley."

He related the story of a boy whom he had recently interred who had been found standing asleep with his arms full of wool and had been beaten awake. This day he had worked seventeen hours; he was carried home by his father, was unable to eat his supper, awoke at 4 a.m. the next morning and asked his brothers if they could see the lights of the mill as he was afraid of being late, and then died. (His younger brother, aged nine, had died previously: the father was "sober and industrious", a Sunday school teacher.) The Anglican curate here gave his unreserved support to the limitation of child labour:

I have seen the poor in this valley oppressed, I have thought it my duty to expose it . . . I am bound, from the responsible nature of my office, to bring it into contrast with the liberal and kindly truth of the Gospel. . . . And where oppression is exercised it generally falls most heavily upon those who are least able to bear it . . . because the widow has no husband, and her children no earthly father . . . we often find them most hardly used. . . .

As a consequence of his sermons—and of personal protests to the masters—the mill-owners had cursed and insulted him and his daughters in the streets. These exposures were followed by a protest meeting in the valley, which was placarded in Oastler's characteristic style:

. . . you are more Tyrannical, more Hypocritical than the slave drivers of the West Indies. . . . Your vaunted *Liberality* . . . I shall prove to be *Tyranny*—your boasted *Piety* . . . neither more nor less

¹ It was believed of many mill-owners that they kept a special fund from the fines raised from their workers, and used it for charitable or chapel-building purposes. A large chapel in Dewsbury is still known among the older generation as "brokken shoit chapel" after the fines taken for broken threads.

than *Blasphemy*. . . . Your system of "Flogging"—of "Fines", of "Innings up Time", of "Truck", of "cleaning machinery during mealtimes"—of "Sunday Workings", of "Low Wages" . . . shall all undergo the Ordeal of "Public Examination". . . .

"The very Saturday night when I was returning from the meeting," Oastler declared:

I saw two mills blazing like fury in the valley. Their inmates, poor little sufferers, had to remain there until 11.30 o'clock, and the owner of one of them I found to be a noted sighing, praying, canting religionist. . . .¹

We shall return to the Methodists, and see why it was their peculiar mission to act as the apologists of child labour.² There can be no doubt that it was the Nonconformist mill-owners whom Parson Bull had chiefly in mind when he attacked the "race" of masters:

. . . a race whose whole wisdom consists in that cunning which enables them to devise the cheapest possible means for getting out of the youngest possible workers the greatest possible amount of labour, in the shortest possible amount of time, for the least possible amount of wages . . . a race of men of whom Agur would have said: *there is a generation, oh how lofty are their eyes! and their eyelids are lifted up. There is a generation whose teeth are as swords, and their jaw teeth are as knives to devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy from among men.*³

On the other hand, while the virtual unanimity of complicity on the part of official Nonconformity exposed it to the biblical attacks of Bull and Oastler, as well as of Short-Time Committee operatives (some of whom had first learned their texts in the mill-owners' own Sunday schools), it should by no means be supposed that the Established Church was working unitedly and without remission on the children's behalf. Indeed, we have it from Shaftesbury himself—who would surely have given credit to the Church if it were due—that with the notable exception of Bull the Anglican clergy as "a body . . . will do nothing".⁴

The claim, then, as to a general "awakening of conscience" is

¹ G. Crabtree, operative, *Brief Description of a Tour through Calder Dale* (1833); *Voice of the West Riding*, 20, 27 July 1833; *Account of a Public Meeting Held at Hebden Bridge*, 24 August 1833.

² It is interesting, however, to note that Cecil Driver, op. cit., p. 110, says that the Primitive Methodists often loaned their chapels to Richard Oastler.

³ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 29 November 1835.

⁴ E. Hodder, *Life of Shaftesbury* (1887 edn.), pp. 175, 378.

misleading. What it does is to belittle the veritable fury of compassion which moved the few score northern professional men who took up the cause of the children; the violence of the opposition to them, which drove them on occasions into near-revolutionary courses; and—as humanitarian historians have tended to do—it underestimates the part played in the agitation over twenty and more strenuous years, by such men as John Doherty and the workers' own Short-Time Committees. More recently, one writer has surveyed the issue with that air of boredom appropriate to the capacious conscience of the Nuclear Age. The modern reader, he says, "well disciplined by familiarity with concentration camps" is left "comparatively unmoved" by the spectacle of child labour.¹ We may be allowed to reaffirm a more traditional view: that the exploitation of little children, on this scale and with this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history.

¹ R. M. Hartwell, "Interpretations of the Industrial Revolution in England" *Journal of Econ. Hist.*, XIX, 2, June 1959.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE CROSS

i. *Moral Machinery*

Puritanism—Dissent—Nonconformity: the decline collapses into a surrender. *Dissent* still carries the sound of resistance to Apollyon and the Whore of Babylon, *Nonconformity* is self-effacing and apologetic: it asks to be left alone. Mark Rutherford, one of the few men who understood the full desolation of the inner history of 19th-century Nonconformity—and who is yet, in himself, evidence of values that somehow survived—noted in his *Autobiography* the form of service customary in his youth:

It generally began with a confession that we were all sinners, but no individual sins were ever confessed, and then ensued a kind of dialogue with God, very much resembling the speeches which in later years I have heard in the House of Commons from the movers and seconders of addresses to the Crown at the opening of Parliament.

The example is taken from the Calvinistic Independents: but it will also serve excellently to describe the stance of Methodism before temporal authority. This surrender was implicit in Methodism's origin—in the Toryism of its founder and in his ambivalent attitude to the Established Church. From the outset the Wesleyans fell ambiguously between Dissent and the Establishment, and did their utmost to make the worst of both worlds, serving as apologists for an authority in whose eyes they were an object of ridicule or condescension, but never of trust. After the French Revolution, successive Annual Conferences were forever professing their submission and their zeal in combating the enemies of established order; drawing attention to their activity "in raising the standard of public morals, and in promoting loyalty in the middle ranks as well as subordination and industry in the lower orders of society."¹

¹ Cited in Halévy, op. cit., III, p. 53. For accounts of Methodism's political stance during these years, see E. R. Taylor, *Methodism and Politics, 1791-1850*; and R. F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working Class Movements of England, 1800-1850* (1937), especially the chapters on "The Methodist Loyalty" and "The Methodist Neutrality". See also *The Town Labourer*, Ch. XIII, "The Defences of the Poor".

But Methodists were seldom admitted by the Establishment to audience—and then only by the back door: never decorated with any of the honours of status: and if they had been mentioned in despatches it would probably have hindered the kind of moral espionage which they were most fitted to undertake.

The Wars saw a remarkable increase in the Methodist following.¹ They witnessed also (Halévy tells us) "an uninterrupted decline of the revolutionary spirit" among all the Nonconformist sects. Methodism is most remarkable during the War years for two things: first, its gains were greatest among the new industrial working class: second, the years after Wesley's death see the consolidation of a new bureaucracy of ministers who regarded it as their duty to manipulate the submissiveness of their followers and to discipline all deviant growths within the Church which could give offence to authority.

In this they were very effective. For centuries the Established Church had preached to the poor the duties of obedience. But it was so distanced from them—and its distance was rarely greater than in this time of absenteeism, and plural livings—that its homilies had ceased to have much effect. The deference of the countryside was rooted in bitter experience of the power of the squire rather than in any inward conviction. And there is little evidence that the evangelical movement within the Church met with much greater success: many of Hannah More's halfpenny tracts were left to litter the servants' quarters of the great houses. But the Methodists—or many of them—were the poor. Many of their tracts were confessions of redeemed sinners from among the poor; many of their local preachers were humble men who found their figures of speech (as one said) "behind my spinning-jenny". And the great expansion after 1790 was in mining and manufacturing districts. Alongside older Salems and Bethels, new-brick Brunswick and Hanover chapels proclaimed the Methodist loyalty. "I hear great things of your amphitheatre in Liverpool," one minister wrote to the Reverend Jabez Bunting in 1811:

A man will need strong lungs to blow his words from one end of it to the other. In Bradford and in Keighley they are building chapels nearly as large as Carver Street Chapel in Sheffield. To what will Methodism come in a few years?²

¹ See below, p. 389.

² T. P. Bunting, *Life of Jabez Bunting*, D.D. (1887), p. 338.

Jabez Bunting, whose active ministry covers the full half-century, was the dominant figure of orthodox Wesleyanism from the time of Luddism to the last years of the Chartist movement. His father, a Manchester tailor, had been a "thorough Radical" who "warmly espoused the cause of the first French revolutionists", but who was not the less a Methodist for that.¹ But in the late 1790s, and after the secession of the Kilhamite New Connexion, a group of younger ministers emerged, of whom Bunting was one, who were above all concerned to remove from Methodism the Jacobin taint. In 1812 Bunting earned distinction by disowning Methodist Luddites; the next year, in Leeds, he counted "several Tory magistrates of the old school, Church and King people, who, probably, never crossed the threshold of a conventicle before, among his constant hearers".² He and his fellow-ministers—one of the more obnoxious of whom was called the Reverend Edmund Grindrod—were above all organisers and administrators, busied with endless Connexional intrigues and a surfeit of disciplinary zeal. Wesley's dislike of the self-governing anarchy of Old Dissent was continued by his successors, with authority vested in the Annual Conference (weighted down with ministers designated by Wesley himself) and its Committee of Privileges (1803). The Primitive Methodists were driven out because it was feared that their camp meetings might result in "tumults" and serve as political precedents (as they did); the "Tent Methodists" and Bible Christians, or Bryanites, were similarly disciplined; female preaching was prohibited; the powers of Conference and of circuit superintendents were strengthened. Espionage into each others' moral failings was encouraged; discipline tightened up within the classes; and, after 1815, as many local preachers were expelled or struck off the "plan" for political as for religious "backslidings". Here we find an entry in the Halifax Local Preacher's Minute Book: "Bro. M. charged with attending a political meeting when he should have been at his class" (December 16th, 1816): there we find a correspondent writing in alarm from Newcastle to Bunting:

. . . a subject of painful and distressing concern that two of our local preachers (from North Shields) have attended the tremendous

¹ Ibid., p. 11. It is interesting to note that Oastler's father, a Leeds clothier, was also a Methodist and a "Tom Painite". In his maturity, Oastler's opinion of Methodism was scarcely more complimentary than that of Cobbett.

² J. Wray, "Methodism in Leeds", Leeds Reference Library.

Radical Reform Meeting . . . I hope no considerable portion of our brethren is found among the Radicals; but a small number of our leaders are among the most determined friends to their spirit and design . . . and some of the really pious, misguided sisterhood have helped to make their colours. On expostulation, I am glad to say, several members have quitted their classes (for they have adopted almost the whole Methodist economy, the terms "Class Leaders", "District Meetings," etc., etc., being perfectly current among them). If men are to be drilled at Missionary and Bible meetings to face a multitude with recollection, and acquire facilities of address, and then begin to employ the mighty moral weapon thus gained to the endangering the very existence of the Government of the country, *we* may certainly begin to tremble. . . .

This was in 1819, the year of Peterloo. The response of the Methodist Committee of Privileges to the events of this year was to issue a circular which "bears clear traces" of Bunting's composition; expressing—

strong and decided disapprobation of certain tumultuous assemblies which have lately been witnessed in several parts of the country; in which large masses of people have been irregularly collected (often under banners bearing the most shocking and impious inscriptions) . . . calculated, both from the infidel principles, the wild and delusive political theories, and the violent and inflammatory declamations . . . to bring all government into contempt, and to introduce universal discontent, insubordination, and anarchy.¹

Wesley at least had been a great-hearted warhorse; he had never spared himself; he was an enthusiast who had stood up at the market-cross to be pelted. Bunting, with his "solid, mathematical way of speaking", is a less admirable character. It was his own advice to "adapt your principles to your exigencies." "In our family intercourse," a friend of his youthful ministry informed his son:

his conversation was uniformly serious and instructive. Like his ministry in the pulpit, every word had its proper place, and every sentence might have been digested previously. . . . Sometimes your dear mother's uncontrollable wit suddenly disturbed our gravity; but he was never seen otherwise than in his own proper character as a minister of the gospel of Christ.

Bunting's uncompromising Sabbatarianism stopped just short at the point of his own convenience: "he did not hesitate, in the necessary prosecution of his ministerial work, to employ

¹ T. P. Bunting, op. cit., pp. 527-8.

beasts; though always with a self-imposed reserve . . .". With children it was another matter. We are often tempted to forgive Methodism some of its sins when we recollect that at least it gave to children and adults rudimentary education in its Sunday schools; and Bamford's happy picture is sometimes recalled, of the Middleton school in the late 1790s, attended by "big collier lads and their sisters", and the children of weavers and labourers from Whittle, Bowlee, Jumbo and the White Moss. But it is exactly *this* picture, of the laxness of the early Methodists, which Bunting was unable to forgive. When, in his ministry at Sheffield in 1808, his eye fell upon children in Sunday school being taught to *write*, his indignation knew no bounds. Here was "an awful abuse of the Sabbath". There could be no question as to its theological impropriety—for children to learn to read the Scriptures was a "spiritual good", whereas writing was a "secular art" from which "temporal advantage" might accrue. Battle commenced in Sheffield (with the former "Jacobin", James Montgomery, defending the children's cause in the *Sheffield Iris*), from which Bunting emerged victorious; it was renewed at Liverpool in the next year (1809) with the same result; and Bunting was in the forefront of a movement which succeeded, very largely, in extirpating this insidious "violation" of the Lord's Day until the 1840s. This was, indeed, one of the ways in which Bunting won his national spurs.¹

The spurs were needed, perhaps, to stick into the children's sides during the six days of the week. In Bunting and his fellows we seem to touch upon a deformity of the sensibility complementary to the deformities of the factory children whose labour they condoned. In all the copious correspondence of his early ministries in the industrial heartlands (Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Halifax and Leeds, 1805-14), among endless petty Connexional disputes, moralistic humbug, and prurient enquiries into the private conduct of young women, neither he nor his colleagues appear to have suffered a single qualm as to the consequences of industrialism.² But the younger leaders of Methodism were not only guilty of complicity in the fact of child labour by default. They weakened the poor from

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 295-7, 312-14, 322-3; Bamford, *Early Days*, pp. 100-1. It is fair to note that the Established Church and other Nonconformist sects also forbade the teaching of writing on Sundays.

² The only humanitarian cause to which Methodists like Bunting gave consistent support was Anti-Slavery agitation; but as the years go by, and the issue is trotted out again and again, one comes to suspect that it was less a vestigial social conscience than a desire to disarm criticism which propped this banner up.

within, by adding to them the active ingredient of submission; and they fostered within the Methodist Church those elements most suited to make up the psychic component of the work-discipline of which the manufacturers stood most in need.

As early as 1787, the first Robert Peel wrote: "I have left most of my works in Lancashire under the management of Methodists, and they serve me excellently well."¹ Weber and Tawney have so thoroughly anatomised the interpenetration of the capitalist mode of production and the Puritan ethic that it would seem that there can be little to add. Methodism may be seen as a simple extension of this ethic in a changing social milieu; and an "economist" argument lies to hand, in the fact that Methodism, in Bunting's day, proved to be exceptionally well adapted, by virtue of its elevation of the values of discipline and of order as well as its moral opacity, both to self-made mill-owners and manufacturers and to foremen, overlookers, and sub-managerial groups. And this argument—that Methodism served as ideological self-justification for the master-manufacturers and for their satellites—contains an important part of the truth. So much John Wesley—in an often-quoted passage—both foresaw and deplored:

. . . religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world. . . . How then is it possible that Methodism, that is, a religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal; consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionately increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.

Many a Methodist mill-owner—and, indeed, Bunting himself—might serve as confirmation of this in the early 19th century.² And yet the argument falters at a critical point. For it is exactly at this time that Methodism obtained its greatest success in serving *simultaneously* as the religion of the industrial bourgeoisie (although here it shared the field with other Nonconformist sects) and of wide sections of the proletariat. Nor can there be any doubt as to the deep-rooted allegiance of many

¹ L. Tyerman, *John Wesley* (1870), III, p. 499. See also J. Sutcliffe, *A Review of Methodism* (York, 1805), p. 37.

² See W. J. Warner, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-80.

working-class communities (equally among miners, weavers, factory workers, seamen, potters and rural labourers) to the Methodist Church. How was it possible for Methodism to perform, with such remarkable vigour, this double service?

This is a problem to which neither Weber nor Tawney addressed themselves. Both were mainly preoccupied with Puritanism in the 16th and 17th centuries, and with the genesis of commercial capitalism; both addressed themselves, in the main, to the psychic and social development of the middle class, the former stressing the Puritan concept of a "calling", the latter the values of freedom, self-discipline, individualism and acquisitiveness. But it is intrinsic to both arguments that puritanism contributed to the psychic energy and social coherence of middle-class groups which felt themselves to be "called" or "elected" and which were engaged (with some success) in acquisitive pursuits. How then should such a religion appeal to the forming proletariat in a period of exceptional hardship, whose multitudes did not dispose them to any sense of group calling, whose experiences at work and in their communities favoured collectivist rather than individualist values, and whose frugality, discipline or acquisitive virtues brought profit to their masters rather than success to themselves?

