

Kingsley Amis

Lone Voices

Views of the 'Fifties

THE sociologising generalisation, that characteristic art-form of the mid-20th century, swells in volume and variety as we near the end of the 1950s. (All we have actually got to the end of is the years that start off 195-, as "Stickler for Accuracy" must surely have pointed out in a letter to, say, the *Budleigh Salterton Advertiser*; but the modern trend-hound takes no heed of that kind of pedantry.) There can be little harm in adding one more wafer to the hundred-weights of labels loading down what I will agree to call the past decade, especially perhaps if its distinguishing mark is seen as that very urge to label, to unearth a new trend and hound it to death, to generalise. It is no accident, for example, that this period saw the emergence of the teen-age group as a self-conscious entity: after all, every other group was doing the same thing. Human spontaneity may well appear to have been worse damaged by the labellers than by any of the spectres they have so clamorously and repetitively labelled—mass culture, herd values, conspicuous consumption, status seeking, success ethics—and the multiplication of diagnosis itself is coming to the point where it obstructs cure.

I myself am not yet conscious of being positively impeded in my social round by the antics of generalisers; I have only reached the stage of firmly opting for any straight hour's-worth of mass-culture in preference to again being told about it. But I am disconcerted by

the smallness of the remaining area in which I can behave without having, without already having had, my behaviour described and explained to me, evaluated, categorised. I can hardly catch sight of an American car without what I used to think was my natural curiosity being drowned out by a string of anti-commercials about male symbols and built-in obsolescence and keeping up with the Rockefellers. At the cinema I have a phantom Dwight Macdonald breathing down my neck with stuff about expensiveness and reassuringness and anonymity and *kitsch*. And almost any television programme turns out to be a duet between what the producers imagined they were up to and what Mr. Richard Hoggart, either in my mind's ear or—increasingly these days—right there on the screen in front of me, explains they are really up to.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE that the presence of an observer will affect that which he observes, and that while in some fields—astronomy, for instance—this perturbation can safely be ignored, the social or sociological areas are more sensitive. This is particularly so if the observer is as tirelessly vocal as he is to-day, when no book-page or literary section or TV discussion is complete without its review or article or expert testimony carrying cultural diagnostics a step further down. I say *down* partly in recognition of the almost equally commonplace fact that to have oneself diag-

nosed to oneself is becoming a major popular sport among the diagnosable masses, as witness almost any day's TV programmes, the sales figures of the Riesmans and Packards and Whytes and their (duller) British equivalents, the Bermuda-shortened, blue-rinsed, small-town New Jersey housewife whom I recently overheard exclaiming passionately to a replica of herself: "Did you read this wonderful book *The Lonely Crowd*?" A couple of decades ago it would have been *Gone with the Wind*—better for everyone.

I gladly admit the appeal of social diagnostics, especially those in the anecdotal American vein, and I except from my strictures serious academic sociology such as that practised by the Institute of Community Studies associated with Bethnal Green and Greenleigh. But, these matters apart, I should like to see the trend-hound actively discouraged for an experimental period of a millennium or so. I view with misgiving the possibility that, by a grotesque irony, those seemingly responsible only for having named group-thinking will turn out to have helped it into power; just as Marx invented as much as discovered economic man, Freud instituted neurosis as a social fact in the course of exploring it as a clinical one. I do not want to contemplate a culture in which every other man is an upper-white-collar coronary-prone left-of-centre tradition-directed mass-valued pyknic infantile-anal togetherness-seeking Kinsey-group-B calcium-deficient mesomorph, *and knows it*. That notion outdoes, in both horror and plausibility, the right-wing jeremiah's prophecy of a huge delinquent majority maintained in prison and mental hospital by a tiny band of normals, and even its science-fiction equivalent, a society divided into Behavers and Observers, seems to me preferable to the extinction of unself-consciousness.

THAT the past ten years have been the worst, falsest, most cynical, most apathetic, most commercialised, most Americanised, richest in cultural decline of any in Britain's history is the theme pounded out by a double mixed orchestrally-accompanied

choir of lone voices. And it would be merely perverse to deny that some of the tumult has been justified, or at least that some of the right persons have been annoyed thereby. But I have little of my own to add, am content to leave in other hands the agitation against the lack of ice in boat-train dining-cars, the H-bomb, the new Jacobethan store in central Swansea, the emergent Britain that (except as regards politeness and efficiency) bases itself on *New Yorker* travel ads, *Dotto*, the Royal Family—here perhaps, having a few months ago denounced Princess Margaret to the man who turned out very soon afterwards to be going to marry her, I might be thought to have special qualifications, yet even these I resign. It ill becomes one who feels that many of the drubbers deserve the most lavish drubbing to drub much himself.

