shift in tone of these last two points, for they were reserved for their more fitting place along the margin of the page.)

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Jonathan Rose. *The Intellectual Life of the English Working Classes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 534 pp.; \$39.95 US (hardcover). ISBN 0 300 08886 8.

This is a splendid book. Standing astride the frontiers of literary history, popular culture, educational history, and the social history of reading, Rose has consulted almost two thousand autobiographical writings produced by British workers – encompassing literally everything published, as well as the reams of unpublished memoirs collected by David Vincent and John Burnett at Keele University. In addition to diaries and memoirs, Rose has sifted through educational records, curriculum materials, library holdings and detailed borrowing statistics, book sale figures, Mass Observation studies commissioned during World War II, and polls and surveys of many kinds. Oral history, as he concedes, is better at recording attitudes than facts, but Rose is at least as interested in what reading meant to working class people as in the narrow facts of what they read.

Rose's sample goes well beyond familiar works such as Flora Thompson's classic *Lark Rise to Candleford* or William Lovett's *Life and Struggles*. He draws examples from a vast array of essentially unknown works by writers whose destiny was obscure and whose life's struggles were described in long-forgotten manuscripts. Astutely, he lets the writers speak for themselves, and they do so in the most touching way imaginable: "Nancy Sharman (b. 1925) recalled that her mother, a Southampton charwoman, had no time to read until during her last illness, at age fifty-four. Then she devoured the complete works of Shakespeare, and 'mentioned pointedly to me that if anything should happen to her, she wished to donate the cornea of her eyes to enable some other unfortunate to read.'"

Rose's eye for the well-positioned quotation gives these working-people voice and, in so doing, raises serious questions about the "enormous condescension of posterity" that, as E.P. Thompson has written, marginalises their intellect, their seriousness, and their

sensitivity. Rose's argument, therefore, stands almost directly opposed to Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, which decried contemporary popular culture (in the post-war period) as being "full of corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions," and also to a more recent strain in cultural criticism, exemplified by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a Past President of the MLA, who has claimed as an undeniable "fact that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare do not figure significantly in the personal economies of these people (i.e., those who have not received a systematic and orthodox education), do not perform individual or social functions that gratify their interests, *do not have value for them*" (italics in original). Rose's response to such a claim is the simple question: How does Herrnstein Smith know? What evidence does she offer as to what "these people" value? Has she asked them? His book takes their own written and spoken words seriously, and offers a very different view.

What would Hoggart and Herrnstein Smith make of the following vignette? "Joseph Keating (b. 1871) read little but boys' magazines and 3d. thrillers until he stumbled across Greek philosophy. He was particularly struck by the Greek precept 'Know thyself,' and pursued that goal by reading until 3 a.m. As a collier he was performing one of the toughest and worst paid jobs in the mine – shovelling out tons of refuse for a half-crown a day – when he heard a coworker sigh, 'Heaven from all creatures hides the book of fate.' Keating was stunned: 'You are quoting Pope.' 'Ayh,' replied his companion, 'me and Pope do agree very well.'"

The Intellectual Life is studded with stories like that of Nancy Sharman's mother's eyes, or Joseph Keating, recognising Pope quoted in the blackness, down the pit. There is great individual power to these stories, but there is also, perhaps more significantly, a cumulative force to their repetition. They give the lie to the ignorant arrogance of the "enormous condescension of posterity" by providing a telling insight into the liberating force of education in the lives of the first two or three generations of scholars in the public school system. This is a most important corrective to the model of educational history that sees only the "social control" aspects of compulsory schooling.

I must stress that Rose's is not a reactionary position. He does not propose that we would all be better off if we went back to the old, great canonic texts, and that incursions into the canon by marginal or popular writing are therefore an affront to standards and a Bad Thing. On the contrary, Rose amply documents the experience of

many readers to show that they often came to Homer and Milton by way of Boys' Own stories, or their equivalent. Mongrel reading, he tells us, leads to a truly liberal education. Working-class readers read hungrily and promiscuously: separating high culture and popular culture into two distinct categories with two mutually exclusive audiences is a mistake. At the core of Rose's argument is the claim that the effect, or "meaning" of books can vary enormously. They are not predictable (as both Hoggart and Herrenstein Smith seem to assume). Real readers read in a huge variety of ways, and for their own reasons. Rose discusses the love of minstrel shows and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* among those who nevertheless – and somewhat paradoxically – identified strongly with an alternative set of "blacks": American Indians. The point is not, he says, "to exonerate any social class of racism. The complicated reality is that prejudice against and identification with nonwhite people could coexist in working-class culture, often in the same individual." The "complicated reality" of the Boys' Own stories is another interesting case. They were vastly popular among working-class boys, who fell in love with their image of school life, and yet the imperial and racist message that was so insidiously compelling for middle-class readers seems to have "taken" only partially on them. A large reason for this, Rose argues, is the physical and intellectual narrowness of working-class life. Mid-nineteenth century geography text books, for example, were 50 years out of date: "no one knew where the Empire was." The world outside the narrow borders of neighborhood barely existed. The two foreign countries that broke through, and became central to the working-class imagination, were the Holy Land and America, the latter, interestingly, somewhat repellent to the educated classes.

