

Peregrine Worsthorne

Of Strong Unions in Weak Societies

Thoughts on a Ruinous Contradiction

“THE MINERS are going to be at the top of the tree, and if that hurts somebody, I am sorry.” Thus spake Mr Joe Gormley, President of the National Union of Miners, in response to a recent national appeal by Britain’s Socialist Government for common sacrifices in the fight against inflation.

Mr Gormley is not a militant or an extremist, still less a Marxist. Quite the opposite. He stands out from his peers as being eminently reasonable, moderate and responsible, a perfect model of a modern trade-union leader, much respected, even loved, by the public at large for his human decency and earthy, Lancastrian common sense. Yet even this paragon, this most statesman-like trade union spokesman, does not hesitate to use this kind of arrogant language; is prepared, quite unashamedly, to admit to being brazenly and ruthlessly concerned about promoting a sectional interest, however this may “hurt” anybody else.

The easy explanation is that nowadays in Britain the trade union leaders, even the gentlest of them, are so powerful that they can afford to snap their fingers at public opinion, rather in the manner of Marie Antoinette telling the French people to eat cake in the absence of bread. Up to a point, of course, the trade unions are much stronger than they have ever been before. But they are not talking like this because they are more powerful. They are more powerful because they are talking like this, because they dare to talk like this.

And they dare to talk like this because, unlike the leaders of every other institution in Britain, they, and they alone, have a clear sense of their own value and an unshaken faith in their own function. Alone among the leaders of contemporary Britain they are totally unweighed down by a sense of guilt, which enables them to display a truly aristocratic disregard for public disapproval—a disregard so spectacularly provocative as to be literally awe-inspiring.

There can be no understanding of the position of hegemony recently won by the trade unions in Britain which does not start with this central insight: that their strength springs from a profound sense of moral legitimacy, the like of which is no longer shared by any other institution. It is not, properly speaking, power at all. It is, in a word, *authority*. They are, in Britain, the embodiment of a commanding idea which has become, in recent years, invincible: the idea of social justice. Not, needless to say, the perfect embodiment; very far from it, as I shall seek to show. But more of an embodiment of this commanding idea than any other institution, and in the Kingdom of the Blind, the one-eyed man is King.

A writer in the *Sunday Times* caught an aspect of this truth recently when he observed, after attending the 1975 trade union annual conference, that

“trade unionists now wear the sort of ties and blazers that once marked out the public school man. As the middle classes let their hair grow and knot multi-coloured ties about their necks, the trade unionists keep their hair short and sport the stripes and badges of their union—a sure sign of a diminishing sense of identity in one group and an increasing assertiveness in the other.”

These two aspects of the problem seem to me integrally connected, the *increasing* assertiveness of the trade unions being caused, or, if not altogether caused, certainly aggravated and encouraged, by the *decreasing* sense of identity among all the countervailing power groups in the land. Television illustrates this process almost every night. There can be no doubt that the most impressive personages to appear on the box nowadays are trade union leaders, since they are the only people who do not apologise for what they are doing, who do not seem to be embarrassed or ashamed by their role and purpose, and are actually prepared to admit that, if necessary, they will exert their full strength to get what they want.

"The lads need more money and they are bloody well going to get it!"

"All we ask is another £25 a week. Don't tell us the firm can't pay, since so long as the bosses drive around in Rolls Royces that excuse is a lot of damned nonsense!"

The message, of course, makes no economic sense. But given the contemporary obsession with social justice, nobody ever replies with equal bluntness, telling the workers (or their so-called elected leaders) to go and get stuffed. What the viewer sees are spokesmen for the working class confidently clenching their Left fists, resisted by nothing more impressive than the soft under-belly of the bourgeoisie, quivering with guilt, and apologising for being rich (just as clergymen today always apologise for believing in God).