Both Weber and Tawney, it is true, adduce powerful reasons as to the *utility*, from the point of view of the employers, of the extension of Puritan or pseudo-Puritan values to the working class. Tawney anatomised the "New Medicine for Poverty", with its denunciation of sloth and improvidence in the labourer, and its convenient belief that—if success was a sign of election—poverty was itself evidence of spiritual turpitude.¹ Weber placed more emphasis on the question which, for the working class, is crucial: work-discipline. "Wherever modern capitalism has begun its work of increasing the productivity of human labour by increasing its intensity," wrote Weber, "it has encountered the immensely stubborn resistance of . . . pre-capitalistic labour."

The capitalistic economy of the present day is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him . . . as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action.

¹ R. H. Tawney, *op. cit.*, pp. 227 ff.

But, as industrial capitalism emerged, these rules of action appeared as unnatural and hateful restraints: the peasant, the rural labourer in the unenclosed village, even the urban artisan or apprentice, did not measure the return of labour exclusively in money-earnings, and they rebelled against the notion of week after week of disciplined labour. In the way of life which Weber describes (unsatisfactorily) as "traditionalism", "a man does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose". Even piece-rates and other incentives lose effectiveness at a certain point if there is no inner compulsion; when enough is earned the peasant leaves industry and returns to his village, the artisan goes on a drunken spree. But at the same time, the opposite discipline of low wages is ineffective in work where skill, attentiveness or responsibility is required. What is required—here Fromm amplifies Weber's argument—is an "inner compulsion" which would prove "more effective in harnessing all energies to work than any outer compulsion can ever be":

Against external compulsion there is always a certain amount of rebelliousness which hampers the effectiveness of work or makes people unfit for any differentiated task requiring intelligence, initiative and responsibility. . . . Undoubtedly capitalism could not have been developed had not the greatest part of man's energy been channelled in the direction of work.

The labourer must be turned "into his own slave driver".¹

The arguments fit the England of the Industrial Revolution like a glove. Throughout the 18th century there is a never-ending chorus of complaint from all the Churches and most employers as to the idleness, profligacy, improvidence and thriftlessness of labour. Now it is the taverns, now it is "that slothful spending the Morning in Bed . . . in Winter Time especially", and now it is the custom of "Saint Monday" which is condemned in tract or sermon.² In truth, the deep-rooted folk memory of a "golden age" or of "Merrie England" derives not from the notion that material goods were more plentiful in 1780 than in 1840 but from nostalgia for the pattern of work and leisure which obtained before the outer and inner disciplines of industrialism settled upon the working man. The

¹ Weber, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 54, 60-7, 160-1, 178; E. Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (1960 edn.), p. 80.

² See N. J. Smelser, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-5; Wadsworth and Mann, *op. cit.*, pp. 387 ff.

commonplace doctrine of employers in the 18th century was the simple one that only the lowest possible wages could enforce the poor to work: as Arthur Young declared, in 1771, "every one but an idiot knows that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will never be industrious". Methodism in no way challenged this doctrine; indeed, it reinforced it with the conventional teaching of the blessedness of poverty. What it did was to provide an inner compulsion as well.

The ingredients of this compulsion were not new.¹ Weber has noted the difficulties experienced by employers in the "putting-out" industries—notably weaving—in the 17th-century, as a result of the irregular working habits (drunkenness, embezzlement of yarn and so on) of the workers. It was in the West of England woollen industry—at Kidderminster—that the Presbyterian divine, Richard Baxter, effected by his ministry a notable change in labour relations; and many elements of the Methodist work-discipline may be found fully-formed in his *Christian Directory* of 1673.² Similar difficulties were encountered by mine-owners and northern woollen and cotton manufacturers throughout the 18th century. Colliers generally received a monthly pay; it was complained that "they are naturally turbulent, passionate, and rude in manners and character":

Their gains are large and *uncertain*, and their employment is a species of task work, the profit of which can very rarely be previously ascertained. This circumstance gives them the wasteful habits of a gamester. . . .

Another trait in the character of a collier, is his predilection to change of situation. . . . Annual changes are almost as common with the pitman as the return of the seasons. . . . Whatever favours he may have received, he is disposed to consider them all cancelled by the refusal of a single request.³

The weaver-smallholder was notorious for dropping his work in the event of any farming emergency; most 18th-century

¹ Nor is this work-discipline in any sense limited to Methodism. We are discussing Methodism here as the leading example of developments which belong also to the history of Evangelicism and of most Nonconformist sects during the Industrial Revolution.

² Weber, op. cit., pp. 66-7, 282; Tawney, op. cit., pp. 198 ff. Baxter's writings were favoured reading among the early Methodists, and were much reprinted in the early decades of the 19th century.

³ *Report of the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor*, I (1798), pp. 238 ff.: account of the Duke of Bridgewater's colliers (near Manchester). The Duke's colliers were regarded as "more moral" than most, and "some of the duke's agents are men of a religious cast, and have established Sunday schools. . . ."

workers gladly exchanged their employments for a month of harvesting; many of the adult operatives in the early cotton mills were "of loose and wandering habits, and seldom remained long in the establishment".¹ A few of the managerial problems in early enterprises are suggested by the list of fines at Wedgwood's Etruria works:

. . . Any workman striking or likewise abusing an overlooker to lose his place.

Any workman conveying ale or liquor into the manufactory in working hours, forfeit 2/-.

Any person playing at fives against any of the walls where there are windows, forfeit 2/- . . .²

Whether his workers were employed in a factory or in their own homes, the master-manufacturer of the Industrial Revolution was obsessed with these problems of discipline. The outworkers required (from the employers' point of view) education in "methodical" habits, punctilious attention to instructions, fulfilment of contracts to time, and in the sinfulness of embezzling materials. By the 1820s (we are told by a contemporary) "the great mass of Weavers" were "deeply imbued with the doctrines of Methodism". Some of the self-made men, who were now their employers, were Methodists or Dissenters whose frugality—as Wesley had foreseen—had produced riches. They would tend to favour fellow-religionists, finding in them a "guarantee for good conduct" and "a consciousness of the value of character".³ The "artisan" traditions of the weavers, with their emphasis on the values of independence, had already prepared them for some variant of Puritan faith.⁴ What of the factory operatives?

It is in Dr. Andrew Ure's *Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835)—a book which, with its Satanic advocacy, much influenced Engels and Marx—that we find a complete anticipation of the "economist" case for the function of religion as a work-discipline. The term *Factory*, for Ure:

¹ A. Redford, op. cit., pp. 19-20. As late as the 1830s, Samuel Greg was complaining of "that restless and migratory spirit which is one of the peculiar characteristics of the manufacturing population".

² V. W. Bladen, "The Potteries in the Industrial Revolution", *Econ. Journal* (Supplement), 1926-9, I, p. 130. See also M. McKendrick, "Josiah Wedgwood and Factory Discipline," *Hist. Journal*, IV, 1, 1961, p. 30. It was Wedgwood's aim to "make such *Machines of the Men* as cannot err."

³ R. Guest, *A Compendious History of the Cotton Manufacture* (1823), pp. 38, 43.

⁴ In the 17th century the Puritan sects had a large weaver following, but—except in the West of England—this tradition had little life in the early 18th century.

involves the idea of a vast automaton, composed of various mechanical and intellectual organs, acting in uninterrupted concert for the production of a common object, all of them being subordinated to a self-regulated moving force.

“The main difficulty” of the factory system was not so much technological but in the “distribution of the different members of the apparatus into one co-operative body”, and, above all, “in training human beings to renounce their desultory habits of work, and to identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton”:

To devise and administer a successful code of factory discipline, suited to the necessities of factory diligence, was the Herculean enterprise, the noble achievement of Arkwright. Even at the present day, when the system is perfectly organized, and its labour lightened to the utmost, it is found nearly impossible to convert persons past the age of puberty, whether drawn from rural or from handicraft occupations, into useful factory hands. After struggling for a while to conquer their listless or restive habits, they either renounce the employment spontaneously, or are dismissed by the overlookers on account of inattention.

“It required, in fact, a man of a Napoleonic nerve and ambition, to subdue the refractory tempers of work-people accustomed to irregular paroxysms of diligence. . . . Such was Arkwright.” Moreover, the more skilled a workman, the more intractable to discipline he became, “the more self-willed and . . . the less fit a component of a mechanical system, in which, by occasional irregularities, he may do great damage to the whole”. Thus the manufacturers aimed at withdrawing any process which required “peculiar dexterity and steadiness of hand . . . from the *cunning* workman” and placing it in charge of a “mechanism, so self-regulating, that a child may superintend it”. “The grand object therefore of the modern manufacturer is, through the union of capital and science, to reduce the task of his work-people to the exercise of vigilance and dexterity,—faculties . . . speedily brought to perfection in the young.”¹

For the children, the discipline of the overlooker and of the machinery might suffice; but for those “past the age of puberty”

¹ Ure, op. cit., pp. 13-21. Cf. also p. 23: “It is in fact the constant aim and tendency of every improvement in machinery to supersede human labour altogether, or to diminish its cost, by substituting the industry of women and children for that of men; or that of ordinary labourers, for trained artisans.” As an expression of the mill-owners’ intentions this is interesting, and relevant to the textile industries; but as an expression of a “law” of capitalist development, Marx and Engels perhaps gave Ure’s claims too much credence.

inner compulsions were required. Hence it followed that Ure devoted a section of his book to the “Moral Economy of the Factory System”, and a special chapter to religion. The unredeemed operative was a terrible creature in Ure’s sight; a prey to “artful demagogues”; chronically given to secret cabals and combinations; capable of any atrocity against his masters. The high wages of cotton-spinners enabled them “to pamper themselves into nervous ailments by a diet too rich and exciting for their in-door occupations”:

Manufactures naturally condense a vast population within a narrow circuit; they afford every facility for secret cabal . . . ; they communicate intelligence and energy to the vulgar mind; they supply in their liberal wages the pecuniary sinews of contention. . . .

In such circumstances, Sunday schools presented a “sublime spectacle”. The committee of a Stockport Sunday school, erected in 1805, congratulated itself upon the “decorum” preserved in the town, in 1832, at a time of “political excitement” elsewhere: “it is hardly possible to approach the town . . . without encountering one or more of these quiet fortresses, which a wise benevolence has erected against the encroachments of vice and ignorance”. And Ure drew from this a moral, not only as to general political subordination, but as to behaviour in the factory itself:

The neglect of moral discipline may be readily detected in any establishment by a practised eye, in the disorder of the general system, the irregularities of the individual machines, the waste of time and material. . . .

Mere wage-payment could never secure “zealous services”. The employer who neglected moral considerations and was himself “a stranger to the self-denying graces of the Gospel”—

knows himself to be entitled to nothing but eye-service, and will therefore exercise the most irksome vigilance, but in vain, to prevent his being overreached by his operatives—the whole of whom, by natural instinct as it were, conspire against such a master. Whatever pains he may take, he can never command superior workmanship. . . .

It is, therefore, excessively the interest of every mill-owner to organize his moral machinery on equally sound principles with his mechanical, for otherwise he will never command the steady hands, watchful eyes, and prompt co-operation, essential to excellence of product. . . . There is, in fact, no case to which the Gospel truth,

"Godliness is great gain," is more applicable than to the administration of an extensive factory.¹

The argument is thus complete. The factory system demands a transformation of human nature, the "working paroxysms" of the artisan or outworker must be methodised until the man is adapted to the discipline of the machine.² But how are these disciplinary virtues to be inculcated in those whose Godliness (unless they become overlookers) is unlikely to bring any temporal gain? It can only be by inculcating "the first and great lesson . . . that man must expect his chief happiness, not in the present, but in a future state". Work must be undertaken as a "*pure act of virtue* . . . inspired by the love of a transcendent Being, operating . . . on our will and affections":

Where then shall mankind find this transforming power?—in the cross of Christ. It is the sacrifice which removes the guilt of sin: it is the motive which removes love of sin: it mortifies sin by showing its turpitude to be indelible except by such an awful expiation; it atones for disobedience; it excites to obedience; it purchases strength for obedience; it makes obedience practicable; it makes it acceptable; it makes it in a manner unavoidable, for it constrains to it; it is, finally, not only the motive to obedience, but the pattern of it.³

Ure, then, is the Richard Baxter of Cottonopolis. But we may descend, at this point, from his transcendental heights to consider, more briefly, mundane matters of theology. It is evident that there was, in 1800, casuistry enough in the theology of all the available English churches to reinforce the manufacturer's own sense of moral self-esteem. Whether he held an hierarchic faith, or felt himself to be elected, or saw in his success the evidence of grace or godliness, he felt few promptings to exchange his residence beside the mill at Bradford for a monastic cell on Bardsey Island. But Methodist theology, by virtue of its promiscuous opportunism, was better suited than any other to serve as the religion of a proletariat whose members had not the least reason, in social experience, to feel themselves to be "elected". In his theology, Wesley appears to have dispensed with the best and selected unhesitatingly the worst elements of Puritanism: if in class terms Methodism was hermaphroditic, in doctrinal terms it was a mule. We have already

¹ Ibid., III, Chs. 1 and 3. My italics.

² Cf. D. H. Lawrence in *The Rainbow*: "They believe that they must alter themselves to fit the pits and the place, rather than alter the pits and the place to fit themselves. It is easier."

³ Ure, op. cit., pp. 423-5.

noted Methodism's rupture with the intellectual and democratic traditions of Old Dissent. But Luther's doctrines of submission to authority might have served as the text for any Wesleyan Conference in the years after 1789:

Even if those in authority are evil or without faith, nevertheless the authority and its power is good and from God. . . .

God would prefer to suffer the government to exist, no matter how evil, rather than allow the rabble to riot, no matter how justified they are in doing so. . . .

(Jabez Bunting, however, unlike Luther, could never have admitted the notion that the rabble could ever be "justified".) The general Lutheran bias of Wesleyanism has often been noted.¹ Wesley's espousal of the doctrine of the universality of grace was incompatible with the Calvinist notion of "election". If grace was universal, sin was universal too. Any man who came to a conviction of sin might be visited by grace and know himself to be ransomed by Christ's blood. Thus far it is a doctrine of spiritual egalitarianism: there is at least equality of opportunity in sin and grace for rich and poor. And as a religion of "the heart" rather than of the intellect, the simplest and least educated might hope to attain towards grace. In this sense, Methodism dropped all doctrinal and social barriers and opened its doors wide to the working class. And this reminds us that Lutheranism was also a religion of the poor; and that, as Munzer proclaimed and as Luther learned to his cost, spiritual egalitarianism had a tendency to break its banks and flow into temporal channels, bringing thereby a perpetual tension into Lutheran creeds which Methodism also reproduced.

But Christ's ransom was only provisional. Wesley's doctrine here was not settled. He toyed with the notion of grace being perpetual, once it had visited the penitent; and thus a dejected form of Calvinism (the "elected" being now the "saved") re-entered by the back door. But as the 18th century wore on the doctrine of justification by faith hardened—perhaps because it was so evident that multitudes of those "saved" in the revivalist campaigns slid back to their old ways after years or

¹ Weber, in his brief discussion of Methodism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, exaggerates the Calvinist elements in its theology, and thereby fails to see its special adaptability as a religion of the proletariat. He thus presses too far the sense of a "calling" among the Wesleys, especially when he seeks to apply it to the "calling" of the working man, a doctrine which has less significance in England than those of submission and obedience.

only months. Thus it became doctrine that forgiveness of sin lasted only so long as the penitent went and sinned no more. The brotherhood and sisterhood who were "saved" were in a state of conditional, provisory election. It was always possible to "backslide"; and in view of human frailty this was, in the eyes of God and of Jabez Bunting, more than likely. Moreover, Bunting was at pains to point out God's view that—

Sin . . . is not changed in its nature, so as to be made less "exceedingly sinful" . . . by the pardon of the sinner. The penalty is remitted; and the obligation to suffer that penalty is dissolved; but it is still naturally due, though graciously remitted. Hence appears the propriety and the duty of continuing to confess and lament even pardoned sin. Though released from its penal consequences by an act of divine clemency, we should still remember, that the dust of self-abasement is our proper place before God. . . .¹

But there are further complexities to the doctrine. It would be presumptuous to suppose that a man might save *himself* by an act of his own will. The saving was the prerogative of God, and all that a man could do was to prepare himself, by utter abasement, for redemption. Once convinced of grace, however, and once thoroughly introduced to the Methodist brotherhood, "backsliding" was no light matter to a working man or woman. It might mean expulsion from the only community-group which they knew in the industrial wilderness; and it meant the ever-present fear as to an eternity of lurid punishment to come:

There is a dreadful hell
And everlasting pains,
Where sinners must with devils dwell
In darkness, fire and chains.