Since I am writing an informal pique-piece, however, I will permit myself one minor drub. Advertising. All those lone voices no doubt agreed at some stage or other (they always do) that advertising was a bad thing before—with that characteristic restlessness Orwell noted in the British intellectual—passing on to horror-comics or what they thought was the latest Dulles gaffe. More recent developments, accordingly, have been rather less generally heeded. I start from the fact that, with some shining exceptions in the book trade and elsewhere, the majority of advertisers are as dishonest as they can get away with being, and the related fact that the talk they go in for about keeping the public informed and the standard up is vicious hot air—vicious because they believe it themselves and are trying hard and successfully to get other people to believe it too. Meanwhile they bash on with their fake consumer surveys, their pseudo-science, their publicity palmed off as fact, above all their high-grade imbecile notions of what is glamorous and exciting.

I was about to continue incautiously with the observation that commercial television is the greatest single vulgarising influence in our national life, but pulled myself up just in time. Apart from being inadmissibly over-obvious, that sort of thing is lone-voice talk.

I mean that it is a protest made on behalf of others who are deemed too comatose or inarticulate to make it for themselves. There are some—children, lunatics, old-age pensioners, illiterates, unemployables, not to speak of the animal kingdom—who cannot fight their own battles, but these are fewer than is often supposed. What a splendid change it would make to find a trend-hound whose gaze was not exclusively directed outwards, an imbibber of Hoggart-wash (as an anonymous friend of mine has called it) who confessed to liking skiffle better than all those rotten old music-hall songs, an honorary watchdog of status-seeking who consciously set himself to seeking a bit of the stuff on his own account. Lone voices would sound much nicer, and loner, if their song were based on actual experience rather than on the putative corruption of some inadequately visualised pools-telly-and-fish-and-chips Everyman.

WITH this said, I should do my best to admit only to personal vexation, not to any part of the concern-disquiet-mis-giving system that breeds so much altruistic insomnia, were I ever to state in detail my own modest objections to what advertising has been getting up to. Somewhere among these would come the idea that too many young people of demonstrable literacy were being attracted in that direction when choosing their career. They might in time come to raise the grade of imbecility obtaining there, but the thing is doing quite well enough already without mind, and where they are really needed is in teaching. Nobody who has not seen it in all its majesty—I speak as a university lecturer—can imagine the pit of ignorance and incapacity into which British education has sunk since the war. It is a pretty good pit not only in depth but laterally, for it takes in everyone from the kindergarten to the House of Lords, assuming these as opposite poles. Here at last I feel I have come up with a really man-sized Fifties trend, one which justifies the utmost dis—oops: one which disquiets and vexes me.

The trouble is not just illiteracy, even understanding this as including unsteady grasp of the fundamentals of a subject as well as unsteadiness with hard words like *goes* and *its*. But for the moment I want to drum the fact of that illiteracy into those who are playing what I have heard called the university numbers racket, those quantitative thinkers who believe that Britain is *falling behind* America and Russia by not producing as many university graduates per head, and that she must *catch up* by building *more* colleges which will turn out *more* graduates and so give us *more* technologists (especially them) and *more* school-teachers. I wish I could have a little tape-and-loudspeaker arrangement sewn into the binding of this magazine, to be triggered off by the light reflected from the reader's eyes on to this part of the page, and set to bawl out at several bells: MORE WILL MEAN WORSE.

I do not know whether it is better to have three really bad school-teachers where formerly there were two mediocre ones, and I have no information about what can be expected to happen to technologists, but I am quite sure that a university admissions policy demanding even less than it now demands—for that is what a larger intake means—will wreck academic standards beyond repair. Already a girl who has literally never heard of metre (I found this out last week) can come to a university to study English literature; what will her successors never have heard of if the doors are opened wider—rhyme, poem, sentence? Not only will examining standards have to be lowered to enable worse and worse people to graduate—you cannot let them all in and then not allow most of them to pass—but the good people will be less good than they used to be: this has been steadily happening ever since I started watching in 1949. Please do not think that I am resenting the prospect of being tugged into the hurly-burly and away from the little circle of devotees with whom I am currently exploring the niceties of Pope's use of the caesura. What I explore with the chaps already tends to be far more the niceties of who Pope was.