That is the point. Trade unions have a cause which excuses excess, or at any rate seems to render it understandable and even tolerable. Educated opinion does not approve of trade union language or behaviour, or of the extent to which they bully society at large. There is a lot of tut-tutting and even indignation. But it is not whole-hearted indignation because however immoral some of the methods used by the trade unions are felt to be, their basic aim—improving the lot of working people—is still felt to be work of almost religious significance. Just as Popes in the Middle Ages got away with murder, claiming to be doing God's work, so today do trade union leaders enjoy a comparable kind of immunity and protection, because they, too, are doing the modern equivalent of God's work.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to exaggerate the value to the trade unions of this moral legitimacy which no other major organised group enjoys to anything like the same extent, since moral legitimacy, paradoxically enough, enables the trade unions to get away with immoral behaviour—racketeering, corruption, violence, intimidation and things which come close to bloody insurrection. For example, *The Observer* carried a long article by another miners' leader, Arthur Scargill, boasting of how, in the last miners' strike, in 1974, he led a mass picketing operation against a power station which was so militant, so numerous, so passionately violent, that it literally overpowered the police who sought to control it. The article is filled with the joy of battle, and positively gloried in trade union power: in physical power ruthlessly deployed.

If a British general were to write such an article about, say, the battle against the IRA in Ulster, with a comparably uninhibited display of pride and pleasure in the business of suppressing terrorism, if he were to use the same kind of boastfully aggressive language about some successful military operation, he would be dismissed as a pathological case, a throwback to an age of barbaric imperialism. Let a police chief anywhere in England talk about the fight against crime with even so much as a hint of brutal determination, and there would be an outcry of indignation from polite opinion. Liberal papers, like *The Times* and *The Guardian*, would yell for his resignation.

So deeply drenched in liberal squeamishness is respectable contemporary opinion in Britain that soldiers and policemen are expected to talk like Quaker brethren. It is recognised, reluctantly and grudgingly, that their function requires resource to physical force. But on no account must they be seen to enjoy it, or be engaging in it with zest and enthusiasm. If they are to be acceptable to the "powers that be", soldiers and policemen must approach their tasks with reluctant disdain and mournful apology, as if they were ashamed of being caught up in such savage pursuits.

TRADE-UNION VIOLENCE, on the other hand enjoys a much wider degree of tolerance; it provokes a much less absolutely hostile response. To suggest that it is approved of, or even tolerated, would be going too far. But liberal opinion reacts to violence in this area with ambivalence, with a desire to understand, even with a certain sympathy, since fighting for Workers' Rights, albeit occasionally with excessive zeal, has come to seem more respectable, more glorious, more in keeping with the spirit of the age, than Upholding the Law or Defending the Realm.

How this came about I shall go into in a moment. But it is difficult to doubt, on the evidence, that it *has* come about. Take, for another example, the recent furore about two building-site pickets, known as the "Shrewsbury Two", who were sent to prison for using violence against non-union workers because they had refused to lay down tools during an industrial dispute; it was mayhem so extreme that one of their victims lost an eye. It was a horrible business. Nobody denies that extreme and extensive violence did take place. Even so, the trade union movement was and is indignant about the con-

victions, and there have been mass marches and demonstrations appealing for the release of the two thugs who now enjoy martyr status in the eyes of their fellow trade unionists. A few of the present members of the Labour Government have publicly dissociated themselves from this trade union agitation, but most have not. While not lending it their overt support, they have been careful to avoid actually denouncing it.

TO SOME EXTENT THIS IS sheer political expediency; not wanting to annoy the trade union movement at the time when its cooperation in wage restraint is being so actively courted. But that is not the whole explanation. More significant, in my view, is the deep-seated feeling of all members of the Labour Party that there *is* something indecent about sending workers to prison for any acts undertaken in pursuit of industrial disputes, however lawless or brutal the acts may have been. Nor is this just a working-class or Labour Party view. It is shared, to a lesser degree, by many middle-class Conservatives as well. Sending workers, *qua* workers, to prison is felt to be slightly shocking, unnatural, almost blasphemous, rather as in olden times it would have seemed shocking and unnatural for the law to lay its hands on members of the nobility. Needless to say, this is not a universal view. There are some Right-wingers who would like to see trade unionists hung, drawn, and quartered. But this kind of hostility is regarded as rather disreputable by the reigning liberal middle-class establishment which today shows the same unmistakable signs of snobbishness and deferential indulgence of lower-class bad behaviour as once it did of the bad behaviour of the upper class.