How, then, to keep grace? Not by good works, since Wesley had elevated faith above works: "You have nothing to do but save souls." Works were the snares of pride and the best works were mingled with the dross of sin; although—by another opportunist feint—works might be a *sign* of grace. (A vestigial Calvinism here for the mill-owners and shopkeepers.) Since this world is the ante-room to eternity, such temporal things as wealth and poverty matter very little: the rich might show the evidence of grace by serving the Church (notably, by

¹ Jabez Bunting, *Sermon on Justification by Faith* (Leeds, 1813), p. 11. Bunting's imagery reminds one that in January of this same year (1813) some Luddites had suffered the full "penal consequences" on the gallows, while others had had their penalty "graciously remitted" to fourteen years transportation.

building chapels for their own work-people). The poor were fortunate in being less tempted by "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life". They were more likely to remain graced, not because of their "calling", but because they faced fewer temptations to backslide.

Three obvious means of maintaining grace presented themselves. First, through service to the Church itself, as a class leader, local preacher, or in more humble capacities. Second, through the cultivation of one's own soul, in religious exercises, tract-reading, but—above all—in attempts to reproduce the emotional convulsions of conversion, conviction of sin, penitence, and visitation by grace. Third, through a methodical discipline in every aspect of life. Above all, in labour itself (which, being humble and unpleasant, should not be confused with good works), undertaken for no ulterior motives but (as Dr. Ure has it) as "a pure act of virtue" there is an evident sign of grace. Moreover, God's curse over Adam, when expelled from the Garden of Eden, provided irrefutable doctrinal support as to the blessedness of hard labour, poverty, and sorrow "all the days of thy life".

We can now see the extraordinary correspondence between the virtues which Methodism inculcated in the working class and the desiderata of middle-class Utilitarianism.¹ Dr. Ure indicates the point of junction, in his advice to the mill-owner "to organize his moral machinery on equally sound principles with his mechanical". From this aspect, Methodism was the desolate inner landscape of Utilitarianism in an era of transition to the work-discipline of industrial capitalism. As the "working paroxysms" of the hand-worker are methodised and his unworkful impulses are brought under control, so his emotional and spiritual paroxysms increase. The abject confessional tracts are the other side of the dehumanised prose style of Edwin Chadwick and Dr. Kay. The "march of intellect" and the repression of the heart go together.

But it was Wesley's claim that Methodism was, above all things, a "religion of the heart". It was in its "enthusiasm" and emotional transports that it differed most evidently from the older Puritan sects.² We might note some of the approved

¹ Weber and Tawney, of course, direct attention to the parallel development of Puritan and Utilitarian dogmas: cf. Tawney, *op. cit.*, p. 219: "Some of the links in the Utilitarian coat of mail were forged . . . by the Puritan divines of the seventeenth century." It was Methodism, however, which forged the last links of the Utilitarian chains riveted upon the proletariat.

² Excepting, of course, the Baptists—notably in Wales.

stages in religious experience, taken from a characteristic tract which describes the conversion of a sailor, Joshua Marsden, in the 1790s. These tracts normally follow a conventional pattern. First, there are descriptions of a sinful youth: swearing, gaming, drunkenness, idleness, sexual looseness or merely "desire of the flesh".¹ There follows either some dramatic experience which makes the sinner mindful of death (miraculous cure in mortal illness, shipwreck or death of wife or children); or some chance-hap encounter with God's word, where the sinner comes to jeer but remains to learn the way to salvation. Our sailor had all these experiences. A shipwreck left him "trembling with horror upon the verge both of the watery and the fiery gulph . . . the ghosts of his past sins stalked before him in ghastly forms". A severe illness "sent him often weeping and broken-hearted to a throne of grace", "consumed and burned up sensual desires", and "showed the awfulness of dying without an interest in Christ". Invited by a friend to a Methodist class meeting, "his heart was melted into a child-like weeping frame. . . . Tears trickled down his cheeks like rivulets". There follows the long ordeal of intercession for forgiveness and of wrestling with temptations to relapse into the former life of sin. Only grace can unloose "the seven seals with which ignorance, pride, unbelief, enmity, self-will, lust and covetousness bind the sinner's heart". Again and again the penitent in his "novitiate" succumbs to obscurely-indicated "temptations":²

In spite of all, he was sometimes borne away by the violence and impetuosity of temptation, which brought upon him all the anguish of a broken spirit. After being overtaken with sin he would redouble his prayers. . . . Sometimes the fear of dying in an unpardoned state greatly agitated his mind, and prevented his falling asleep for fear of awakening in the eternal world.

When the "desire of the flesh" is to some degree humbled, the "Enemy" places more subtle spiritual temptations in the penitent's path. Chief among these are *any* disposition which leads to "hardness of the heart"—levity, pride, but above all the temptation to "buy salvation" by good works rather than

¹ For an example, taken from this tract, see p. 58 above.

² The language often suggests that the objective component of the "sin" was masturbation. And this might well be deduced from three facts: (1) The introversion nature of penitent self-absorption. (2) The obsessional Methodist teaching as to the sinfulness of the sexual organs. (3) The fact that the children of Methodists were expected to come to a sense of sin at about the age of puberty. See G. R. Taylor, *The Angel-Makers* (1958), p. 326 for the increase in literature on the subject in these years.

waiting with patience to "receive it as the free gift of God, through the infinite merits of the bleeding Reconciler". The doctrine of good works is "this Hebrew, this Popish doctrine of human merit". Thus "hardness of the heart" consists in any character-trait which resists utter submission:

God . . . before he can justify us freely . . . must wither our gourd, blast the flower of proud hope, take away the prop of self-dependence, strip us of the gaudy covering of christless righteousness, stop the boasting of pharasaical self-sufficiency, and bring the guilty, abased, ashamed, blushing, self-despairing sinner, to the foot of the Cross.

At this point of abasement, "all his prospects appeared like a waste howling wilderness". But "the time of deliverance was now at hand". At a love-feast in the Methodist chapel, the penitent knelt in the pew "and, in an agony of soul, began to wrestle with God". Although "the enemy raged and rolled upon him like a flood",

Some of the leaders, with some pious females, came into the gallery, and united in interceding for him at a throne of grace: the more they prayed, the more his distress and burthen increased, till finally he was nearly spent; and sweat ran off him . . . and he lay on the floor of the pew with little power to move. This, however, was the moment of deliverance. . . . He felt what no tongue can ever describe; a something seemed to rest upon him like the presence of God that went through his whole frame; he sprang on his feet, and felt he could lay hold upon Christ by faith.

From this time forward the "burthen of sin fell off". "The new creation was manifested by new moral beauties—love, joy, hope, peace, filial fear, delight in Jesus, tender confidence, desire after closer communion, and fuller conformity. . . . A new kingdom of righteousness was planted in the heart." God's glory became "the end of each action". But salvation was conditional; the conviction of grace co-existed with the knowledge that man "is a poor, blind, fallen, wretched, miserable and (without divine grace) helpless sinner".¹

Our sinner has now been "translated from the power of Satan to the kingdom and image of God's dear Son". And we may see here in its lurid figurative expression the psychic ordeal in which the character-structure of the rebellious pre-industrial

¹ Joshua Marsden, *Sketches of the Early Life of a Sailor* (an autobiography in the third person) (Hull, n.d.), *passim*.

labourer or artisan was violently recast into that of the submissive industrial worker. Here, indeed, is Ure's "transforming power". It is a phenomenon, almost diabolic in its penetration into the very sources of human personality, directed towards the repression of emotional and spiritual energies. But "repression" is a misleading word; these energies were not so much inhibited as displaced from expression in personal and in social life, and confiscated for the service of the Church. The box-like, blackening chapels stood in the industrial districts like great traps for the human psyche. Within the Church itself there was a constant emotional drama of backsliders, confessions, forays against Satan, lost sheep; one suspects that the pious sisterhood, in particular, found in this one of the great "consolations" of religion. For the more intellectual there was the spiritual drama of:

trials, temptations, heart sinkings, doubts; struggles, heaviness, manifestations, victories, coldnesses, wanderings, besetments, deliverances, helps, hopes, answers to prayer, interpositions, reliefs, complaints . . . workings of the heart, actings of faith, leadings through the mazes of dark dispensations . . . fiery trials, and succour in the sinking moment.¹

But what must be stressed is the *intermittent character* of Wesleyan emotionalism. Nothing was more often remarked by contemporaries of the workaday Methodist character, or of Methodist home-life, than its methodical, disciplined and repressed disposition. It is the paradox of a "religion of the heart" that it should be notorious for the inhibition of all spontaneity. Methodism sanctioned "workings of the heart" only upon the occasions of the Church; Methodists wrote hymns but no secular poetry of note; the idea of a passionate Methodist lover in these years is ludicrous. ("Avoid all manner of passions", advised Wesley.) The word is unpleasant: but it is difficult not to see in Methodism in these years a ritualised form of psychic masturbation. Energies and emotions which were dangerous to social order, or which were merely unproductive (in Dr. Ure's sense) were released in the harmless form of sporadic love-feasts, watch-nights, band-meetings or revivalist campaigns. At these love-feasts, after hymns and the ceremonial breaking of cake or water-biscuit, the preacher then spoke, in a raw emotional manner, of his spiritual experiences, temptations and contests with sin:

¹ *Sketches of the Early Life of a Sailor*, pp. 104, 111.

While the preacher is thus engaged, sighs, groans, devout aspirations, and . . . ejaculations of prayer or praise, are issuing from the audience in every direction.

In the tension which succeeded, individual members of the congregation then rose to their feet and made their intimate confessions of sin or temptation, often of a sexual implication. An observer noted the "bashfulness, and evident signs of inward agitation, which some of the younger part of the females have betrayed, just before they have risen to speak".¹

The Methodists made of religion (wrote Southey) "a thing of sensation and passion, craving perpetually for sympathy and stimulants".² These Sabbath orgasms of feeling made more possible the single-minded weekday direction of these energies to the consummation of productive labour. Moreover, since salvation was never assured, and temptations lurked on every side, there was a constant inner goading to "sober and industrious" behaviour—the visible sign of grace—every hour of the day and every day of the year. Not only "the sack" but also the flames of hell might be the consequence of indiscipline at work. God was the most vigilant overlooker of all. Even above the chimney breast "Thou God Seest Me" was hung. The Methodist was taught not only to "bear his Cross" of poverty and humiliation; the crucifixion was (as Ure saw) the very pattern of his obedience: "True followers of our bleeding Lamb, Now on Thy daily cross we die . . .".³ Work was the Cross from which the "transformed" industrial worker hung.

But so drastic a redirection of impulses could not be effected without a central disorganisation of the human personality. We can see why Hazlitt described the Methodists as "a collection of religious invalids."⁴ If Wesley took from Luther his authoritarianism, from Calvinism and from the English Puritan divines of the 17th century Methodism took over the joylessness: a methodical discipline of life "combined with

¹ Joseph Nightingale, *Portraiture of Methodism* (1807), pp. 203 ff.

² R. Southey, *Life of Wesley and Rise and Progress of Methodism* (1890 edn.), 381 ff.

³ J. E. Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (1948), p. 240:

We cast our sins into that fire
Which did thy sacrifice consume,
And every base and vain desire.
To daily crucifixion doom.

⁴ W. Hazlitt, "On the Causes of Methodism", *The Round Table* (1817), *Works*, IV, pp. 57 ff.

the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyments".¹ From both it took over the almost-Manichaeic sense of guilt at man's depravity. And, as gratuitous additions, the Wesleys absorbed and passed on through their hymns and writings the strange phenomenon of early 18th-century necrophily and the perverse imagery which is the least pleasant side of the Moravian tradition. Weber has noted the connection between sexual repression and work-discipline in the teachings of such divines as Baxter:

The sexual asceticism of Puritanism differs only in degree, not in fundamental principle, from that of monasticism; and on account of the Puritan conception of marriage, its practical influence is more far-reaching than that of the latter. For sexual intercourse is permitted, even within marriage, only as the means willed by God for the increase of His glory according to the commandment, "Be fruitful and multiply." Along with a moderate vegetable diet and cold baths, the same prescription is given for all sexual temptations as is used against religious doubts and a sense of moral unworthiness: "Work hard in your calling."²

Methodism is permeated with teaching as to the sinfulness of sexuality, and as to the extreme sinfulness of the sexual organs. These—and especially the male sexual organs (since it became increasingly the convention that women could not feel the "lust of the flesh")—were the visible fleshly citadels of Satan, the source of perpetual temptation and of countless highly unmethodical and (unless for deliberate and Godly procreation) unproductive impulses.³ But the obsessional Methodist concern with sexuality reveals itself in the perverted eroticism of Methodist imagery. We have already noted, in John Nelson's conversion, the identification of Satan with the phallus. God is usually a simple father image, vengeful, authoritarian and prohibitive, to whom Christ must intercede, the sacrificial Lamb "still bleeding and imploring Grace/For every Soul of Man." But the association of feminine—or, more frequently, ambivalent—sexual imagery with Christ is more perplexing and unpleasant.

Here we are faced with layer upon layer of conflicting symbolism. Christ, the personification of "Love" to whom the great bulk of Wesleyan hymns are addressed, is by turns

¹ Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 158-9.

³ Only an appreciation of the degree to which this obsession came to permeate English culture—and in particular working-class culture—can lead to an understanding of why Lawrence was impelled to write *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

maternal, Oedipal, sexual and sado-masochistic. The extraordinary assimilation of wounds and sexual imagery in the Moravian tradition has often been noted. Man as a sinful "worm" must find "Lodging, Bed and Board in the Lamb's Wounds". But the sexual imagery is easily transferred to imagery of the womb. The "dearest little opening of the sacred, precious and thousand times beautiful little side" is also the refuge from sin in which "the Regenerate rests and breathes":

O precious Side-hole's cavity
I want to spend my life in thee. . . .
There in one Side-hole's joy divine,
I'll spend all future Days of mine.
Yes, yes, I will for ever sit
There, where thy Side was split.¹

Sexual and "womb-regressive" imagery appears here to be assimilated. But, after the Wesleys broke with the Moravian brethren, the language of their hymns and the persistent accusation of Antinomian heresy among Moravian communities, had become a public scandal. In the hymns of John and Charles Wesley overt sexual imagery was consciously repressed, and gave way to imagery of the womb and the bowels:

Come, O my guilty brethren, come,
Groaning beneath your load of sin!
His bleeding heart shall make you room,
His open side shall take you in. . . .

This imagery, however, is subordinated to the overpowering sacrificial imagery of blood, as if the underground traditions of Mithraic blood-sacrifice which troubled the early Christian Church suddenly gushed up in the language of 18th-century Methodist hymnody. Here is Christ's "bleeding love", the blood of the sacrificial Lamb in which sinners must bathe, the association of sacrifice with the penitent's guilt. Here is the "fountain" that "gushes from His side,/Open'd that all may enter in":

Still the fountain of Thy blood
Stands for sinners open'd wide;
Now, even now, my Lord and God,
I wash me in Thy side.

¹ See R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford, 1950), pp. 408-17; G. R. Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-7.

And sacrificial, masochistic, and erotic language all find a common nexus in the same blood-symbolism:

We thirst to drink Thy precious blood,
We languish in Thy wounds to rest,
And hunger for immortal food,
And long on all Thy love to feast.

The union with Christ's love, especially in the eucharistic "marriage-feast" (when the Church collectively "offers herself to God" by "offering to God the Body of Christ"),¹ unites the feelings of self-mortification, the yearning for the oblivion of the womb, and tormented sexual desire, "harbour'd in the Saviour's breast":

'Tis there I would always abide,
And never a moment depart,
Conceal'd in the cleft of Thy side,
Eternally held in Thy heart.²

It is difficult to conceive of a more essential disorganisation of human life, a pollution of the sources of spontaneity bound to reflect itself in every aspect of personality. Since joy was associated with sin and guilt, and pain (Christ's wounds) with goodness and love, so every impulse became twisted into the reverse, and it became natural to suppose that man or child only found grace in God's eyes when performing painful, laborious or self-denying tasks. To labour and to sorrow was to find pleasure, and masochism was "Love". It is inconceivable that men could actually *live* like this; but many Methodists did their best. Whitefield, when planning to marry, consoled himself with the thought: "If I know anything of my own heart, I am free from that foolish passion the world calls love." Wesley's itinerant philandering seems to have been a form of pseudo-courtship which never reached consummation and which both mortified himself and humiliated the woman.

¹ J. E. Rattenbury, op. cit., p. 132.

² Ibid., pp. 109-11, 202-4, 224-34; and J. E. Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (1941), p. 184. This subject is due for renewed and more expert attention. Mr. G. R. Taylor's study of *The Angel-Makers* is suggestive, but his attempt to find a "sexual" explanation of historical change in patrist and matrist child-orientations is pressed to the point of absurdity. It should be noted that the "side" was a current euphemism for the female sexual organs as well as for the womb. A suggestion as to the assimilation of erotic and masochistic-sacrificial imagery is this: the "bleeding side" may suggest the menstrual period (Eve's "curse") in which intercourse is forbidden or polluted; thus the notions both of sexual pleasure and of its absolute prohibition become associated with the crucifixion; and, equally, the sinner can only be "taken in" to Christ's side with a sense of aggravated guilt and self-pollution.

When he married, it would appear that he did so as a punishment for himself and, more especially, for his wife. Wesleyanism's traditional prurient obsession with feminine sin and with prostitution is well known. And where but in the devotional diary of a Methodist minister in early Victorian England could one find such a desolate entry as this?