Rose's autobiographers discovered a new world of adventure, liberation, and escape in reading. When they were provided with the tools for cracking the cultural codes of their "tradition" they were culturally conservative, drawn much more to classics like Shakespeare and Dickens than to contemporary authors. Rose shows, however, that this may have been largely due to the far greater cheapness and the much easier availability of the old fashioned "standards." What is absolutely clear however is that they were willing to sacrifice both time and money for the sake of books, often going without food and sleep in order to exercise their imaginations.

The provenance of these memoirs is largely concentrated "in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after the achievement of mass literacy but before radio and television, [when] working-class

culture was saturated by the spirit of mutual education.” Of course, these autobiographies are a skewed sample – largely male, overwhelmingly “labour aristocrats,” and heavily biased towards the respectable culture of improvement and uplift. Interestingly, the Communists come in for very rough treatment from Rose’s autobiographers: some like Hymie Fagan (b. 1903) disliked the Party’s policing of its members and were skeptical of its intimate connections with Moscow; others like J.T. Murphy (b. 1888) walked away, having concluded that “it was as if we had been released from a condition of continuous tension, common to the life of Communists, wherein all one’s thoughts are concentrated on the party and its work, its associations, its people, its doctrine, to the exclusion of the larger world around us.” Others disliked the Marxist “smokescreen of jargon,” the quasi-Wesleyan revivalism, and the odious personalities of party hacks and their toadies. And their dislike and suspicion of individual communists, “not only unemployed ... but often distinctly unemployable people, with a turn for violent language and a yearning for violent action,” was seemingly justified: thus it seems unsurprising that three quarters of the Accrington communists switched sides in 1939 and went over *en masse* to the local branch of the Fascists, opened by Oswald Mosely himself.

The blend of initial attraction, but ultimate repulsion, that characterized the autobiographers’ experiences with the Communist Party is indicative of their essential “Englishness.” They were largely cut from a Labour Party/Nonconformist cloth that valued independence and that found inspiration in incremental self-improvement. Reading about these people recalled for me E.P. Thompson’s great essay, “The Peculiarities of the English” in *The Poverty of Theory*, where he argues strenuously that in order to understand the collective character of the English working class it is necessary to jettison the tidy Platonism of “Parisian philosophies” and come to grips with the culture of a class of people who were drawn not only to the genius of Shakespeare and Dickens but also to the independence and respectable self-control championed by Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, as well as by Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.

The heroic period of working-class intellectual life was from about 1870 until the end of the 1940s. This was the period of the “traditional” British working class – cloth caps, seaside holidays, fish-and-chips, two-up/two-down housing, and front parlours kept

“for best.” It was also the period of working-class political awakening, massive urbanization, the penny post, the daily newspaper, and, latterly, the cinema. Rose does a wonderful job explicating how a sample of working-class people experienced this historical moment. He is less concerned, however, in setting this moment into its historical context. So while we hear a bit about the Empire and the Industrial Revolution, we actually learn next to nothing about their working lives, other leisure activities, their families, or their personal emotions. But this is a niggle; the overwhelming sense I gained from reading Rose’s account of these autobiographers was a profound admiration for their determination to be heroes in their own lives, and for the spare eloquence of their words.

Probably the most provocative part of Rose’s argument is chapter 12, “What Was Leonard Bast Really Like,” where he mounts a powerful critique of Modernism. In particular he lays bare the class prejudices and elitism of the intellectuals who identified themselves with High Modernism. Behind their condescension toward the half-educated upstarts and lower middle-class clerks making their own claims on culture, he locates the anxiety and fear of a class of intellectuals whose relative economic superiority (and the status that depended on it) was being eroded. Rose’s detailed information on the rising salaries of clerks, as opposed to the dropping annual income of an E.M. Forster or a Leonard Woolf, is fascinating. Now, he suggests, the cycle repeats itself with Post-Modernism. Again, the avant-garde functions as a bulwark to keep the upstart common reader out, though the intellectual elite who sponsor it are now the literature professors, similarly “kept” economically, but similarly seeing their economic superiority over the Leonard Basts of the late twentieth century undermined.

We have all become familiar with the mantra of “race, class, and gender.” In the closing chapter Rose points out that only lip service has been paid to the second term in the series: issues of class get swept up in the discourse of contemporary literary study – or rather, swept under, as far more attention has been paid to race and gender. Rose’s book does much to offer a nuanced, densely documented, and intelligent corrective.

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