If anybody doubts this, reflect for a moment on how inconceivable it would be for a great capitalist corporation like ICI or Unilever to seek to organise a national campaign for the release of two of its directors caught red-handed in some comparable piece of thuggery to that for which the "Shrewsbury Two" were convicted—bursting into a rival boardroom, say, and beating into a pulp a group of competitor directors who had refused to join in some cartel arrangement. It is even more inconceivable that, in the event of such an agitation ever getting under way, a Conservative Government would refuse to condemn it and some Ministers even lend it their support.

Needless to say, even the most purblind supporter of the capitalist cause would not feel

prepared, let alone compelled, to defend thuggery or lawlessness of this kind; still less to expect or demand that Conservative Ministers of the Crown should assist them in doing so. Such madness would spell the death of capitalism and the total discrediting of the Tory Party, since all sections of public opinion would be aghast, horrified, and totally repelled.

Yet these kind of extraordinary goings-on do take place in the event of trade-union thugs being sent to jail, and public opinion is not aghast, horrified, and totally repelled, or at any rate not remotely to the extent that it would be by comparable behaviour on the part of any other power group. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no mass desertions from the trade union movement in protest at the obscene attempt to canonise these two hooligans, or from the Labour Party for failing formally to anathematise this attempt. There have been critical articles in the liberal press, true, but no sense of national outrage as would certainly be provoked if any other power group were to behave with the same kind of shameless indecency.

THE REASON, of course, is very obvious. Trade unionists, in the present climate, enjoy a special dispensation, a unique exculpatory glamour that takes much of the sting out of public criticism. Mythologically speaking, they are still the underdogs, the underprivileged, with all the benefits that such a status bestows in an age dedicated to the cause of social justice. I am well aware of how absurd this is in present circumstances, since so many trade unionists are now the *nouveaux riches* and take home wage packets that make them the envy of vast numbers of professional people. In reality, they are, for the most part, very far from being underdogs. Rather the reverse. All this is true, as Conservatives try to point out.

But social attitudes never keep pace with reality, and it is really rather naive to expect them to do so. It is, after all, only within the last quarter-of-a-century that trade unionists have begun to exploit their economic strength to the full, and most of the adult British population had its attitudes formed during a period when the unions *were* the underdogs. This is still the impression which any British schoolboy or schoolgirl would get from such historical lessons as they get in their classrooms, since this is how the trade unions are made to appear.

This, in itself, is a fascinating phenomenon—the extent to which the trade union movement, of all the institutions which flowered in the Victorian era, is the only one so far to have escaped the attention of historians bent on destroying favourable misconceptions: the only one which has not yet had its feet of clay exposed and its heroes de-mythologised. Imperialism, militarism, evangelicalism, Whiggism, Toryism, liberalism, capitalism, have all been debunked, but not trade unionism and its leaders. No Lytton Strachey, for example, has got to work on the great trade union leaders of the 19th century, showing them to be frauds and hypocrites, as has been done for the great soldiers, churchmen, statesmen, tycoons, *et al.*

RATHER THE OPPOSITE. The history of trade unionism is still told in reverential tones, with all the myths and legends of how the unions were oppressed and persecuted faithfully preserved. In fact, as revisionist historians will presumably soon get round to showing, the trade union leaders, even in the early days, were very far from being the heroic fighters for human rights that they are supposed to have been. Nor was their struggle for recognition nearly so uphill or so stony as they liked to pretend.

It is fascinating to note, for example that Frederic Harrison, the union nominee on the first Royal Commission set up to look into trade unionism in 1876, himself extremely well-disposed towards their cause, could not refrain from expressing his doubts in his private diary:

“If the unions cannot get over it [violence against non-union members] some of them, and certainly the masons, deserve all that was said of them and are as mere organs of class tyranny. My God! Think if I were to publish a formal recantation. But I keep my counsel as yet.”

In the event, he went on keeping his counsel, as a later entry shows:

“I am not going to cave in now. The unions have serious faults but I still believe . . . them capable of improvement.”

This, as it turned out, was the general view of the Royal Commission, which produced majority and minority reports showing great sympathy and understanding of the union cause.