Christmas Day. I married a couple in South Parade, then had a cold plunge at the Baths (Lily Lane). I closed this sad year on my knees . . . with my heart lifted towards God.¹

This strange imagery was perpetuated during the years of the Industrial Revolution, not only in Methodist hymnody but also in the rhetoric of sermons and confessions. Nor did it pass unnoticed. "The Deity is personified and embodied in the grossest of images," Leigh Hunt commented in an essay "On the Indecencies and Profane Rapture of Methodism". "If God must be addressed in the language of earthly affection, why not address him as a parent rather than a lover?"² But by the end of the 18th century, the Methodist tradition was undergoing a desolate change. The negation or sublimation of love was tending towards the cult of its opposite: death. Charles Wesley himself had written more than one hymn which presages this change:

Ah, lovely Appearance of Death!
No Sight upon Earth is so fair.
Not all the gay Pageants that breathe
Can with a dead Body compare.

The Methodist tradition here is ambivalent. On the one hand, Methodist preachers perfected techniques to arouse paroxysms of fear of death and of the unlimited pains of Hell. Children, from the age that they could speak, were terrified with images of everlasting punishment for the slightest misbehaviour. Their nights were made lurid by Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and similar reading.³ But at the same time, those who could read were

¹ E. V. Chapman, *John Wesley & Co. (Halifax)* (Halifax, 1952), p. 70.

² The Editor of the Examiner [Leigh Hunt], *An Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism* (1809), esp. pp. 54-64, 89-97. The language also laid the Methodists open to charges that love-feasts, watch-nights, and revivalist fervour became occasions for promiscuous sexual intercourse. Among sober critics, Nightingale discounted these accusations, Leigh Hunt supported them, Southey reserved judgement. See such *canaille* as A Professor, *Confessions of a Methodist* (1810).

³ Cf. W. E. H. Lecky, *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (1891 edn.), II, p. 585: "The ghastly images [the Methodist preachers] continually evoked poisoned their imaginations, haunted them in every hour of weakness or depression, discoloured all their judgements of the world, and added a tenfold horror to the darkness of the grave."

deluged, throughout the early 19th century, with the tracts which celebrated "Holy Dying". No Methodist or evangelical magazine, for the mature or for children, was complete without its death-bed scene in which (as Leigh Hunt also noted) death was often anticipated in the language of bride or bridegroom impatient for the wedding-night. Death was the only goal which might be desired without guilt, the reward of peace after a lifetime of suffering and labour.

So much of the history of Methodism has, in recent years, been written by apologists or by fair-minded secularists trying to make allowances for a movement which they cannot understand, that one notes with a sense of shock Lecky's judgement at the end of the 19th century:

A more appalling system of religious terrorism, one more fitted to unhinge a tottering intellect and to darken and embitter a sensitive nature, has seldom existed.¹

Over the Industrial Revolution there brooded the figure of the Reverend Jabez Branderham (almost certainly modelled upon Jabez Bunting) who appears in Lockwood's grim nightmare at the opening of *Wuthering Heights*: "good God! what a sermon; divided into *four hundred and ninety* parts . . . and each discussing a separate sin!" It is against this all-enveloping "Thou Shalt Not!", which permeated *all* religious persuasions in varying degree in these years, that we can appreciate at its full height the stature of William Blake. It was in 1818 that he emerged from his densely-allegorical prophetic books into a last phase of gnomic clarity in *The Everlasting Gospel*. Here he reasserted the values, the almost-Antinomian affirmation of the joy of sexuality, and the affirmation of innocence, which were present in his earlier songs. Almost every line may be seen as a declaration of "mental war" against Methodism and Evangelicism.² Their "Vision of Christ" was his vision's "greatest Enemy". Above all, Blake drew his bow at the teaching of humility and submission. It was this nay-saying humility which "does the Sun & Moon blot out", "Distorts the Heavens from Pole to Pole",

Rooting over with thorns & stems
The buried Soul & all its Gems.

¹ Lecky, op. cit. III, pp. 77-8.

² Cf. Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, p. 437: "Remember that we are all fallen creatures, born in sin, and naturally depraved. Christianity recognises no *innocence* or *goodness* of heart."

ii. *The Chiliasm of Despair*

The utility of Methodism as a work-discipline is evident. What is less easy to understand is why so many working people were willing to submit to this form of psychic exploitation. How was it that Methodism could perform with such success this dual role as the religion of both the exploiters and the exploited?

During the years 1790-1830¹ three reasons may be adduced: direct indoctrination, the Methodist community-sense, and the psychic consequences of the counter-revolution.

The first reason—indoctrination—cannot be overstated. The evangelical Sunday schools were ever-active, although it is difficult to know how far their activities may be rightly designated as "educational". The Wesleyans had inherited from their founder a peculiarly strong conviction as to the aboriginal sinfulness of the child; and this expressed—in Wesley's case—with a force which might have made some Jesuits blench:

Break their wills betimes. Begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pains it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and to cry softly; from that age make him do as he is bid, if you whip him ten times running to effect it. . . . Break his will now, and his soul shall live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity.²

At Wesley's Kingswood School only severely workful "recreations" were allowed—chopping wood, digging and the like—since games and play were "unworthy of a Christian child". ("I will kill or cure," said Wesley, who rarely said things he did not mean: "I *will* have one or the other—a Christian school,

¹ These years cover the period of the rise and dominance of Jabez Bunting and his circle. After 1830 liberalising tendencies can be seen at work within the Methodist Connexion; and although Bunting fought a determined rearguard action, by the Forties Methodism entered a new and somewhat softened stage. On the one hand, some second or third generation mill-owners and employers left the Methodists for the respectability of the Established Church. On the other hand, Methodism appears as the authentic outlook of some in the small shopkeeper and clerical and sub-managerial groups, in which a muted radicalism is joined to the ideology of "self-help". See E. R. Taylor, op. cit., Chs. V, VI, and W. J. Warner, op. cit. pp. 122-35.

² Southey, op. cit., p. 561. We can see, for example from Bamford's memoirs of the 1790s, and from Thomas Cooper's *Life* (when as a Methodist schoolmaster in the 1820s he regarded it as a sign of grace that he should *not* strike his pupils) that Wesley's teachings were humanised by many of his late 18th-century and early 19th-century followers. But see the orthodox utilitarian advocacy of Jabez Bunting, in *Sermon on a great work described* (1805).

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

i. *The Radical Culture*

WHEN CONTRASTED WITH the Radical years which preceded and the Chartist years which succeeded it, the decade of the 1820s seems strangely quiet—a mildly prosperous plateau of social peace. But many years later a London costermonger warned Mayhew:

People fancy that when all's quiet that all's stagnating. Propagandism is going on for all that. It's when all's quiet that the seed's a-growing. Republicans and Socialists are pressing their doctrines.¹

These quiet years were the years of Richard Carlile's contest for the liberty of the press; of growing trade union strength and the repeal of the Combination Acts; of the growth of free thought, co-operative experiment, and Owenite theory. They are years in which individuals and groups sought to render into theory the twin experiences which we have described—the experience of the Industrial Revolution, and the experience of popular Radicalism insurgent and in defeat. And at the end of the decade, when there came the climactic contest between Old Corruption and Reform, it is possible to speak in a new way of the working people's consciousness of their interests and of their predicament *as a class*.

There is a sense in which we may describe popular Radicalism in these years as an intellectual culture. The articulate consciousness of the self-taught was above all a *political* consciousness. For the first half of the 19th century, when the formal education of a great part of the people entailed little more than instruction in the Three R's, was by no means a period of intellectual atrophy. The towns, and even the villages, hummed with the energy of the autodidact. Given the elementary techniques of literacy, labourers, artisans, shopkeepers and clerks and schoolmasters, proceeded to instruct themselves,

¹ Mayhew, *op. cit.*, I, p. 22.

severally or in groups. And the books or instructors were very often those sanctioned by reforming opinion. A shoemaker, who had been taught his letters in the Old Testament, would labour through the *Age of Reason*; a schoolmaster, whose education had taken him little further than worthy religious homilies, would attempt Voltaire, Gibbon, Ricardo; here and there local Radical leaders, weavers, booksellers, tailors, would amass shelves of Radical periodicals and learn how to use parliamentary Blue Books; illiterate labourers would, nevertheless, go each week to a pub where Cobbett's editorial letter was read aloud and discussed.

Thus working men formed a picture of the organisation of society, out of their own experience and with the help of their hard-won and erratic education, which was above all a political picture. They learned to see their own lives as part of a general history of conflict between the loosely defined "industrious classes" on the one hand, and the unreformed House of Commons on the other. From 1830 onwards a more clearly-defined class consciousness, in the customary Marxist sense, was maturing, in which working people were aware of continuing both old and new battles on their own.

It is difficult to generalise as to the diffusion of literacy in the early years of the century. The "industrious classes" touched, at one pole, the million or more who were illiterate, or whose literacy amounted to little more than the ability to spell out a few words or write their names. At the other pole there were men of considerable intellectual attainment. Illiteracy (we should remember) by no means excluded men from political discourse. In Mayhew's England the ballad-singers and "patterers" still had a thriving occupation, with their pavement farces and street-corner parodies, following the popular mood and giving a Radical or anti-Papal twist to their satirical monologues or Chaunts, according to the state of the market.¹ The illiterate worker might tramp miles to hear a Radical orator, just as the same man (or another) might tramp to taste a sermon. In times of political ferment the illiterate would get their workmates to read aloud from the periodicals; while at Houses of Call the news was read, and at political meetings a prodigious time was spent in reading addresses and passing long strings of resolutions. The earnest Radical might even attach a talismanic virtue to the possession of favoured works

¹ See esp. Mayhew, *op. cit.*, I, p. 252 ff.

which he was unable, by his own efforts, to read. A Cheltenham shoemaker who called punctually each Sunday on W. E. Adams to have "Feargus's letter" read to him, nevertheless was the proud owner of several of Cobbett's books, carefully preserved in wash leather cases.¹

Recent studies have thrown much light on the predicament of the working-class reader in these years.² To simplify a difficult discussion, we may say that something like two out of every three working men were able to read after some fashion in the early part of the century, although rather fewer could write. As the effect of the Sunday schools and day schools increasingly became felt, as well as the drive for self-improvement among working people themselves, so the number of the illiterate fell, although in the worst child labour areas the fall was delayed. But the ability to read was only the elementary technique. The ability to handle abstract and consecutive argument was by no means inborn; it had to be discovered against almost overwhelming difficulties—the lack of leisure, the cost of candles (or of spectacles), as well as educational deprivation. Ideas and terms were sometimes employed in the early Radical movement which, it is evident, had for some ardent followers a fetishistic rather than rational value. Some of the Pentridge rebels thought that a "Provisional Government" would ensure a more plentiful supply of "provisions"; while, in one account of the pitmen of the north-east in 1819, "Universal Suffrage is understood by many of them to mean universal suffering . . . 'if one member suffers, all must suffer.'"³

Such evidence as survives as to the literary accomplishment of working men in the first two decades of the century serves only to illustrate the folly of generalisation. In the Luddite times (when few but working men would have supported their actions) anonymous messages vary from self-conscious apostrophes to "Liberty with her Smiling Attributes" to scarcely decipherable chalking on walls. We may take examples of both kinds. In 1812 the Salford Coroner, who had returned a verdict of "Justifiable Homicide" upon the body of a man shot while attacking Burton's mill was warned:

¹ W. E. Adams, *Memoirs of a Social Atom* (1903), I, p. 164.

² See especially R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790-1848* (1955), the same author's article, "Working-Class Readers in Early Victorian England", *English Hist. Rev.*, LXV (1950); R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957), esp. Chs. IV, VII, XI; and J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living* (1961), Part One.

³ *Political Observer*, 19 December 1819.

. . . know thou cursed insinuator, if Burton's infamous action was "justifiable", the Laws of Tyrants are Reasons Dictates.—Beware, Beware! A months' bathing in the Stygian Lake would not wash this sanguinary deed from our minds, it but augments the heritable cause, that stirs us up in indignation.¹

The letter concludes, "Ludd finis est"—a reminder that Manchester boasted a grammar school (which Bamford himself for a short time attended) as well as private schools where the sons of artisans might obtain Latin enough for this. The other paper was found in Chesterfield Market. It is much to the same purpose but (despite the educational disadvantages of the writer) it somehow carries a greater conviction:

I Ham going to inform you that there is Six Thousand men coming to you in Apral and then We Will go and Blow Parlement house up and Blow up all afour hus/labring Peple Cant Stand it No longer/dam all Such Roges as England governes but Never mind Ned lud when general nody and is harmey Comes We Will soon bring about the greate Revelation then all these greate mens heads gose of.

Others of the promised benefits of "general nody" were: "We Will Nock doon the Prisions and the Judge we Will murde whan he is aslepe."²

The difference (the critics will tell us) is not only a matter of style: it is also one of sensibility. The first we might suppose to be written by a bespectacled, greying, artisan—a cobbler (or hatter or instrument-maker) with Voltaire, Volney and Paine on his shelf, and a taste for the great tragedians. Among the State prisoners of 1817 there were other men of this order from Lancashire: the seventy-year-old William Ogden, a letter-press printer, who wrote to his wife from prison: "though I am in Irons, I will face my enemies like the Great Caractacus when in the same situation"; Joseph Mitchell, another printing worker, whose daughters were called Mirtilla, Carolina and Cordelia, and who—when another daughter was born while he was in prison—wrote in haste to his wife proposing that the baby be called Portia: or Samuel Bamford himself, whose instructions to his wife were more specific: "a Reformers Wife ought to be an heroine".³ The second letter (we can be almost sure) is the work of a collier or a village stockinger. It is of much the same order as the more playful letter left by a

¹ Another letter ("Eliza Ludd" to Rev. W. R. Hay, 1 May 1812) commences: "Sir, Doubtless you are well acquainted with the Political History of America;" both in H.O. 40.1.

² H.O. 42.121.

³ H.O. 42.163; *Blanketteer*, 20 November 1819.

pitman in the north-east coalfield in the house of a colliery viewer in 1831, into which he and some mates had broken during a strike riot:

I was at yor hoose last neet, and meyd mysel very comfortable. Ye hey nee family, and yor just won man on the colliery, I see ye hev a greet lot of rooms, and big cellars, and plenty wine and beer in them, which I got ma share on. Noo I naw some at wor colliery that has three or fower lads and lasses, and they live in won room not half as gude as yor cellar. I don't pretend to naw very much, but I naw there shudn't be that much difference. The only place we can gan to o the week ends is the yel hoose and hev a pint. I dinna pretend to be a profit, but I naw this, and lots o ma marrows na's te, that wer not tret as we owt to be, and a great filosofher says, to get noledge is to naw wer ignerent. But weve just begun to find that oot, and ye maisters and owners may luk oot, for yor not gan to get se much o yor own way, wer gan to hev some o wors now. . . .¹

"If the Bible Societies, and the Sunday School societies have been attended by no other good," Sherwin noted, "they have at least produced one beneficial effect;—they have been the means of teaching many thousands of children to read."² The letters of Brandreth and his wife, of Cato Street conspirators, and of other State prisoners, give us some insight into that great area between the attainments of the skilled artisan and those of the barely literate.³ Somewhere in the middle we may place Mrs. Johnston, addressing her husband ("My Dear Johnston"), who was a journeyman tailor, in prison:

. . . believe me my Dear if thare is not a day nor a hour in the day but what my mind is less or more engage about you. I can appeal to the almighty that it is true and when I retire to rest I pray God to forgive all my enimies and change thare heart. . . .

Beside this we may set the letter of the Sheffield joiner, Wolstenholme, to his wife:

Our Minaster hath lent me four vollams of the Missionary Register witch give me grat satisfaction to se ou the Lord is carin on is work of grais in distant contres.

The writing of this letter was attended with difficulties, since "Have broke my spettacles".⁴ Such letters were written in

¹ R. Fynes, *The Miners of Northumberland and Durham* (1923 edn.), p. 21.

² Sherwin's *Political Register*, 17 May 1817. ³ See p. 666 and p. 704 above.

⁴ H.O. 42.172. These correspondents, who were impatiently awaiting release from detention, knew that their mail was read by the prison governor, and were therefore especially prone to insert references to forgiveness, grace, and improving reading.

unaccustomed leisure. We can almost see Wolstenholme laboriously spelling out his words, and stopping to consult a more "well-lettered" prisoner when he came to the hurdle of "satisfaction". Mrs. Johnston may have consulted (but probably did not) one of the "professional" letter-writers to be found in most towns and villages, who wrote the appropriate form of letter at *1d.* a time. For, even among the literate, letter-writing was an unusual pursuit. The cost of postage alone prohibited it except at infrequent intervals. For a letter to pass between the north and London might cost *1s. 10d.*, and we know that both Mrs. Johnston and Mrs. Wolstenholme were suffering privations in the absence of their husbands—Mrs. Johnston's shoes were full of water and she had been able to buy no more since her husband was taken up.

All the Cato Street prisoners, it seems, could write after some fashion. Brunt, the shoemaker, salted some sardonic verses with French, while James Wilson wrote:

the Cause wick nerved a Brutus arm
to strike a Tirant with alarm
the cause for wick brave Hamden died
for wick the Galant Tell defied
a Tirants insolence and pride.