My personal stake in this is twofold. I do not fancy teaching in something that is called a university but is really a rather less glamorous and authentic training college. And I do not fancy living in a society which has abandoned the notion of the university as a centre of learning. Powerful forces, both inside and outside its walls, are bringing this notion under ever more intense attack. The mere acceptance of expansion (we are promised a 50 per cent increase in students by 1970) is itself, I have argued, equivalent to such attack. Further, influential opinion takes the necessity of a de-naturing change as virtually beyond dispute. In the 11th May debate on education in the House of Lords, many of whose members must have attended a university some time in this century, we find Lord Beveridge saying: "The most important purpose of the university [is] to spread knowledge rather than add to it." Viscount Esher said (I quote from *The Times* of 12th May) that

he would like everyone who felt the desire to be able to go to a university without an entrance examination and without cost. This would bring change and give variety to the pattern of university life. At present only boys and girls capable of getting a first or second had a chance of getting in. The pattern was stereotyped. Places must be found for the free-lance, the adventurers, young people of enterprise. . . .

Lord Esher is very far from being alone in his view that desire, rather than any archaic nonsense about capacity, should be an adequate entrance qualification, and the same holds true for his feeling that at present the university will take only the academically minded (in the contemptuous sense), whereas in fact it is already taking almost everyone who can read and write. I wish he would tell me where all his unfairly deprived adventurous enterprising free-lances are to be found. We could do with them.

MORE WILL MEAN WORSE. The delusion that there are thousands of young people about who are capable of benefiting from university training, but have somehow failed to find their way there, is of course a necessary component of the expansionist case.

It means that one can confidently mention a thing called *quality* and say it will be *maintained*. University graduates, however, are like poems or bottles of hock, and unlike cars or tins of salmon, in that you cannot *decide* to have more good ones. All you can decide to have is more. And MORE WILL MEAN WORSE. Let me assure Lord Esher finally, and all whose prejudices run his way, that many university teachers work hard at *not* stereotyping their students. If many of these enter the great world in fuddled and temporary possession of tutorial opinions, this is because, after the most dedicated probing, they have shown no sign of forming any of their own.

The demand for expansion is frequently coupled with the demand for more science, and therefore less arts, in the university. We live in a scientific age, you see. It might be thought that this is just when you want more arts, but no. We are to have more "general courses" of mixed, *i.e.* diluted, science and arts, more science for the arts students—oh, and arts for the scientists too, naturally. If any policy-making educational body should ever turn away for a moment from its corps of nodding vice-chancellors and go so far as to consult someone actually engaged in teaching, they will be told (unless indeed they pick, as they will tend to and be encouraged to, one of the growing body of numbers-racketeers) that it is already hard enough to turn out an arts graduate who knows something about arts, without eating into his time at the university, and at school, in order to provide him with a smattering of biology or physics. What they will almost certainly not be told is that the humanities are in danger and must be defended. That case, to the permanent shame of those engaged in the humanities, is going by default. Last March I wrote to the *Observer* to attack some vulgar TV boost for technology, and enquired whether there was anybody who was prepared to "refute the phantom dichotomy of 'the two cultures,' repudiate the ever-more-widely accepted view of the humanities as behind the times, vague, decorative, marginal, contemplative, postponable, while

science (which in this context usually means technology) is seen as up with the times, precise, essential, central, active, urgent." I had answer enough. There was nobody. Why are there no voices, lone or otherwise, in our arts faculties?

I AM sorry to have been so thin on trends, and for a time I contemplated pushing the score up a notch by naming, as the cultural disappointment of the decade or something like that, the revealed inadequacy of the *Scrutiny* school of criticism—its inability to praise anything Dr. Leavis has not praised first, to do so otherwise than in his prose style, and to deal with contemporary literature otherwise than by denigration, thus abdicating from the essential critical task (if there be such a thing) of trying to range modern writers in order. Everyone has been too occupied, I would have gone on to say, in saluting the institution of D. H. Lawrence as "a great English writer," to use the *ipsissima verba*, on which my comments would have been two: first, that Lawrence's arrival as a great Sinhalese or Ghanaian writer would have been more remarkable, and secondly, thank God he neither is nor has arrived as a great anything writer. From there I might have proceeded to trace to Lawrence a large part of the decline in sexual morality during the decade, noting the infective properties of his belief in selfish will, of his faith in the validity of mood and whim, and of that Calvinistic psychotheology whereby some are born to sweet delight, but very few apart from you and me, and those who dispute the arrangement are born to an endless night of the dirty little secret.

To get it all said properly, however, would have meant trying to read through some of Lawrence's books. And I am not even sure that there has been a decline in sexual morality. The trouble is—and hither I trace in part my failure with the trends—that the past decade is really the first I have noticed as such. I was only eight in 1930, and the 1940s were too unusual and, for me, too replete with incident to allow of much trend-truffling. Until 1945 or so I was mostly occu-

pled either with thinking about having to join the army or, what is evidently much rarer among those of a literary bent, actually being in it. And then there I was back at Oxford, working, getting a degree, getting married, getting children, getting a job, getting settled here in Swansea. I kept telling myself, I remember, that I simply must look out of the window one of these days and notice how the 'Forties were doing, but something else kept coming up and stopping me. It was an unreflecting time.