But this is not the impression given in schools. At a time, as I say, when all the other British institutions have had their myths and legends stripped away, only the trade unions are still allowed to enjoy the benefit of brazen historical propaganda, in which they always appear as David fighting Goliath. It is impossible to imagine, for

example, the BBC commissioning a television series on the history of trade unionism which approached that subject in the same knocking spirit as the recent BBC series which dealt with the history of the British Empire; or a single prestigious film-maker choosing to send up the language, customs and rituals of, say, a Mining Village with the same derisory enthusiasm as a whole host of them regularly apply to the language, customs and rituals of, say, a middle-class Suburb or a Stately Home.

Only the other day there was a splendid illustration of what I have in mind, in a new BBC series, *Days of Hope*, which purports to dramatise the social conditions of England during and immediately after the First World War. We saw a young soldier deserter coming to the aid of a Yorkshire mining village during the 1921 coal strike, when the Government of the day declared a national emergency and sent up the troops to maintain “law and order.” There is no reason to complain about the director’s (Ken Loach) extreme bias in favour of the miners and against the coal-owner, the army, and the police. That is his artistic right, and he made the most of it.

But what is so interesting is that an artist of his stature should have so absolutely uncritical an idea about a mining village; should want to portray it in this sugary, sentimental, chocolate-box and totally unrealistic way, and to see nothing absurd in doing so, rather as, in an earlier age, writers like G. A. Henty and Jeffery Farnol saw nothing absurd in idealising the British army or in romanticising the British nobility. No reputable contemporary artist would allow himself to be so naively indulgent about any other group in society; or expect his public to tolerate such a false perception. If he did he would be dismissed as a figure of fun. Yet Ken Loach is taken very seriously indeed, since the public does not want to be shown the naked truth about working people. Their purity of heart, like that of the Victorian maiden, simply has to be assumed, even if this involves artistic nonsense which will seem to succeeding generations no less incredible than the Victorian habit of covering up the legs of pianos does to us.

OF COURSE THIS WILL CHANGE in time. But it has not changed yet, and because it has not changed, contemporary public opinion is indoctrinated in a wholly idealised and glamorised picture of Trade Unionism, as an earlier public was indoctrinated in a wholly idealised and glamorised

picture of, say, the Aristocracy. And just as the idea of the aristocracy as a kind of divinely ordained top-dog held sway over the imagination of Englishmen long after it had ceased to have any real basis in social or economic reality—long after, that is, aristocrats had ceased to fulfil the function from which their glamour originally sprang—so today the glamour of the trade unions, as a kind of divinely ordained defender of bottom-dogs, continues to hold a comparable place, although it, too, has no longer any basis in reality.

If the upper class was well served by the myth of its superiority, which enabled it to command a popular respect—a respect born of what was then the prevailing snobbery which took the form of admiring and kowtowing to those blessed with social and educational privilege—so today are the trade unions well served by the myth of their inferiority, which enables them to command a respect born of the latest snobbery which takes the form of admiring and kowtowing to those cursed with the lack of social and educational privilege.

I HAVE DWELT AT SOME LENGTH ON what must be called the psychological background to trade union power since it seems to me absolutely central to an understanding of the problem, at any rate as it affects Britain. Needless to say, the fundamental fact, the concrete cause of increased trade union power—which is common to all advanced societies where the right to strike is recognised—has to do with the vulnerability of the advanced, interdependent industrial society to the withdrawal of labour in certain vital areas, like energy and power. The trade unions, by ruthless use of the strike weapon, can reduce a country like Britain to chaos in a few weeks far more effectively than the *Luftwaffe* was ever able to do. But, broadly speaking, trade unions in all advanced countries can do the same. Yet only in Britain has this weapon been exploited to the full in recent years, to the point where an elected government, Mr Edward Heath's (of 1970), was destroyed by it. The question that has to be answered is why the British trade unions feel so much more militant than do their counterparts in other Western countries; and, equally interesting, why the rest of society shows such a strange apathy and weakness in the face of this challenge.