Richard Tidd, another shoemaker, on the other hand, could only muster: "Sir I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting".¹ We cannot, of course, take such men as a "sample", since their involvement in political activity indicates that they belonged to the more conscious minority who followed the Radical press. But they may serve to warn us against *under-*stating the diffusion of effective literacy.² The artisans are a special case—the intellectual *élite* of the class. But there were, scattered throughout all parts of England, an abundance of educational institutions for working people, even if "institution" is too formal a word for the dame school, the penny-a-week evening school run by a factory cripple or injured pitman, or the Sunday school itself. In the Pennine valleys, where the weavers' children were too poor to pay for slates or paper, they were taught their letters by drawing them with their fingers in a sand-table. If thousands lost these elementary attainments when they reached adult life, on the other hand the

¹ See J. Stanhope, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-7.

² Some of the earliest trade union correspondence which survives—that of the framework-knitters in the Nottingham City Archives—shows a widespread diffusion of literary attainment. See above, pp. 535-40.

work of the Nonconformist Churches, of friendly societies and trade unions, and the needs of industry itself, all demanded that such learning be consolidated and advanced. "I have found," Alexander Galloway, the master-engineer, reported in 1824,

from the mode of managing my business, by drawings and written descriptions, a man is not of much use to me unless he can read and write; if a man applies for work, and says he cannot read and write, he is asked no more questions. . . .¹

In most artisan trades the journeymen and petty masters found some reading and work with figures an occupational necessity.

Not only the ballad-singer but also the "number man" or "calendar man" went round the working-class districts, hawking chap-books,² almanacs, dying speeches and (between 1816 and 1820, and at intervals thereafter) Radical periodicals. (One such "calendar man", who travelled for Cowdrey and Black, the "seditious [i.e. Whig] printers in Manchester", was taken up by the magistrates in 1812 because it was found that on his catalogues was written: "No blind king—Ned Ludd for ever.")³ One of the most impressive features of post-war Radicalism was its sustained effort to extend these attainments and to raise the level of political awareness. At Barnsley as early as January 1816 a penny-a-month club of weavers was formed, for the purpose of buying Radical newspapers and periodicals. The Hampden Clubs and Political Unions took great pains to build up "Reading Societies" and in the larger centres they opened permanent newsrooms or reading-rooms, such as that at Hanley in the Potteries. This room was open from 8 a.m. till 10 p.m. There were penalties for swearing, for the use of indecent language and for drunkenness. Each evening the London papers were to be "publicly read". At the rooms of the Stockport Union in 1818, according to Joseph Mitchell, there was a meeting of class leaders on Monday nights; on Tuesdays, "moral and political readings"; on Wednesdays, "a conversation or debate"; on Thursdays, "Grammar, Arithmetic, &c" was taught; Saturday was a social evening; while Sunday was school day for adults and children alike. In Blackburn the members of the Female Reform Society pledged themselves "to use our utmost endeavour to instil into the minds

¹ *First Report . . . on Artizans and Machinery* (1824), p. 25.

² Catnach's "Trial of Thurtell", 500,000 (1823): "Confession and Execution of Corder", 1,166,000 (1828).

³ H.O. 40.1.

of our children a deep and rooted hatred of our corrupt and tyrannical rulers." One means was the use of "The Bad Alphabet for the use of the Children of Female Reformers": B was for Bible, Bishop, and Bigotry; K for King, King's evil, Knave and Kidnapper; W for Whig, Weakness, Wavering, and Wicked.

Despite the repression after 1819, the tradition of providing such newsrooms (sometimes attached to the shop of a Radical bookseller) continued through the 1820s. In London after the war there was a boom in coffee-houses, many of which served this double function. By 1833, at John Doherty's famous "Coffee and Newsroom" attached to his Manchester bookshop, no fewer than ninety-six newspapers were taken every week, including the illegal "unstamped". In the smaller towns and villages the reading-groups were less formal but no less important. Sometimes they met at inns, "hush-shops", or private houses; sometimes the periodical was read and discussed in the workshop. The high cost of periodicals during the time of the heaviest "taxes on knowledge" led to thousands of *ad hoc* arrangements by which small groups clubbed together to buy their chosen paper. During the Reform Bill agitation Thomas Dunning, a Nantwich shoemaker, joined with his shopmates and "our Unitarian minister . . . in subscribing to the *Weekly Dispatch*, price 8½*d.*, the stamp duty being 4*d.* It was too expensive for one ill-paid crispin. . ."¹

The circulation of the Radical press fluctuated violently. Cobbett's 2*d. Register* at its meridian, between October 1816 and February 1817, was running at something between 40,000 and 60,000 each week, a figure many times in excess of any competitor of any sort.² The *Black Dwarf* ran at about 12,000 in 1819, although this figure was probably exceeded after Peterloo. Thereafter the stamp tax (and the recession of the movement) severely curtailed circulation, although Carlile's periodicals ran in the thousands through much of the Twenties. With the Reform Bill agitation, the Radical press broke through to a mass circulation once more: Doherty's *Voice of the People*,

¹ For Radical reading-rooms, see A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press* (1949), pp. 25-8, 395-6; Wearmouth, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-5, 88-9, 97-8, 111-12. For Dunning, "Reminiscences" (ed., W. H. Chaloner), *Trans. Lancs. & Cheshire Antiq. Soc.*, LIX, 1947, p. 97. For Stockport, see *Blanketteer*, 27 November 1819, and D. Read, *op. cit.*, p. 48 f. For Blackburn, W. W. Kinsey, "Some Aspects of Lancashire Radicalism," (M. A. Thesis, Manchester 1927), pp. 66-7.

² In 1822 the circulation of the leading daily, *The Times*, was 5,730; the *Observer* (weekly), 6,860.

30,000, Carlile's *Gauntlet*, 22,000, Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*, 16,000, while a dozen smaller periodicals, like O'Brien's *Destructive*, ran to some thousands. The slump in the sale of costly weekly periodicals (at anything from 7*d.* to 1*s.*) during the stamp tax decade was to great degree made up by the growth in the sales of cheap books and individual pamphlets, ranging from *The Political House that Jack Built* (100,000) to Cobbett's *Cottage Economy* (50,000, 1822-8), *History of the Protestant 'Reformation'*, and *Sermons* (211,000, 1821-8). In the same period, in most of the great centres there were one or more (and in London a dozen) dailies or weeklies which, while not being avowedly "Radical", nevertheless catered for this large Radical public. And the growth in this very large *petit-bourgeois* and working-class reading public was recognised by those influential agencies—notably the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge—which made prodigious and lavishly subsidised efforts to divert the readers to more wholesome and improving matter.¹

This was the culture—with its eager disputations around the booksellers' stalls, in the taverns, workshops, and coffee-houses—which Shelley saluted in his "Song to the Men of England" and within which the genius of Dickens matured. But it is a mistake to see it as a single, undifferentiated "reading public". We may say that there were several different "publics" impinging upon and overlapping each other, but nevertheless organised according to different principles. Among the more important were the commercial public, pure and simple, which might be exploited at times of Radical excitement (the trials of Brandreth or of Thistlewood were as marketable as other "dying confessions"), but which was followed according to the simple criteria of profitability; the various more-or-less organised publics, around the Churches or the Mechanic's Institutes; the passive public which the improving societies sought to get at and redeem; and the active, Radical public, which organised itself in the face of the Six Acts and the taxes on knowledge.

The struggle to build and hold this last public has been

¹ I have accepted the figures given by R. D. Altick, *op. cit.*, pp. 381-93, although I doubt the claims for the *Voice of the People* and *Gauntlet*. For comparative figures of the orthodox press, see Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961), pp. 184-92. For the attempts to replace the radical press with safe and improving matter, see R. K. Webb, *op. cit.*, Chs. II, III, IV and J. F. C. Harrison, *op. cit.*, Chs. I and II.

admirably told in W. D. Wickwar's *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press*.¹ There is perhaps no country in the world in which the contest for the rights of the press was so sharp, so emphatically victorious, and so peculiarly identified with the cause of the artisans and labourers. If Peterloo established (by a paradox of feeling) the right of public demonstration, the rights of a "free press" were won in a campaign extending over fifteen or more years which has no comparison for its pig-headed, bloody-minded, and indomitable audacity. Carlile (a tinsmith who had nevertheless received a year or two of grammar school education at Ashburton in Devon) rightly saw that the repression of 1819 made the rights of the press the fulcrum of the Radical movement. But, unlike Cobbett and Wooler, who modified their tone to meet the Six Acts in the hope of living to fight another day (and who lost circulation accordingly), Carlile hoisted the black ensign of unqualified defiance and, like a pirate cock-boat, sailed straight into the middle of the combined fleets of the State and Church. As, in the aftermath of Peterloo, he came up for trial (for publishing the Works of Paine), the entire Radical press saluted his courage, but gave him up for lost. When he finally emerged, after years of imprisonment, the combined fleets were scattered beyond the horizon in disarray. He had exhausted the ammunition of the Government, and turned its *ex officio* informations and special juries into laughing-stocks. He had plainly sunk the private prosecuting societies, the Constitutional Association (or "Bridge-Street Gang") and the Vice Society, which were supported by the patronage and the subscriptions of the nobility, bishops and Wilberforce.

Carlile did not, of course, achieve this triumph on his own. The first round of the battle was fought in 1817, when there were twenty-six prosecutions for seditious and blasphemous libel and sixteen *ex officio* informations filed by the law officers of the Crown.² The laurels of victory, in this year, went to Wooler and Hone, and to the London juries which refused to

¹ His account, covering the period 1817-1832 is mainly concerned with the first phase of the battle—the right of publication—particularly associated with Richard Carlile. The second phase, the struggle of the "Great Unstamped" (1830-5), associated particularly with the names of Carpenter, Hetherington, Watson, Cleave and Hobson, has not yet found its historian, although see C. D. Collett, *History of the Taxes on Knowledge* (1933 edn.), Ch. II, and A. G. Barker, *Henry Hetherington* (n.d.).

² Wickwar, *op. cit.*, p. 315. See also *ibid.*, pp. 38-9 for the peculiarly unfair form of persecution, the *ex officio* information, which virtually permitted imprisonment without trial.

convict. Wooler conducted his own defence; he was a capable speaker, with some experience of the courts, and defended himself with ability in the grandiloquent libertarian manner. The result of his two trials (5 June 1817) was one verdict of "Not Guilty" and one muddled verdict of "Guilty" (from which three jurymen demurred) which was later upset in the Court of King's Bench.¹ The three trials of William Hone in December 1817 are some of the most hilarious legal proceedings on record. Hone, a poor bookseller and former member of the L.C.S., was indicted for publishing blasphemous libels, in the form of parodies upon the Catechism, Litany, and Creed. Hone, in fact, was only a particularly witty exponent of a form of political squib long established among the newsvendors and patterers, and practised in more sophisticated form by men of all parties, from Wilkes to the writers in the *Anti-Jacobin*. Hone, indeed, had not thought his parodies worth risking liberty for. When the repression of February 1817 commenced, he had sought to withdraw them; and it was Carlile, by republishing them, who had forced the Government's hand. Here is a sample:

Our Lord who art in the Treasury, whatsoever be thy name, thy power be prolonged, thy will be done throughout the empire, as it is in each session. Give us our usual sops, and forgive us our occasional absences on divisions; as we promise not to forgive those that divide against thee. Turn us not out of our places; but keep us in the House of Commons, the land of Pensions and Plenty; and deliver us from the People. Amen.

Hone was held in prison, in poor health, from May until December, because he was unable to find £1,000 bail. He had aroused the particular and personal fury of members of the Cabinet to whom he had attached names that were never forgotten: "Old Bags" (Lord Chancellor Eldon), "Derry Down Triangle" (Castlereagh), and "the Doctor" (Sidmouth). Not much was expected when it was learned that he intended to conduct his own defence. But Hone had been improving the time in prison by collecting examples, from the past and present, of other parodists; and in his first trial before Justice Abbott he secured an acquittal. In the next two days the old, ill and testy Lord Chief Justice Ellenborough himself presided over the trials. Page after page of the record is filled with Ellenborough's interruptions, Hone's unruffled reproofs to the Chief Justice on his conduct, the reading of

¹ *The Two Trials of T. J. Wooler* (1817).

ludicrous parodies culled from various sources, and threats by the Sheriff to arrest "the first man I see laugh". Despite Ellenborough's unqualified charge (" . . . in obedience to his conscience and his God, he pronounced this to be a most impious and profane libel") the jury returned two further verdicts of "Not Guilty", with the consequence (it is said) that Ellenborough retired to his sick-room never to return. From that time forward—even in 1819 and 1820—all parodies and squibs were immune from prosecution.¹

Persecution cannot easily stand up in the face of ridicule. Indeed, there are two things that strike one about the press battles of these years. The first is, not the solemnity but the delight with which Hone, Cruikshank, Carlile, Davison, Benbow and others baited authority. (This tradition was continued by Hetherington, who for weeks passed under the noses of the constables, in his business as editor of the unstamped *Poor Man's Guardian*, in the highly unlikely disguise of a Quaker.) Imprisonment as a Radical publisher brought, not odium, but honour. Once the publishers had decided that they were ready to go to prison, they outdid each other with new expedients to exhibit their opponents in the most ludicrous light. Radical England was delighted (and no one more than Hazlitt) at the resurrection by Sherwin of *Wat Tyler*—the republican indiscretion of Southey's youth. Southey, now Poet Laureate, was foremost in the clamour to curb the seditious licence of the press, and sought an injunction against Sherwin for infringement of copyright. Lord Eldon refused the injunction: the Court could not take notice of property in the "unhallowed profits of libellous publications". "Is it not a little strange," Hazlitt enquired, "that while this gentleman is getting an injunction against himself as the author of *Wat Tyler*, he is recommending gagging bills against us, and thus making up by force for his deficiency in argument?"² On the other hand, Carlile (who had taken over Sherwin's business) was more than pleased that the injunction was refused—for the sales of

¹ *Second Trial of William Hone* (1818), pp. 17, 45; *Proceedings at the Public Meeting to form a subscription for Hone* (1818); F. W. Hackwood, *William Hone* (1912), Chs. IX-XI; Wickwar, op. cit., pp. 58-9. An old patterer told Mayhew (I, p. 252) that despite the acquittals, it remained difficult to "work" Hone's parodies in the streets: "there was plenty of officers and constables ready to pull the fellows up, and . . . a beak that wanted to please the high dons, would find some way of stopping them. . . ."

² Hazlitt, *Works*, VII, pp. 176 ff. "Instead of applying for an injunction against *Wat Tyler*," Hazlitt opined, "Mr. Southey would do well to apply for an injunction against Mr. Coleridge, who has undertaken his defence in *The Courier*."

the poem were a staple source of profit in his difficult period at the start of business. "Glory be to thee, O Southey!", he wrote six years later: "*Wat Tyler* continued to be a source of profit when every other political publication failed. The world does not know what it may yet owe to Southey."¹

The incidents of the pirating of *Queen Mab* and the *Vision of Judgement* were part of the same ebullient strategy. No British monarch has ever been portrayed in more ridiculous postures nor in more odious terms than George IV during the Queen Caroline agitation, and notably in Hone and Cruikshank's *Right Divine of Kings to Govern Wrong*, *The Queen's Matrimonial Ladder*, *Non Mi Ricordo*, and *The Man in the Moon*. The same author's *Slap at Slop and the Bridge-Street Gang* (1822), appeared in the format of the Government-subsidised *New Times*, complete with a mock newspaper-stamp with the design of a cat's paw and the motto: "On Every Thing He Claps His Claw", and with mock advertisements and mock lists of births and deaths:

MARRIAGE

His Imperial Majesty Prince Despotism, in a consumption, to Her Supreme Antiquity, The IGNORANCE of Eighteen Centuries, in a decline. The bridal dresses were most superb.

While Carlile fought on from prison, the satirists raked his prosecutors with fire.

The second point is the real toughness of the libertarian and constitutional tradition, notwithstanding the Government's assault. It is not only a question of support in unexpected places—Hone's subscription list was headed by donations from a Whig duke, a marquis, and two earls—which indicates an uneasiness in the ruling class itself. What is apparent from the reports of the law officers of the Crown, in all political trials, is the caution with which they proceeded. In particular they were aware of the unreliability (for their purposes) of the jury system. By Fox's Libel Act of 1792 the jury were judges of the libel as well as of the fact of publishing; and however judges might seek to set this aside, this meant in effect that twelve Englishmen had to decide whether they thought the "libel" dangerous enough to merit imprisonment or not. One State prosecution which failed was a blow at the morale of authority which could only be repaired by three which succeeded. Even

¹ Sherwin's *Republican*, 29 March 1817; Carlile's *Republican*, 30 May 1823.

in 1819-21 when the Government and the prosecuting societies carried almost every case¹ (in part as a result of their better deployment of legal resources and their influence upon juries, in part because Carlile was at his most provocative and had shifted the battlefield from sedition to blasphemy), it still is not possible to speak of "totalitarian" or "Asiatic" despotism. Reports of the trials were widely circulated, containing the very passages—sometimes, indeed, whole books read by the defendants in court—for which the accused were sentenced. Carlile continued imperturbably to edit the *Republican* from gaol; some of his shopmen, indeed, undertook in prison the editing of another journal, as a means of self-improvement. If Wooler's *Black Dwarf* failed in 1824, Cobbett remained in the field. He was, it is true, much subdued in the early Twenties. He did not like Carlile's Republicanism and Deism, nor their hold on the artisans of the great centres; and he turned increasingly back to the countryside and distanced himself from the working-class movement. (In 1821 he undertook the first of his *Rural Rides*, in which his genius seems at last to have found its inevitable form and matter.) But, even at this distance, the *Political Register* was always there, with its columns—like those of the *Republican*—open to expose any case of persecution, from Bodmin to Berwick.