I seem to myself now to be at a great distance from that cottage outside Oxford where I tried to write a book on Graham Greene, write a novel, prepare for a research degree and help to look after the baby. (The Greene opus got as far as the Argentinian university which for some unfathomable reason had commissioned it, but no further; the novel, which was about a young man rather like myself, only nastier, got finished but not published; the research degree was not granted. The baby, however, will soon be as tall as I am.) When I look back on the 'Fifties I can see, despite the quarts of adrenalin they made me release at times, small cause for complaint in matters affecting me personally. The world of letters, into which I finally contrived to infiltrate, proved benign, not at all in the grip of that "London literary racket" I had heard so much about before I got there. It contains, to be sure, some persons of more influence than ability, but however "disquieting" their existence may be, they have never done me any harm that I know of. And, starting off as a non-affluent non-Etonian without acquaintances in that world, I found it a surprisingly easy one to move about in.

Even that business about the Angry Young Men, which is going to look so wonderful if anyone remembers it in a few years' time, had its appealing side. It is difficult to sound sincere in repudiating free publicity, so I was lucky in never having to. In my case, the simplifications and distortions inevitable in gossipy booksy journalism fell short of tempting me irresistibly to break the writer's first rule and start explaining what I "really

meant" by my books. And if it was boring at times to be asked by new acquaintances what I was so angry about, I was amply repaid on other occasions by seeing people wondering whether I was going to set about breaking up their furniture straight away or would wait till I was drunk. Sometimes I would meditate on how nice it would be if one's novels were read as novels instead of sociological tracts, but then one morning the whole shooting-match just softly and silently vanished away, and there we all were, reduced to being judged on our merits again. Which ought to be all right, if the merits hold up.

IF THEY do, then some of us will have the chance of becoming lone voices in the only way that really matters; by writing well. The less appealing side of the Angry Young Man business was that it embodied and encouraged a philistine, paraphrasing, digest-compiling attitude to literature, one which was favoured not only outside the phantom "movement" (on the dailies' book pages) but inside it as well (in the works of Colin Wilson and others). The taking of such a view is a constant temptation to everybody, not only where literature is concerned—I wonder how much of the vilification modern British philosophy encounters comes from its tendency to resist the act of paraphrase, to remain obdurately philosophical in the face of attempts to boil off its "technique" and

reduce it to a series of assertions constituting a "world-view." But that is not my battle. Literature is, and the situation there is more serious, for this, as no other, is a field in which any fool can have an opinion. Nearly any fool, plus many non-fools in their weaker, more fatigued, less attentive moments, would rather read a book as a purée of trends and attitudes than as a work of art having its own unique, unparaphrasable qualities. And here comes my chance to do justice to *Scrutiny* by observing that at any rate it fought hard against this kind of philistinism, and that it represented the only important body of opinion on that side of the fight.

Any decent writer sees his first concern as the rendering of what he takes to be permanent in human nature, and this holds true no matter how "contemporary" his material. Now and again he may feel—we should perhaps think less of him if he did not ever feel—that there are some political causes too vast or urgent to be subordinated to mere literature, and will allow one or other such to determine the shape of what he writes. But by doing so he will have been guilty of betrayal. He will have accelerated the arrival of the day on which it is generally agreed that a novel or a poem or a play is no more than a system of generalisations orchestrated in terms of plot and diction and situation and the rest; the day, in other words, on which the novel, the poem, and the play cease to exist, and that is the worst prospect of all.

Four poems by R. Pack Browning

Reply to a Question

How much do you write?
Not enough. The sight
Of the seagull's solo over
Trees and treasons, flight
Out of day, lover
Above loving, could cover
Easily every page I might
Scrawl. My questionable right
To meddle, to try to recover
In black ink the white
Passion, makes my pen hover,
Unmoved by its meek mover.

Vocation

Ring my finger with the right rock:
Wrap it with the deepest diamond rooted
In a smooth strap of steel. Lock
The ring with fire and call me wedded.
This ceremony should appease their talk.

Pigeons

The sounds about the house were sad
All down the day. The pigeons had
Opened their mouths to the wind and blown
Low slow tones down
The curling currents since dawn. Enter,
Spoke the air, and out of center
Soared my soul to stare for the sun.
Swallowing the sky, I made the run
Up air like shot steam. Then, like lead,
Dropped. Night had built a pigeons' bed.

Gulls

Saucers sliding down the slow sluice
Of the sloped wind ways,
The gulls go low over the land,
Seeing, speaking their search.

Who comes off the air, let to the land
After wide flight, stayed,
Knows the right rocks underfoot:
The good gull, good-grounded.