These questions, it seems to me, have to be answered in terms, so to speak, of class morale:

by understanding the factors making for high working-class morale and low middle-class morale, even if such an analysis runs the risk of gross simplification. The cult of equality currently sweeping the Western world hit Britain far harder than it did any other country, because there was so much more to hit: that is to say, so much more inequality. Not necessarily more inequality of wealth, but more inequality of life-styles, manner, language, accents, appearances, habits. The cult of equality has unsettled Britain more than any other country because its institutions were so inherently associated with the idea of inequality, with a class system rooted in inegalitarian ideas and values. One of the disadvantages of Britain is that, because of its record of continuity, its avoidance of political and social upheaval or revolution, all its institutions give the fatal impression of being far more stamped with a privileged style, with, if you like, the manners and appearances of the *ancien régime*, than do those of, say, France or West Germany or, even more obviously, those of the United States. As a result, they are particularly susceptible to being made to look provocatively out of keeping with the spirit of the times.

In no respect is this more obvious than in the confrontations between the two sides of industry: between management and labour. Although in fact management, in the last decade or so, has been vastly democratised, in the sense of being largely made up now of self-made men, it still does not give this impression, since its spokesmen sound and look posh, speak and dress in something approximating at any rate to the gentlemanly appearance. However they may struggle to escape the fatal appearance of inherited privilege, something of its patina still settles upon them. How could it be otherwise? A class system as deeply entrenched as that of Britain's has a momentum that carries on long after the engine has been switched off, and however much the new type of managers may spring from the same family background as the trade union leaders, the different educational and social experiences through which they have passed, on the way to the boardroom, mould them into the traditional boss class shape: which is a shape that in modern times subtracts from, rather than adding to, their authority and confidence.

BRITAIN, IN THIS RESPECT, suffers from a unique disadvantage. The successful self-made man,

when he makes it, cannot avoid moving into a style of life which associates him with a past social system that was rooted in inherited privilege, since the pattern of life at the top still dates from those days. Take the most obvious example of a country house. If a successful, self-made tycoon wishes to indulge in such a purchase—or a successful Labour politician for that matter—it is likely to involve him in the process of beginning to seem like a country gentleman or squire, with all the upper-class associations that go with such a status. Or if he joins a London club, it is likely to be a club that was originally a gentlemanly preserve full of echoes of the old ruling class. Britain has made enormous strides in the last quarter-of-a-century towards the ideal of genuine equality of opportunity. In every walk of life the top prizes are increasingly open to men of talent. But much more than in any other country, this reality is disguised by a misleading image which suggests that little has changed, since the new non-hereditary ruling few are surrounded by the same symbols as were the old hereditary ruling few, thus fating them to share in the inhibitions and defensiveness which, nowadays, are the inevitable accompaniment of anything which smacks of privilege.

ONLY THE TRADE UNION LEADERS, so far, have escaped this albatross and are therefore in a position to exercise power without apology, since they look and sound as men of power should look and sound in an age when privilege is a mark, not of divine grace—as it used to be—but of the devil's handiwork. (Much more so than Labour Party leaders who are increasingly indistinguishable, in social and educational background, from their Conservative counterparts.) Not only, in short, do they have the increased economic power which, as I say, is a factor common to all trade-union movements today in a free society—but also this intangible advantage of embodying the one style of leadership in Britain today which avoids appearing both anachronistic and illegitimate. They are exceptionally strong, therefore, both physically and morally, so strong as to be, at any rate for the time being, irresistible.

I say "for the time being", since it is only a matter of time before the cultural worm begins to turn and start eating away at working-class power and authority, as it has eaten away at the moral base of earlier power groups. But until this happens, until the breach is made between

the wielders of physical power and the cultural legitimisers of that power, there is not much that can be done by those who would wish to reverse this trend.

In any case, those who do wish to reverse this trend—let us call them, for want of a better description, the conservative middle classes—suffer from another disadvantage in launching such a struggle, also peculiar to Britain. They are, quite simply, much too nice; far nicer than their counterparts on the Continent or in the United States. This, again, is another hangover of the British class system which, through the public schools, taught the 19th-century bourgeoisie to think like country gentlemen. As a result, their heirs today find themselves locked in a chivalrous tradition wholly unsuited to the new reality of class war created by trade union militancy, rather as the medieval knights, accustomed to the romantic tournaments of Arthurian legend, were gravely inhibited when it came to fighting pitched battles against peasant armies.