The honours of this contest did not belong to a single class. John Hunt and Thelwall (now firmly among the middle-class moderates) were among those pestered by the "Bridge-Street Gang"; Sir Charles Wolseley, Burdett, the Reverend Joseph Harrison, were among those imprisoned for sedition. But Carlile and his shopmen were those who pressed defiance to its furthest point. The main battle was over by 1823, although there were renewed prosecutions in the late Twenties and early Thirties, and blasphemy cases trickled on into Victorian times. Carlile's greatest offence was to proceed with the unabashed publication of the *Political Works*, and then the *Theological Works*, of Tom Paine—works which, while circulating surreptitiously in the enclaves of "old Jacks" in the cities, had been banned ever since Paine's trial *in absentia* in 1792, and Daniel Isaac Eaton's successive trials during the Wars. To this he added many further offences as the struggle wore on, and as he himself moved from Deism to Atheism, and as he threw in provocations—such as the advocacy of assassina-

¹ In these three years there were 115 prosecutions and 45 *ex officio* informations.

tion¹—which in any view of the case were incitements to prosecution. He was an indomitable man, but he was scarcely loveable, and his years of imprisonment did not improve him. His strength lay in two things. First, he would not even admit of the possibility of defeat. And second, he had at his back the culture of the artisans.

The first point is not as evident as it appears. Determined men have often (as in the 1790s) been silenced or defeated. It is true that Carlile's brand of determination ("THE SHOP IN FLEET STREET WILL NOT BE CLOSED AS A MATTER OF COURSE") was peculiarly difficult for the authorities to meet. No matter how much law they had on their side, they must always incur odium by prosecutions. But they had provided themselves, under the Six Acts, with the power to *banish* the authors of sedition for offences far less than those which Carlile both committed and proudly admitted. It is testimony to the delicate equilibrium of the time, and to the limits imposed upon power by the consensus of constitutionalist opinion, that even in 1820 this provision of the Act was not employed. Banishment apart, Carlile could not be silenced, unless he were to be beheaded, or, more possibly, placed in solitary confinement. But there are two reasons why the Government did not proceed to extreme measures: first, already by 1821 it seemed to them less [†]*necessary*, for the increased stamp duties were taking effect. Second, it was apparent after the first encounters that if Carlile [†]were to be silenced, half a dozen new Carliles would step into his place. The first two who did so *were*, in fact, Carliles: his wife and his sister. Thereafter the "shopmen" came forward. By one count, before the battle had ended Carlile had received the help of 150 volunteers, who—shopmen, printers, news-vendors—had between them served 200 years of imprisonment. The volunteers were advertised for in the *Republican*—men "who were free, able, and willing to serve in General Carlile's Corps:

It is most distinctly to be understood that a love of propagating the principles, and a sacrifice of liberty to that end . . . AND NOT GAIN, must be the motive to call forth such volunteers; for—though R. Carlile pledges himself to . . . give such men the best support in his power—should any great number be imprisoned, he is not so situated as to property or prospects as to be able to promise any particular sum weekly. . . .²

From that time forward the "Temple of Reason" off Fleet

¹ See below, p. 764.

² Wickwar, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

Street was scarcely left untenanted for more than a day. The men and women who came forward were, in nearly every case, entirely unknown to Carlile. They simply came out of London; or arrived on the coach from Lincolnshire, Dorset, Liverpool and Leeds. They came out of a culture.

It was not the "working-class" culture of the weavers or Tyneside pitmen. The people most prominent in the fight included clerks, shop assistants, a farmer's son; Benbow, the shoemaker turned bookseller; James Watson, the Leeds warehouseman who "had the charge of a saddlehorse" at a drysalter's; James Mann, the cropper turned bookseller (also of Leeds). The intellectual tradition was in part derived from the Jacobin years, the circle which had once moved around Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, or the members of the L.C.S., the last authentic spokesman of which—John Gale Jones—was one of Carlile's most constant supporters. In part it was a new tradition, owing something to Bentham's growing influence and something to the "free-thinking Christians" and Unitarians, such as Benjamin Flower and W. J. Fox. It touched that vigorous sub-culture of the "editors of Sunday newspapers and lecturers at the Surrey Institute" which *Blackwood's* and the literary Establishment so scorned—schoolmasters, poor medical students, or civil servants who read Byron and Shelley and the *Examiner*, and among whom, not Whig or Tory, but "right and wrong considered by each man abstractedly, is the fashion".¹

It is scarcely helpful to label this culture *bourgeois* or *petit-bourgeois*, although Carlile had more than his share of the individualism which (it is generally supposed) characterises the latter. It would seem to be closer to the truth that the impulse of rational enlightenment which (in the years of the wars) had been largely confined to the Radical intelligentsia was now seized upon by the artisans and some of the skilled workers (such as many cotton-spinners) with an evangelistic zeal to carry it to "numbers unlimited"—a propagandist zeal scarcely to be found in Bentham, James Mill or Keats. The subscription lists for Carlile's campaign drew heavily upon London; and, next,

¹ Keats to his brother George, 17 September 1819, *Works* (1901), V, p. 108. The letter continues: "This makes the business of Carlile the bookseller of great moment in my mind. He has been selling deistical pamphlets, republished Tom Paine, and many other works held in superstitious horror. . . . After all, they are afraid to prosecute. They are afraid of his defence; it would be published in all the papers all over the empire. They shudder at this. The trials would light a flame they could not extinguish. Do you not think this of great import?"

upon Manchester and Leeds. The artisan culture was, above all, that of the self-taught. "During this twelve-month," Watson recalled of his imprisonment, "I read with deep interest and much profit Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hume's *History of England*, and . . . Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History*."¹ The artisans, who formed the nuclei of Carlile's supporting "Zetetic Societies" (as well as of the later Rotunda) were profoundly suspicious of an established culture which had excluded them from power and knowledge and which had answered their protests with homilies and tracts. The works of the Enlightenment came to them with the force of revelation.

In this way a reading public which was increasingly working class in character was forced to *organise itself*. The war and immediate post-war years had seen a "kept" press, on the one hand, and a Radical press on the other. In the Twenties much of the middle-class press freed itself from direct Government influence, and made some use of the advantages which Cobbett and Carlile had gained. *The Times* and Lord Brougham, who disliked the "pauper press" perhaps as much as Lord Eldon (although for different reasons), gave to the term "Radicalism" a quite different meaning—free trade, cheap government, and utilitarian reform. To some degree (although by no means entirely) they carried the Radical middle-class with them—the schoolmasters, surgeons, and shopkeepers, some of whom had once supported Cobbett and Wooler—so that by 1832 there were *two* Radical publics: the middle-class, which looked forward to the Anti-Corn Law League, and the working-class, whose journalists (Hetherington, Watson, Cleave, Lovett, Benbow, O'Brien) were already maturing the Chartist movement. Throughout the Twenties the working-class press struggled under the crushing weight of the stamp duties,² while Cobbett remained loosely and temperamentally affiliated to the plebeian rather than to the middle-class movement. The dividing-line came to be, increasingly, not alternative "reform" strategies (for middle-class reformers could on occasion be as revolutionary in their tone as their working-class counterparts) but alternative notions of political economy. The touchstone can be seen during the field labourer's "revolt" in 1830, when *The Times* (Cobbett's "BLOODY OLD TIMES") led the demand

¹ W. J. Linton, *James Watson*, (Manchester, 1880), p. 19.

² In 1830 these taxes amounted to a 4d. stamp on each newspaper or weekly periodical, a duty of 3s. 6d. on each advertisement, a small paper duty, and a large surety against action for libel.

for salutary examples to be made of the rioters, while both Cobbett and Carlile were prosecuted once again on charges of inflammatory writing.

In 1830 and 1831 the black ensign of defiance was hoisted once again. Cobbett found a loophole in the law, and recommenced his *Twopenny Trash*. But this time it was Hetherington, a printing worker, who led the frontal attack. His *Poor Man's Guardian* carried the emblem of a hand-press, the motto "Knowledge is Power", and the heading: "Published contrary to 'Law' to try the power of 'Might' against 'Right'." His opening address, quoted clause by clause the laws he intended to defy:

. . . the *Poor Man's Guardian* . . . will contain "news, intelligence and occurrences," and "remarks and observations thereon," and "upon matters of Church and State tending," decidedly, "to excite hatred and contempt of the Government and Constitution of . . . this country, as BY LAW established," and also, "to vilify the ABUSES of Religion". . . .

It would also defy every clause of the stamp tax legislation, or any other acts whatsoever and despite the "laws" or the will and pleasure of any tyrant or body of tyrants whatsoever, any thing hereinbefore, or any-where-else . . . to the contrary notwithstanding.

His fourth number carried the advertisement, "WANTED": "Some hundreds of POOR MEN out of employ who have NOTHING TO RISK . . . to sell to the poor and ignorant" this paper. Not only were the volunteers found, but a score of other unstamped papers sprang up, notably Carlile's *Gauntlet*, and Joshua Hobson's *Voice of the West Riding*. By 1836 the struggle was substantially over, and the way had been opened for the Chartist press.

But the "great unstamped" was emphatically a working-class press. The *Poor Man's Guardian* and the *Working Man's Friend* were in effect, organs of the National Union of the Working Classes; Doherty's *Poor Man's Advocate* was an organ of the Factory Movement; Joshua Hobson was a former hand-loom weaver, who had built a wooden hand-press by his own labour; Bronterre O'Brien's *Destructive* consciously sought to develop working-class Radical theory. These small, closely-printed, penny weeklies carried news of the great struggle for General Unionism in these years, the lock-outs of 1834 and the protests at the Tolpuddle case, or searching debate and exposition of Socialist and trade union theory. An examination of this period would take us beyond the limits of this study, to a time when

the working class was no longer in the making but (in its Chartist form) already made. The point we must note is the degree to which the fight for press liberties was a central formative influence upon the shaping movement. Perhaps 500 people were prosecuted for the production and sale of the "unstamped".¹ From 1816 (indeed, from 1792) until 1836 the contest involved, not only the editors, booksellers, and printers, but also many hundreds of newsvendors, hawkers, and voluntary agents.²

Year after year the annals of persecution continue. In 1817 two men selling Cobbett's pamphlets in Shropshire, whom a clerical magistrate "caused . . . to be apprehended under the Vagrant Act . . . and had well flogged at the whipping-post"; in the same year hawkers in Plymouth, Exeter, the Black Country, Oxford, the north; in 1819 even a peep-show huckster, who showed a print of Peterloo in a Devon village. The imprisonments were rarely for more than a year (often newsvendors were committed to prison for a few weeks and then released without trial) but they could be more serious in their effects upon the victims than the more widely-publicised imprisonments of editors. Men were thrown into verminous "Houses of Correction"; often chained and fettered; often without knowledge of the law or means of defence. Unless their cases were noted by Cobbett, Carlile or some section of the Radicals, their families were left without any income and might be forced into the workhouse.³ It was, indeed, in the smaller centres that the contest for freedom was most hard-fought. Manchester or Nottingham or Leeds had Radical enclaves and meeting-places, and were ready to support the victimised. In the market town or industrial village the cobbler or teacher who took in Cobbett or Carlile in the Twenties might expect to be watched and to suffer persecution in indirect forms. (Often Cobbett's parcels of *Registers* to country subscribers simply failed to arrive—they were "lost" on the mail.) A whole pattern of distribution, with its own folklore, grew up around the militant press.

¹ Abel Heywood, the Manchester bookseller, claimed the figure to be 750.

² Societies for the Diffusion of "Really Useful Knowledge" were formed to assist the "unstamped". See *Working Man's Friend*, 18 May 1833.

³ See Wickwar, *op. cit.*, pp. 40, 103-14; *Second Trial of William Hone* (1818), p. 19; for the case of Robert Swindells, confined in Chester castle, while his wife and baby died from neglect, and his remaining child was placed in the poorhouse; Sherwin's *Political Register*, 14 March 1818, for the cases of Mellor and Pilling of Warrington, held for nineteen weeks chained to felons in Preston Gaol, sent for trial at the Court of King's Bench in London—the 200 miles to which they had to walk—the trial removed to Lancaster (200 miles back)—and then discharged.

Hawkers (Mayhew was told), in order to avoid "selling" the *Republican*, sold straws instead, and then gave the paper to their customers. In the Spenn Valley, in the days of the "unstamped", a penny was dropped through a grating and the paper would "appear". In other parts, men would slip down alleys or across fields at night to the known rendezvous. More than once the "unstamped" were transported under the noses of the authorities in a coffin and with a godly cortège of free-thinkers.

We may take two examples of the shopmen and vendors. The first, a *shopwoman*, serves to remind us that, in these rationalist and Owenite circles, the claim for women's rights (almost silent since the 1790s) was once again being made, and was slowly extending from the intelligentsia to the artisans. Carlile's womenfolk, who underwent trial and imprisonment, did so more out of loyalty than out of conviction. Very different was Mrs. Wright, a Nottingham lace-mender, who was one of Carlile's volunteers and who was prosecuted for selling one of his *Addresses* containing opinions in his characteristic manner:

A Representative System of Government would soon see the propriety of turning our Churches and Chapels into Temples of Science and . . . cherishing the Philosopher instead of the Priest. Kingcraft and Priestcraft I hold to be the bane of Society. . . . Those two evils operate jointly against the welfare both of the body of mind, and to palliate our miseries in this life, the latter endeavour to bamboozle us with a hope of eternal happiness.

She conducted her long defence herself¹ and was rarely interrupted. Towards the end of her defence,

Mrs. Wright requested permission to retire and suckle her infant child that was crying. This was granted, and she was absent from the Court twenty minutes. In passing to and fro, to the Castle Coffee House, she was applauded and loudly cheered by assembled thousands, all encouraging her to be of good cheer and to persevere.

Some time later she was thrown into Newgate, on a November night, with her six-months' baby and nothing to lie on but a mat. Such women as Mrs. Wright (and Mrs. Mann of Leeds) had to meet not only the customary prosecutions, but also the abuse and insinuations of an outraged loyalist press. "This wretched and shameless woman," wrote the *New Times*, was attended by "several females. Are not these circumstances enough to shock every reflecting mind?" She was an "abandoned

¹ Most of Carlile's shopmen were provided with long written defences by Carlile, and this was probably so in her case.

creature" (the conventional epithet for prostitutes) "who has cast off all the distinctive shame and fear and decency of her sex". By her "horrid example" she had depraved the minds of other mothers: "these monsters in female form stand forward, with hardened visages, in the face of day, to give their public countenance and support—for the first time in the history of the Christian world—to gross, vulgar, horrid blasphemy". She was a woman, wrote Carlile, "of very delicate health, and truly all spirit and no matter".¹

The longest sentences endured by a newsvendor were probably those served by Joseph Swann, a hat-maker of Macclesfield. He was arrested in 1819 for selling pamphlets and a seditious poem:

Off with your fetters; spurn the slavish joke;
Now, now, or never, can your chain be broke;
Swift then rise and give the fatal stroke.

Shunted from gaol to gaol, and chained with felons, he was eventually sentenced to two years imprisonment for seditious conspiracy, two years for blasphemous libel, and a further six months for seditious libel to run consecutively. When these monstrous sentences had been passed, Swann held up his white hat and enquired of the magistrate: "Han ye done? Is that all? Why I thowt ye'd got a bit of hemp for me, and hung me." His wife also was briefly arrested (for continuing the sale of pamphlets); she and her four children survived on a parish allowance of 9s. a week, with some help from Carlile and Cobbett. Cobbett, indeed, interested himself particularly in the case of Swann, and when Castlereagh committed suicide it was to Swann that Cobbett addressed his triumphant obituary obloquies: "CASTLEREAGH HAS CUT HIS OWN THROAT AND IS DEAD! Let that sound reach you in the depth of your dungeon . . . and carry consolation to your suffering soul!" After serving his four and a half years, Swann "passed the gate of Chester Castle . . . in mind as stubborn as ever", and resumed his trade as a hatter. But he had not yet been discharged from service. In November 1831 the *Poor Man's Guardian* reported proceedings at the Stockport magistrate's court, where Joseph Swann was charged with selling the "unstamped". The Chairman of the Bench, Captain Clarke, asked him what he had to say in his defence:

¹ See Wickwar, op. cit., pp. 222-3; *Trial of Mrs. Susannah Wright* (1822), pp. 8, 44, 56; *New Times*, 16 November 1822.