Noblesse oblige and all the other anachronistic hangovers of an aristocratic age, which only make sense against a background of secure privilege and unchallenged strength, still debilitate the boardrooms of Britain, inducing in them a wholly inappropriate reluctance to recognise that the paternalistic days of benevolent goodwill have long since passed into history. The backs of British management are up against the wall; yet they still hanker after sitting on the fence as if the fence itself had not been turned into a barricade.

IN THE BAD OLD DAYS of capitalistic exploitation, such a civilising injection of feudal sense of responsibility was thoroughly desirable, vastly and valuably moderating the ruthless inhumanity of class warfare.

It was all to the good in those days that the bourgeois boss should have married into the landed gentry, been educated at an Anglican public school, and generally merged his identity in a way of life rooted more in the cricket fields of Eton than in the jungle of the market place; better, that is, at least in terms of social peace if not in terms of maintaining Britain's industrial supremacy.

But today, with the balance of power having switched overwhelmingly on to the side of organised labour, these gentlemanly inhibitions,

these anachronistic scruples born out of a world of green lawns and dreaming spires, are proving an appalling handicap in the new cycle of class war about to reach its climax, since the trade union generals of the opposing armies (Jack Jones, Hugh Scanlon, Mick McGahey, Arthur Scargill) have learnt their ethics of combat in an entirely different and more serious school where no holds are barred, no Marquis of Queensberry rules observed.

A DEEPLY DISTURBING PARALLEL can be drawn between the way this problem is affecting us domestically now and the way it bedevilled foreign affairs in the 1920s and 1930s when the then ruling class proved pitifully unwilling to recognise the ruthless nature of the powers arrayed against it: the extent to which the new rulers in Japan, Germany, and Italy were fighting for supremacy in earnest, inhabiting a world which owed nothing to Christian pieties instilled in the classrooms and chapels of the English public school. Herr Hitler was not a gentleman. Nor are the Communists in the unions who are also fighting to win.

On the European Continent, the industrial climate is notably different from what it is here, because management is backed by a middle class no less prone to explosions of militant anger, no more reluctant to take to the streets—to the barricades too, if necessary—than are the workers.

Take France, for example, where the middle class is fully prepared to march, demonstrate, break windows, and even heads if need be, rather than allow itself to be pushed around or dictated to by the Left. If on a Monday the Communists get 100,000 parading down the Champs-Élysées, hands clenched in menace, on a Tuesday the Right will do the same. Each side knows the other's strength, and potential nastiness, and respects it. There is a real and chastening balance of mutual deterrence.

But that is because the middle class thinks like a middle class, with its values rooted in a proper understanding of what the class struggle entails, without its range of vision interrupted by the mirage of gentlemanly, turn-the-other-cheek behaviour. In the heyday of high capitalism this was a great disadvantage, since it meant that the Continental bosses ground the faces of the poor with a primitive, single-minded savagery which the older aristocratic influences greatly helped to dilute in this country. Result: Red revolu-

tion in France, from which Britain was spared.

But the problem today is not one of moderating the excesses of capitalism, at a time of pitiful proletarian weakness, for which purpose the English public-school education, with its contempt for hard industrial efficiency and its romantic idealisation of knightly chivalry, was so admirably suited. The problem today is one of resisting ruthless trade-union power, of fighting for bourgeois values against overwhelming odds.

For this wholly different purpose the public school ethic is disastrously inappropriate, deplorably inhibiting. The Gentlemen of England would prefer to die rather than demonstrate; and a stiff upper lip or, if driven to extremity, perhaps a rolled umbrella, is the nearest thing to an offensive weapon they would think of brandishing against the massed muscle of organised labour.

AS A RESULT, the social balance in Britain has been dangerously upset, with organised labour discovering the full extent of its power—which in any advanced technological society is almost limitless—without any countervailing spirit of comparably aggressive purposefulness animating the other side of industry. The language and the mood of the Right (indeed the whole of the non-Left) are still redolent of a vanished age when the middle class, unlike its Continental counterparts, felt so impregnable secure as to indulge in a kind of psychological disarmament which has now left it perilously vulnerable.