Defendant.—Well, Sir, I have been out of employment for some time; neither can I obtain work; my family are all starving. . . . And for another reason, the weightiest of all; I sell them for the good of my fellow countrymen; to let them see how they are misrepresented in Parliament . . . I wish to let the people know how they are humbugged. . .

Bench.—Hold your tongue a moment.

Defendant.—I shall not! for I wish every man to read these publications . . .

Bench.—You are very insolent, therefore you are committed to three months' imprisonment in Knutsford House of Correction, to hard labour.

Defendant.—I've nothing to thank you for; and whenever I come out, I'll hawk them again. And *mind you* [looking at Captain Clarke] the first that I hawk shall be to your house . . .

Joseph Swann was then forcibly removed from the dock.¹

In the 20th-century rhetoric of democracy most of these men and women have been forgotten, because they were impudent, vulgar, over-earnest, or "fanatical". In their wake the subsidised vehicles of "improvement", the *Penny Magazine* and the *Saturday Magazine* (whose vendors no one prosecuted) moved in; and afterwards the commercial press, with its much larger resources, although it did not really begin to capture the Radical reading public until the Forties and the Fifties. (Even then the popular press—the publications of Cleave, Howitt, Chambers, Reynolds, and Lloyd—came from this Radical background.) Two consequences of the contest may be particularly noticed. The first (and most obvious) is that the working-class ideology which matured in the Thirties (and which has endured, through various translations, ever since) put an exceptionally high value upon the rights of the press, of speech, of meeting and of personal liberty. The tradition of the "free-born Englishman" is of course far older. But the notion to be found in some late "Marxist" interpretations, by which these claims appear as a heritage of "bourgeois individualism" will scarcely do. In the contest between 1792 and 1836 the artisans and workers made this tradition peculiarly their own, adding to the claim for free speech and thought their own claim for the untrammelled propagation, in the cheapest possible form, of the products of this thought.

In this, it is true, they shared a characteristic illusion of the

¹ Wickwar, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-7; *Independent Whig*, 16 January 1820; Cobbe's *Political Register*, 17 August 1822; *Poor Man's Guardian*, 12 November 1831; A. G. Barker, *Henry Hetherington*, pp. 12-13.

epoch, applying it with force to the context of working-class struggle. All the enlighteners and improvers of the time thought that the only limit imposed to the diffusion of reason and knowledge was that imposed by the inadequacy of the means. The analogies which were drawn were frequently mechanical. The educational method of Lancaster and Bell, with its attempt at the cheap multiplication of learning by child monitors, was called (by Bell) the "STEAM ENGINE of the MORAL WORLD." Peacock aimed with deadly accuracy when he called Brougham's Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge the "Steam Intellect Society". Carlyle was supremely confident that "pamphlet-reading is destined to work the great necessary moral and political changes among mankind":

The Printing-press may be strictly denominated a Multiplication Table as applicable to the mind of man. The art of Printing is a multiplication of mind. . . . Pamphlet-vendors are the most important springs in the machinery of Reform.¹

Owen contemplated the institution, by means of propaganda, of the NEW MORAL WORLD with messianic, but mechanical, optimism.

But if this was, in part, the rationalist illusion, we must remember the second—and more immediate—consequence: between 1816 and 1836 this "multiplication" seemed to *work*. For the Radical and unstamped journalists were seizing the multiplying-machine on behalf of the working class; and in every part of the country the experiences of the previous quarter-century had prepared men's minds for what they now could read. The importance of the propaganda can be seen in the steady extension of Radical organisation from the great towns and manufacturing areas into the small boroughs and market towns. One of the Six Acts of 1819 (that authorising the search for weapons) was specifically confined only to designated "disturbed districts" of the Midlands and the north.² By 1832—and on into Chartist times—there is a Radical nucleus to be found in every county, in the smallest market towns and even in the larger rural villages, and in nearly every case it is based on the local artisans. In such centres as Croydon, Colchester and Ipswich, Tiverton and Taunton, Nantwich or Cheltenham, there were hardy

¹ See Wickwar, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

² The counties of Lancaster, Chester, the West Riding, Warwick, Stafford, Derby, Leicester, Nottingham, Cumberland, Westmorland, Northumberland, Durham, the city of Coventry, and the county boroughs of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Nottingham.

and militant Radical or Chartist bodies. In Ipswich we find weavers, saddlers, harness-makers, tailors, shoemakers; in Cheltenham shoemakers, tailors, stonemasons, cabinet-makers, gardeners, a plasterer and a blacksmith—"earnest and reputable people—much above the average in intelligence".¹ These are the people whom Cobbett, Carlile, Hetherington and their newsvendors had "multiplied".

"Earnest and reputable people . . ."—this autodidact culture has never been adequately analysed.² The majority of these people had received some elementary education, although its inadequacy is testified from many sources:

I well remember the first half-time school in Bingley. It was a cottage at the entrance to the mill-yard. The teacher, a poor old man who had done odd jobs of a simple kind for about 12s. a week, was set to teach the half-timers. Lest, however, he should teach too much or the process be too costly, he had to stamp washers out of cloth with a heavy wooden mallet on a large block of wood during school hours.³

This is, perhaps, the "schooling" of the early 1830s at its worst. Better village schools, or cheap fee-paying schools patronised by artisans, could be found in the Twenties. By this time, also, the Sunday schools were liberating themselves (although slowly) from the taboo upon the teaching of writing, while the first British and National schools (for all their inadequacies) were beginning to have some effect. But, for any secondary education, the artisans, weavers, or spinners had to teach themselves. The extent to which they were doing this is attested by the sales of Cobbett's educational writings, and notably of his *Grammar of the English Language*, published in 1818, selling 13,000 within six months, and a further 100,000 in the next fifteen years.⁴ And we must remember that in translating sales (or the circulation of periodicals) into estimates of readership, the same book or paper was loaned, read aloud, and passed through many hands.

¹ W. E. Adams, op. cit., p. 169. I am indebted to Mr. A. J. Brown for information about Ipswich. See also *Chartist Studies*, ed. A. Briggs, for Chartism in Somerset and East Anglia.

² J. F. C. Harrison's admirable account in *Learning and Living* tends to underestimate the vigour of radical culture before 1832. The best first-hand accounts are in William Lovett's autobiography and (for Chartist times) Thomas Frost, *Forty Years Recollections* (1880).

³ Thomas Wood, *Autobiography (1822-80)* (Leeds, 1956). See also An Old Potter, *When I Was a Child* (1903), Ch. 1.

⁴ M. L. Pearl, *William Cobbett* (1953), pp. 105-7. There were also many pirated editions.

But the "secondary education" of the workers took many forms, of which private study in solitude was only one. The artisans, in particular, were not as rooted in benighted communities as it is easy to assume. They tramped freely about the country in search of work; apart from the enforced travels of the Wars, many mechanics travelled abroad, and the relative facility with which thousands upon thousands emigrated to America and the colonies (driven not only by poverty but also by the desire for opportunity or political freedom) suggests a general fluency of social life. In the cities a vigorous and bawdy plebeian culture co-existed with more polite traditions among the artisans. Many collections of early 19th-century ballads testify to the fervour with which the battle between Loyalists and Radicals was carried into song. Perhaps it was the melodramatic popular theatre which accorded best with the gusto of the Jacobins and of the "old Radicals" of 1816-20. From the early 1790s the theatre, especially in provincial centres, was a forum in which the opposed factions confronted each other, and provoked each other by "calling the tunes" in the intervals. A "Jacobin Revolutionist and Leveller" described a visit to the theatre, in 1795, in a northern port:

. . . and as the theatre is generally the field in which the Volunteer Officers fight their Campaigns, these military heroes . . . called for the tune of *God Save the King*, and ordered the audience to stand uncovered . . . I sat covered in defiance of the military.¹

It was in the years of repression that this song (with its denunciation of the "knaveish tricks" of the Jacobins) replaced "The Roast Beef of Old England" as a "national anthem". But as the Wars dragged on, the audience often proved itself to be less easily cowed by "Church and King" bullies than later generations. A riot in Sheffield in 1812 commenced when "the South Devon officers insist on having 'God Save the King' sung, and the mobility in the gallery insist on its not being sung. . . . A disturber has been sent to prison."²

Most early 19th-century theatre-riots had some Radical tinge to them, even if they only expressed the simple antagonism between the stalls and the gods. The jealousy of the monopolistic Patent Theatres to their little rivals, with their "burlettas" and their shows "disgraced . . . by the introduction of Horses, Elephants, Monkeys, Dogs, Fencers, Tumblers, and Rope

¹ *Philanthropist*, 22 June 1795.

² T. A. Ward, op. cit., p. 196. See also the Nottingham example, above p. 473.

Dancers",¹ was reinforced by the dislike felt by employers for the dangerous ebullience of the audience. In 1798 the "opulent Merchants, Shipbuilders, Ropemakers" and other employers around London Docks memorialised the Government, complaining that the performances at the Royalty Theatre, near the Tower, encouraged "habits of dissipation and profligacy" among "their numerous Manufacturers, Workmen, Servants, &c."² (The complaint had been going on for more than two hundred years.) In 1819 disorder raged through central London, night after night, and week after week, in the notorious "O.P." riots, when the prices were raised at Drury Lane. It was Authority's particular dislike of the theatre's blend of disorder and sedition which enabled the Patent Theatres to preserve at least the forms of their monopoly until as late as 1843.

The vitality of the plebeian theatre was not matched by its artistic merit. The most positive influence upon the sensibility of the Radicals came less from the little theatres than from the Shakespearian revival—not only Hazlitt, but also Wooler, Bamford, Cooper, and a score of self-taught Radical and Chartist journalists were wont to cap their arguments with Shakespearian quotations. Wooler's apprenticeship had been in dramatic criticism; while the strictly trades unionist *Trades Newspaper* commenced, in 1825, with a theatre critic as well as a sporting column (covering prize-fighting and the contest between "the Lion Nero and Six Dogs").³ But there was one popular art which, in the years between 1780 and 1830, attained to a peak of complexity and excellence—the political print.

This was the age, first, of Gillray and of Rowlandson, and then of George Cruikshank, as well as of scores of other caricaturists, some competent, some atrociously crude. Theirs was, above all, a metropolitan art. The models for the cartoonists drove in their coaches past the print-shops where their political (or personal) sins were mercilessly lampooned. No holds whatsoever were barred, on either side. Thelwall or Burdett or Hunt would be portrayed by the loyalists as savage incendiaries, a flaming torch in one hand, a pistol in the other,

¹ See H.O. 119.3/4 for the accusations and counter-accusations passing between Covent Garden and Drury Lane, on the one hand, and the "illegitimate" little theatres on the other, 1812-18.

² H.O. 65.1.

³ *Trades Newspaper*, 31 July, 21 August 1825 et. seq. The Editor felt called upon to apologise for carrying news of prize-fighting and animal-baiting; but the paper was governed by a committee of London trades unions, and the members' wishes had to be met.

and with belts crammed with butchers' knives; while Cruikshank portrayed the King (in 1820) lolling blind drunk in his throne, surrounded by broken bottles and in front of a screen decorated with satyrs and large-breasted trollops. (The Bishops fared no better.) The popular print was by no means an art for the illiterate, as the balloons full of minute print, issuing from the mouths of the figures, testify. But the illiterate also could participate in this culture, standing by the hour in front of the print-shop window and deciphering the intricate visual minutae in the latest Gillray or Cruikshank: at Knight's in Sweeting's Alley, Fairburn's off Ludgate Hill, or Hone's in Fleet Street (Thackeray recalled), "there used to be a crowd . . . of grinning, good-natured mechanics, who spelt the songs, and spoke them out for the benefit of the company, and who received the points of humour with a general sympathising roar". On occasions, the impact was sensational; Fleet Street would be blocked by the crowds; Cruikshank believed that his "Bank Restriction Note" (1818) resulted in the abolition of the death-penalty for passing forged money. In the 1790s the Government actually suborned Gillray into anti-Jacobin service. During the Wars the mainstream of prints was patriotic and anti-Gallican (John Bull took on his classic shape in these years), but on domestic issues the prints were savagely polemical and frequently Burdettite in sympathy. After the Wars a flood of Radical prints was unloosed, which remained immune from prosecution, even during the Queen Caroline agitation, because prosecution would have incurred greater ridicule. Through all its transformations (and despite the crudities of many practitioners) it remained a highly sophisticated city art: it could be acutely witty, or cruelly blunt and obscene, but in either case it depended upon a frame of reference of shared gossip and of intimate knowledge of the manners and foibles of even minor participants in public affairs—a patina of intricate allusiveness.¹

The culture of the theatre and the print-shop was popular in a wider sense than the literary culture of the Radical artisans. For the keynote of the autodidact culture of the Twenties and early Thirties was moral sobriety. It is customary to attribute this to the influence of Methodism, and undoubtedly, both directly and indirectly, this influence can be felt. The Puritan

¹ Some notion of the complexity of this output can be gained from Dr. Dorothy George's very learned *Catalogues of Political and Personal Satire in the British Museum*, volumes VII, VIII, and IX and X. See also Blanchard Jerrold, *George Cruikshank* (1894), Ch. IV.

character-structure underlies the moral earnestness and self-discipline which enabled men to work on by candle-light after a day of labour. But we have to make two important reservations. The first is that Methodism was a strongly *anti-intellectual* influence, from which British popular culture has never wholly recovered. The circle to which Wesley would have confined the reading of Methodists (Southey noted) "was narrow enough; his own works, and his own series of abridgements, would have constituted the main part of a Methodist's library".¹ In the early 19th century local preachers and class leaders were encouraged to read more: reprints of Baxter, the hagiography of the movement, or "vollams of the Missionary Register". But poetry was suspect, and philosophy, biblical criticism, or political theory taboo. The whole weight of Methodist teaching fell upon the blessedness of the "pure in heart", no matter what their rank or accomplishments. This gave to the Church its egalitarian spiritual appeal. But it also fed (sometimes to gargantuan proportions) the philistine defences of the scarcely-literate. "It is *carte blanche* for ignorance and folly," Hazlitt exploded:

Those . . . who are either unable or unwilling to think connectedly or rationally on any subject, are at once released from every obligation of the kind, by being told that faith and reason are opposed to one another.²

From the successive shocks of Paine, Cobbett, Carlile, the Methodist ministers defended their flocks: the evidence was abundant that unmonitored literacy was the "snare of the devil".

Some of the off-shoots from the main Methodist stem—the Methodist Unitarians (an odd conjunction) and notably the New Connexion—were more intellectual in inclination, and their congregations resemble the older Dissenting Churches. But the main Methodist tradition responded to the thirst for enlightenment in a different way. We have already noted³ the submerged affinities between Methodism and middle-class Utilitarianism. Strange as it may seem, when we think of Bentham and his hatred of "juggical" superstition, the spirit of the times was working for a conjunction of the two traditions. If intellectual *enquiry* was discouraged by the Methodists, the acquisition of *useful* knowledge could be seen as godly and full of merit. The emphasis, of course, was upon the *use*. Work-

discipline alone was not enough, it was necessary for the labour force to advance towards more sophisticated levels of attainment. The old opportunist Baconian argument—that there could be no evil in the study of nature, which is the visible evidence of God's laws—had now been assimilated within Christian apologetics. Hence arose that peculiar phenomenon of early Victorian culture, the Nonconformist parson with his hand on the Old Testament and his eye on a microscope.

The effects of this conjunction can already be felt within the working-class culture of the Twenties. Science—botany, biology, geology, chemistry, mathematics, and, in particular, the applied sciences—the Methodists looked upon with favour, provided that these pursuits were not intermixed with politics or speculative philosophy. The solid, statistical, intellectual world which the Utilitarians were building was congenial also to the Methodist Conference. They also compiled their statistical tables of Sunday school attendances, and Bunting (one feels) would have been happy if he could have calculated degrees of spiritual grace with the accuracy that Chadwick calculated the minimum diet that might keep a pauper in strength to work. Hence came that alliance between Nonconformists and Utilitarians in educational endeavour, and in the dissemination of "improving" knowledge alongside godly exhortation. Already in the Twenties this kind of literature is well established, in which moral admonishments (and accounts of the drunken orgies of Tom Paine on his unvisited deathbed) appear side by side with little notes on the flora of Venezuela, statistics of the death-roll in the Lisbon earthquake, recipes for boiled vegetables, and notes on hydraulics:

Every species . . . requires a different kind of food. . . . Linnaeus has remarked, that the cow eats 276 species of plants and rejects 218; the goat eats 449 and rejects 126; the sheep eats 387 and rejects 141; the horse eats 262 and rejects 212; and the hog, more nice in its taste than any of those, eats but 72 plants and rejects all the rest. Yet such is the unbounded munificence of the Creator, that all these countless myriads of sentient beings are amply provided for and nourished by his bounty! "The eyes of all these look unto Him, and he openeth his hand and satisfieth the desire of every living being."¹

¹ Thomas Dick, *On the Improvement of Society by the Diffusion of Knowledge* (Glasgow, 1833), p. 175. See also p. 213, where it is argued that "arithmetic, algebra, geometry, conic sections, and other departments of mathematics" are particularly godly studies since they "contain truths that are eternal and unchangeable".

¹ Southey, *Life of Wesley*, p. 558.