NO DOUBT THIS TOO will change, in time. But I am writing of the present, not the future, trying to explain why the trade unions *today* are riding so high in Britain. There are many other reasons than those on which I have touched here. But the most basic reason, which I have tried to describe, is that their rise to a position of economic ascendancy, brought about largely through the accidents of technological development, has coincided with social and cultural developments which enable them to use their strength with a clear conscience, while those who would resist them lack the will to do so uninhibitedly, because they doubt—or feel guilty about—the virtue of their cause. To some extent, all this is true of other democratic capitalistic societies. But it is more true in Britain than elsewhere, which is why the problem is so much worse here and will take so much longer to solve.

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Column

I SHALL ALWAYS remember Friday, 17 October, as one of the strangest, saddest and most disturbing days of my life, in which a bizarre concatenation of events combined to convince me that all was for the worst in

the worst of all possible worlds.

I had flown into New York from San Francisco in the early hours of the morning and after a few hours' sleep awoke to find the city tottering on the verge of bankruptcy; and so it remained throughout the day, until, at the last hour, it seemed, the president of the New York teachers' union was finally bullied into directing the union's pension fund to invest 150 million dollars in the city's worthless bonds.

This was in itself enough to give a certain air of unreality to the city; how can one be so rich and so poor at the same time? But New York's finances are fortunately none of my affair; what cast a dark shadow over the day for me was to learn that an old and dear friend, Lionel Trilling, with whom I had expected to stay in New York, was on his death bed and that there was no hope of his recovery. It seemed to me then, as it seems to me now, that New York should have been in mourning, not for her shattered finances, but for one of her most distinguished sons, who was as much a part of the city's cultural life as the Rockefeller Center or the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I had the same feeling when, three weeks later, I learned that he was dead. For he was a New Yorker born and bred, a citizen of no mean city, who had devoted nearly all his life to the service of New York's own great university of Columbia, and by his teaching and his writing there had exercised a decisive influence on the intellectual life of his time. He was indeed one of the most gifted writers and critics of an exceptionally gifted generation of Americans, even though by the end of his life American culture had taken a direction which seemed to lead away from everything in which he believed.

To say that his life was devoted to literary criticism and university teaching may give the impression that it was spent in some academic ivory tower, but in fact for him literature, learning, teaching, research were simply ways in

which he came into close and intimate contact with life, sometimes in forms which were violent and ugly. The student riots which struck Columbia in 1968 were a direct manifestation of forces in American life which aimed to destroy everything which he, and the university itself, had tried to achieve, and even after they had died down they remained for him a reason for profound grief and distress. His admirable novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, is concerned with matters that directly affected the life of every American citizen and led, in the prosecution of Alger Hiss for perjury, to one of the most sensational political trials of the century. A strange freak of fortune had made Trilling a fellow student with the bizarre hero/villain of the case, Whittaker Chambers, of whom he has given a fascinating account in his introduction to the new edition of the novel which has recently been published.¹

In his tight grasp of the relationship which exists between literature and life, Trilling may well be compared with Matthew Arnold, and the affinities between the two are no doubt among the reasons why Arnold was the subject of one of his earliest and best books. Like Arnold, he could not dissociate himself from the contemporary scene, however troubled and painful, and he saw it as Arnold saw it in "Dover Beach":

*And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

Ignorance was the army he fought all his life, and by his teaching and his example he brought into American life something of the sweetness and light which Arnold himself regarded as the hallmark of a civilised society.

BUT THERE ARE OTHERS better qualified than I to assess Trilling's contribution to literature and to learning. For myself, I valued him as a person, with an individual style of his own, combined with a singular sweetness of character. He had a certain New York elegance of manner and demeanour, both a rigour and a generosity of mind, and a kind of unobtrusive, dark, Jewish good looks, which made one think of him as something very special. He was devoted to England, and to English, and European, culture, yet with all this it was an essential part of the pleasure of his friendship that he remained always and unmistakably an American. For this reason, he was one of the best unofficial ambassadors the United States have ever sent to this country.

Mark Pattison, a very different kind of person, once wrote, in his life of Casaubon, the great 16th-century scholar, that the ultimate end of the life of learning is to produce, not a book, but a

¹ See, in ENCOUNTER, "Column" (June 1975) and Malcolm Bradbury, "The It & the We" (November 1975).