² *Works*, IV, pp. 57 ff., from *The Round Table* (1817).

³ See above, p. 365.

And already in the Twenties, Political Economy can be seen as a third partner alongside Morality and Useful Knowledge, in the shape of homilies upon the God-given and immutable laws of supply and demand. Capital, even nicer in its taste than the hog, would select only the industrious and obedient worker and reject all others.

Thus Methodism and Evangelicism contributed few active intellectual ingredients to the articulate culture of the working people, although they can be said to have added an earnestness to the pursuit of *information*. (Arnold was later to see the Nonconformist tradition as deeply philistine, and indifferent to "sweetness and light".) And there is a second reservation to be made, when the sobriety of the artisan's world is attributed to this source. Moral sobriety was in fact demonstrably a product of the Radical and rationalist agitation itself; and owed much to the old Dissenting and Jacobin traditions. This is not to say that there were no drunken Radicals nor disorderly demonstrations. Wooler was only one of the Radical leaders who, it was said, was too fond of the bottle; while we have seen that the London taverns and Lancashire hush-shops were important meeting-places. But the Radicals sought to rescue the people from the imputation of being a "mob"; and their leaders sought continually to present an image of sobriety.

Moreover, there were other motives for this emphasis. One of the Rules of the Bath Union Society for Parliamentary Reform (established in January 1817) is characteristic:

It is earnestly recommended to every Member not to spend his Money at public houses, because half of the said Money goes in Taxes, to feed the Maggots of Corruption.¹

In the post-war years Hunt and Cobbett made much of the call for abstinence from all taxed articles, and in particular of the virtues of water over spirits or beer. The sobriety of the Methodists was the one (and only) attribute of their "sect" which Cobbett found it possible to praise: "I look upon drunkenness as the root of much more than half the mischief, misery and crimes with which society is afflicted."² This was not always Cobbett's tone; on other occasions he could lament the price, for the labourer, of beer. But a general moral primeness is to be found in most quarters. It was, particularly, the

¹ H.O. 40.4.

² *Political Register*, 13 January 1821. The Temperance Movement can be traced to this post-war campaign of abstinence.

ideology of the artisan or of the skilled worker who had held his position in the face of the boisterous unskilled tide. It is to be found in Carlyle's account of his early manhood:

I was a regular, active, and industrious man, working early and late . . . and when out of the workshop never so happy anywhere as at home with my wife and two children. The alehouse I always detested . . . I had a notion that a man . . . was a fool not to make a right application of every shilling.¹

Many a day he had missed out a meal, and "carried home some sixpenny publication to read at night". It is to be found, in its most admirable and moving form, in William Lovett's *Life and Struggles . . . in Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, a title which, in itself, condenses all that we are seeking to describe.

It was a disposition strengthened, among the republicans and free-thinkers, by the character of the attacks upon them. Denounced in loyalist lampoons and from Church pulpits as disreputable exemplars of every vice, they sought to exhibit themselves as bearing, alongside their unorthodox opinions, an irreproachable character. They struggled against the loyalist legends of revolutionary France, which was presented as a sanguinary thieves' kitchen, whose Temples of Reason were brothels. They were particularly sensitive to any accusation of sexual impropriety, of financial misconduct, or of lack of attachment to the familial virtues.² Carlyle published in 1830 a little book of homilies, *The Moralist*, while Cobbett's *Advice to Young Men* was only a more hearty and readable essay upon the same themes of industry, perseverance, independence. The rationalists, of course, were especially anxious to counter the accusation that the rejection of the Christian faith must inevitably entail the dissolution of all moral restraints. Alongside Volney's influential *Ruins of Empire* there was translated, and circulated as a tract, his *Law of Nature*, which served to argue—in the form of a dialogue—that the respectable virtues must all be adhered to according to the laws of social utility:

¹ See Wickwar, op. cit., p. 68.

² Cf. T. Frost, *Forty Years' Recollections*, p. 20 (of the anti-Owenite propaganda of the Thirties): "It was a very common device for complainants and witnesses to say of a person charged with larceny, wife desertion, or almost any other offence, 'He is a Socialist'; and reports of all such cases had the side-head, 'Effect of Owenism' . . .".

Q. Why do you say that conjugal love is a virtue?

A. Because the concord and union which are the consequence of the affection subsisting between married persons, establish in the bosom of their family a multitude of habits which contribute to its prosperity and conservation. . . .

So on for the greater part of a page. And so, through chapters on Knowledge, Continnence, Temperance, Cleanliness, the Domestic Virtues, which read like a prospectus for the Victorian age. Where heterodoxy appeared on matters of sexual relations, as it did among the Owenite communitarians, it generally did so with a zeal characteristic of the Puritan temperament.¹ The very small group of neo-Malthusians who with considerable courage propagated among the working people, in the early Twenties, knowledge of the means of contraception did so out of the conviction that the only way in which the "industrious classes" could raise their physical and cultural standards was by limiting their own numbers. Place and his companions would have been utterly shocked if it had been suggested that these means contributed to sexual or personal freedom.²

Levity or hedonism was as alien to the Radical or rationalist disposition as it was to the Methodist, and we are reminded of how much the Jacobins and Deists owed to the traditions of old Dissent. But it is possible to judge too much from the written record, and the public image of the orator. In the actual movement, cheerfulness keeps breaking in, not only with Hone, but, increasingly, with Hetherington, Lovett and their circle, who were softer, more humorous, more responsive to the people, less didactic, but not less determined, than their master, Carlile. It is tempting to offer the paradox that the rationalist artisans on Carlile's or Volney's model exhibited the same behaviour-patterns as their Methodist analogues; whereas in one case sobriety and cleanliness were recommended in obedience to God and to Authority, in the other case they were

¹ See, for example, William Hodson in the *Social Pioneer*, 20 April 1839 (*et passim*): "Allow me, Sir, to state . . . my views upon the [Marriage] Question . . . neither man nor woman can be happy, until they have equal rights; to marry each other for a home, as if often the case now, is the buying of human flesh; it is slave dealing of the worst description. . . . I contend that all unions ought to be solely from affection—to continue the unions when that affection ceases to exist is perfect . . . prostitution."

² See Wallas, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-72; N. Himes, "J. S. Mill's Attitude toward Neo-Malthusianism", *Econ. Journal* (Supplement), 1926-9, I, pp. 459-62; M. Stopes, *Contraception* (1923); N. Himes, "The Birth Control Handbills of 1823", *The Lancet*, 6 August 1927; M. St. J. Packe, *Life of John Stuart Mill* (1954), pp. 56-9. See also below, p. 777.

requisite virtues in those who made up the army which would overthrow Priestcraft and Kingcraft. To an observer who did not know the language the moral attributes of both might have appeared indistinguishable. But this is only partly so. For Volney's chapter-headings continue, "Of the Social Virtues, and of Justice". There was a profound difference between disciplines recommended for the salvation of one's own soul, and the same disciplines recommended as means to the salvation of a class. The Radical and free-thinking artisan was at his most earnest in his belief in the *active* duties of citizenship.

Moreover, together with this sobriety, the artisan culture nurtured the values of intellectual enquiry and of mutuality. We have seen much of the first quality, displayed in the fight for press freedom. The autodidact had often an uneven, laboured, understanding, but it was *his own*. Since he had been forced to find his intellectual way, he took little on trust: his mind did not move within the established ruts of a formal education. Many of his ideas challenged authority, and authority had tried to suppress them. He was willing, therefore, to give a hearing to any new anti-authoritarian ideas. This was one cause for the instability of the working-class movement, especially in the years between 1825 and 1835; it also helps us to understand the rapidity with which Owenism spread, and the readiness of men to swing from one to another of the utopian and communitarian schemes which were put forward. (This artisan culture can be seen, also, as a leaven still at work in Victorian times, as the self-made men or the children of artisans of the Twenties contributed to the vigour and diversity of its intellectual life.) By mutuality we mean the tradition of mutual study, disputation, and improvement. We have seen something of this in the days of the L.C.S. The custom of reading aloud the Radical periodicals, for the benefit of the illiterate, also entailed—as a necessary consequence—that each reading devolved into an *ad hoc* group discussion: Cobbett had set out his arguments, as plainly as he could, and now the weavers, stockingers, or shoemakers, debated them.

A cousin of this kind of group was the mutual improvement society, whether formal or informal, which met week by week with the intention of acquiring knowledge, generally under the leadership of one of its own members.¹ Here, and in the Mechanics' Institutes, there was some coming-together of the

¹ See J. F. C. Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 43 *et. seq.*

traditions of the chapel and of the Radicals. But the co-existence was uneasy, and not always peaceful. The early history of the Mechanic's Institutes, from the formation of the London Institute in 1823 until the 1830s, is a story of ideological conflict. From the standpoint of the Radical artisan or trade unionist, the enthusiasm of Dr. Birkbeck and of some Dissenting clergy and Benthamite professional men to assist them to establish centres for the promotion of knowledge was very much to be welcomed. But they certainly were not prepared to have this help *on any terms*. If Brougham appears in some recent writing as a great, but opportunist, Radical, this was not at all how he was viewed by the "old Radicals" of 1823. They had seen him provide apologies for the spy system in 1817 (in a speech which Cobbett raked up again and again); and they were to see him stand up in the House at the climax of Carlile's campaign and declare that he "rejoiced at the result of some recent trials" and regarded the prisoners as having published "a mass of the grossest and most criminal matter".¹ Brougham's zeal for the Institutes was enough to make them suspect at the outset; and Place's attempts to act as go-between between Brougham (whom he secretly despised) and the London trades unionists (who less secretly suspected him) were not likely to dispel this. The crucial conflicts took place on the questions of control, of financial independence, and on whether or not the Institutes should debate political economy (and, if so, *whose* political economy). Thomas Hodgskin was defeated in the latter conflict by Place and Brougham. In the former conflicts Birkbeck, in his zeal to raise money to expand the facilities of the Institute, overruled the advice of Robertson, Hodgskin and John Gast that—if the matter was undertaken less ambitiously—the artisans themselves could raise the necessary funds, and own and control the whole.

These two defeats, and the inauguration of Brougham's lectures on political economy (1825), meant that control passed to the middle-class supporters, whose ideology also dominated the political economy of the syllabus. By 1825 the *Trades Newspaper* regarded the London Institute as a lost cause, which was dependent upon "the great and wealthy":

When it was founded, there was such a strong and general feeling excited on its behalf among the Mechanics of the Metropolis, that

¹ See Wickwar, *op. cit.*, p. 147; and Place's comment, "Well done, hypocrite; you who are not a Christian yourself."

we felt perfectly convinced, had not that feeling been damped . . . the Mechanics themselves might and would have furnished all the means requisite for ensuring it the most splendid success. . . .

In the provinces the history of the Mechanic's Institutes is more chequered. In Leeds (as Dr. Harrison has shown) the Institute was from the outset controlled by sponsors from the middle class, and notably by Nonconformist manufacturers; in Bradford and in Huddersfield it was, for a period, controlled by Radical artisans. After the mid-Twenties the tendency was general for the custom of artisans to give way to that of the lower middle class, and for orthodox political economy to come into the syllabus. But still in 1830 the movement looked unorthodox enough (by reason of its galaxy of Utilitarian and Unitarian sponsors) for many Anglican and Wesleyan clergy to hold aloof. A Yorkshire vicar, in 1826, saw the Institutes as agencies of universal suffrage and "universal free-thinking", which would "in time degenerate into Jacobin clubs, and become nurseries of disaffection". In the early 1830s a curate attacked the management of the Leicester Mechanic's Institute for perverting it into a school "for the diffusion of infidel, republican, and levelling principles". Among the papers taken by its library was Carlile's *Gauntlet*.¹

We have spoken of the *artisan* culture of the Twenties. It is the most accurate term to hand, and yet it is not more than approximate. We have seen that "*petit-bourgeois*" (with its usual pejorative associations) will not do; while to speak of a "working-class" culture would be premature. But by artisan we should understand a milieu which touched the London shipwrights and Manchester factory operatives at one side, and the degraded artisans, the outworkers, at the other. To Cobbett these comprised the "journeymen and labourers", or, more briefly, "the people". "I am of opinion," he wrote to the Bishop of Llandaff in 1820, "that your Lordship is very much deceived in supposing the People, or the vulgar, as you were pleased to call them, to be *incapable of comprehending argument*":

The people do not, I assure your Lordship, at all relish little simple tales. Neither do they delight in declamatory language, or in loose

¹ See especially J. F. C. Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-88, 173-8; *Mechanic's Magazine*, 11 and 18 October 1823; T. Kelly, *George Birkbeck* (Liverpool, 1957), Chs. V and VI; E. Halévy, *Thomas Hodgskin* (1956), pp. 87-91; Chester New, *op. cit.*, Ch. XVII; *Trades Newspaper*, 17 July 1825; F. B. Lott, *Story of the Leicester Mechanic's Institute* (1935); M. Tylecote, *The Mechanic's Institutes of Lancashire and Yorkshire before 1851* (Manchester, 1957).

assertion, their minds have, within the last ten years, undergone a very great revolution. . . .

Give me leave . . . to say that . . . these classes are, to my certain knowledge, at this time, more enlightened than the other classes of the community. . . . They see further into the future than the Parliament and the Ministers.—There is this advantage attending their pursuit of knowledge.—They have no particular interest to answer; and, therefore, their judgement is unclouded by prejudice and selfishness. Besides which, their communication with each other is perfectly free. The thoughts of one man produce other thoughts in another man. Notions are canvassed without the restraint imposed upon suspicion, by false pride, or false delicacy. And hence the truth is speedily arrived at.¹

Which argument, which truths?

ii. *William Cobbett.*

Cobbett throws his influence across the years from the end of the Wars until the passing of the Reform Bill. To say that he was in no sense a systematic thinker is not so say that his was not a serious intellectual influence. It was Cobbett who *created* this Radical intellectual culture, not because he offered its most original ideas, but in the sense that he found the tone, the style, and the arguments which could bring the weaver, the schoolmaster, and the shipwright, into a common discourse. Out of the diversity of grievances and interests he brought a Radical consensus. His *Political Registers* were like a circulating medium which provided a common means of exchange between the experiences of men of widely differing attainments.

We can see this if we look, less at his ideas, than at his tone. And one way to do this is to contrast his manner with that of Hazlitt, the most "Jacobin" of the middle-class Radicals and the one who—over a long period of years—came closest to the same movement as that of the artisans. Hazlitt is using his knife on the fund-holders and sinecurists:

Legitimate Governments (flatter them as we will) are not another Heathen mythology. They are neither so cheap nor so splendid as the Delphin edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. They are indeed "Gods to punish," but in other respects "men of our infirmity." They do not feed on ambrosia or drink nectar; but live on the common fruits of the earth, of which they get the largest share, and the best. The wine they drink is made of grapes: the blood they shed is that of their subjects: the laws they make are not

¹ *Political Register*, 27 January 1820.

against themselves: the taxes they vote, they afterwards devour. They have the same wants that we have: and, having the option, very naturally help themselves first, out of the common stock, without thinking that others are to come after them. . . . Our State-paupers have their hands in every man's dish, and fare sumptuously every day. They live in palaces, and loll in coaches. In spite of Mr. Malthus, their studs of horses consume the produce of our fields, their dog-kennels are glutted with the food that would maintain the children of the poor. They cost us so much a year in dress and furniture, so much in stars and garters, blue ribbons, and grand crosses,—so much in dinners, breakfasts, and suppers, and so much in suppers, breakfasts, and dinners. These heroes of the Income-tax, Worthies of the Civil List, Saints of the Court calendar (*compagnons du lys*), have their naturals and non-naturals, like the rest of the world, but at a dearer rate. . . . You will find it easier to keep them a week than a month; and at the end of that time, waking from the sweet dream of Legitimacy, you may say with Caliban, "Why, what a fool was I to take this drunken monster for a God."¹

Hazlitt's was a complex and admirable sensibility. He was one of the few intellectuals who received the full shock of the experience of the French Revolution, and, while rejecting the naïvetés of the Enlightenment, reaffirmed the traditions of *liberté* and *égalité*. His style reveals, at every point, not only that he was measuring himself against Burke, Coleridge, and Wordsworth (and, more immediately, against *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly Review*), but that he was aware of the strength of some of their positions, and shared some of their responses. Even in his most engaged Radical journalism (of which this is an example) he aimed his polemic, not towards the popular, but towards the polite culture of his time. His *Political Essays* might be published by Hone,² but, when writing them, he will have thought less of Hone's audience than of the hope that he might make Southey squirm, make the *Quarterly* apoplectic, or even stop Coleridge short in mid-sentence.

This is in no sense a criticism. Hazlitt had a width of reference and a sense of commitment to a *European* conflict of historical significance which makes the plebeian Radicals appear provincial both in space and time. It is a question of rôles. Cobbett could never have written a sentence of this passage. He could not admit (even as a figure of speech) that we might *will* to

¹ "What is the People?", from *Political Essays* (1819), in *Works*, VII, p. 263.

² Hone said in his advertisement: "The Publisher conscientiously affirms, that there is more Original and just Thinking, luminously expressed in this Volume, than in any other Work of a living Author."