

book review

The Return of Richard Hoggart

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Richard Hoggart

The Uses of Literacy

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Sue Owen (ed.)

Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies

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As Stuart Hall argues in Sue Owen's *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies*,

It is widely recognized that, without Richard Hoggart, there would have been no Centre for Cultural Studies. It is not always so widely acknowledged that without *The Uses of Literacy* there would have been no cultural studies. [20]

Despite its initial success, Hoggart's text has been marginalised in much recent work in the field. It features in histories of cultural studies, but is frequently represented

as valuable only because it paved the way for more explicitly theoretical and politically committed work. It does not directly inform current scholarship in the way that the work of Hoggart's contemporary Raymond Williams does, and has often been dismissed as naïve, sentimental or a simple continuation of 'Leavisite' methods. As the publication of this new paperback edition of *The Uses of Literacy* suggests, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in Hoggart's work in the last few years, and an attempt to reevaluate his significance. This has involved a reconsideration not only of his historical importance, but also of the ways in which his texts contribute to ongoing debates over class and culture, power and resistance.

Sue Owen can take considerable credit for shaping this renewed discussion of Hoggart's work. *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies* emerged from *The Uses of Richard Hoggart*, a conference she organised in 2006, which also produced a further collection, *Re-reading Richard Hoggart*, and a special journal issue, both of which she edited. As the range of this work suggests, the engagement with Hoggart remains productive, not simply as a way of returning to certain neglected questions, such as those about working-class culture, but of exploring both the premises of cultural studies and its current critical practices. The focus of this new scholarship is at least as much on exploring Hoggart's methods of analysis as on his interpretations of particular texts or phenomena. *The Uses of Literacy* is central to this process, and to the claims for his continued importance. A careful rereading of Hoggart's book reveals not an uncritical celebration of the pre-war British urban poor, or a lament for lost organic communities, but a sophisticated attempt to analyse the impact of advanced capitalism on the working class and explore the ways in which this might be represented. It is valuable, in other words, not just because of its innovative subject matter, its focus on a marginalised and stereotyped section of society, but because of its form.

The Uses of Literacy is a work of its time. Though Hoggart claimed he was surprised by 'the belief of many readers that the book had caught and given shape to a moment of change in British cultural life', he recognized that '[p]ublished ten years earlier, or later, it might have had much less effect.'¹ The text intervenes in a wide-ranging debate about the social and political changes in Britain that followed the end of World War II, a debate that extended beyond the academy and took much of its impetus from new artistic movements. There are clear parallels between Hoggart's

book and the work of writers such as John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, Shelagh Delaney and John Osborne, who also explored the experience of the provincial working class in a country which was being transformed by the welfare state, the expansion of higher education and the rapid, though still incomplete, disintegration of the British empire. In each case, their texts insisted upon the complexity of working-class lives that had often previously been dismissed as trivial and predictable, easily covered by a handful of well-worn generalisations. This was very different from simply celebrating such experience. While Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, for example, emphasises the resourcefulness of the urban poor, their ability to construct meaning under adverse conditions, it also exposes the limitations and prejudices of the communities from which its protagonist, Jo, struggles unsuccessfully to escape. Though *The Uses of Literacy* is frequently described as nostalgic, Hoggart is constantly alert to the risk of sentimentality, and in the opening pages satirises the idea that the:

working-classes are at bottom in excellent health—so the pastoral descriptions run—in better health than other classes; rough and unpolished perhaps, but diamonds nevertheless; rugged, but ‘of sterling worth’: not refined, not intellectual, but with both feet on the ground; capable of a good belly-laugh, charitable and forthright. [4–5]

This is only one of a number of the narratives that obscures the lives it purports to describe. Even the ‘middle-class Marxist’s view of the working-classes’, Hoggart argues, is problematic, as it often ‘succeeds in part-pitying and part-patronizing working-class people beyond any semblance of reality’. (6) His concern with the dense texture of everyday life is part of a broader transformation of radical politics that saw the working-class as a complex network of individuals and communities with their own values and concerns, rather than a homogeneous group. This contribution to the development of left-wing thought has often been underestimated in subsequent criticism but was obvious to contemporaries such as E.P. Thompson, who recognised the importance of ‘the analysis of the cultural influences at work by Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, and other contributors to ULR [*Universities & Left Review*]² in his 1959 article on ‘The New Left’.

The Uses of Literacy is, then, the product of a particular historical moment and political debate. It is also, however, a deeply personal book. Its analysis of the

popular culture of the 1950s is framed by a sensitive, detailed account of Hoggart's childhood in Leeds and, in particular, Hunslet, the working-class area of the city where he moved after being orphaned at the age of eight. The book's constant movement between public and private, general and particular, is central to its achievement. It is enabled by a method of interpretation and a prose that owe as much to a tradition of essayists, novelists and autobiographers as to academic conventions, as contemporary reviewers noted. Eliot Freidson, for example, argued in *The American Journal of Sociology* that 'this is not a report of professional social research' but the product of a 'sensitivity' that 'is fine indeed'.³ Asher Tropp, writing in the *American Sociological Review*, compared it to David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, arguing that '[b]oth are the work of gifted amateurs in a field where modern sociological techniques of inquiry seem inadequate for the task in hand'.⁴ As the latter response in particular suggests, Hoggart's transgression of disciplinary boundaries produced insights that could not have been attained through established methods of quantitative analysis. His description as a 'gifted amateur' does not imply a lack of relevant knowledge but a freedom to ask different questions. His techniques of close reading, derived from literary criticism, and dense, focused description, derived from literature itself, enabled a sympathetic engagement with the texture of working-class experience, including his own, a recognition of the value of lives that had been lost among generalisations and statistics. This approach helped to establish cultural studies as a form of interdisciplinary scholarship grounded in a concern with the everyday and 'ordinary'. *The Uses of Literacy* insists on the importance of working across departmental boundaries, but also, more radically, on a broader conception of knowledge that includes memory, intuition and an artistic sensitivity to experience. It not only looks beyond any particular discipline, but beyond academic discourse as such.

Hoggart's famously accessible prose reinforces this sense of a break from academic conventions. His work is not addressed to specialists, but to what he calls, in his preface, the 'serious "common reader" or "intelligent layman" from any class'. (xxix–xxx) As Stefan Collini argues, 'it is the literary confidence and stylishness of *The Uses of Literacy* that now seems so striking'.⁵ His writing is novelistic, combining close observation and an imaginative sympathy with those portrayed. One of the most famous examples of this is his description of library reading rooms:

This is the special refuge of the misfits and left-overs, of the hollow-cheeked, watery-eyed, shabby, and furtively sad. An eccentric absorbed in the rituals of his monomania sits between a pinched unmarried brother, kept by a married sister for the sake of his war-pension, and an aged widower from a cheap lodging or a house smelling permanently of old tea and the frying-pan. They come in off the streets, on to which they have gone after swilling under a cold-tap and twisting scarves round collarless necks; they come in after walking round a bit, watching other people doing things, belonging somewhere. [55–6]

The text is full of such passages. Describing how difficult it is to 'be alone, to think alone, to read quietly' (24) in a working-class household, for example, he sketches an interior in which,

the iron thumps on the table, the dog scratches and yawns or the cat miaows to be let out; the son, drying himself on the family towel near the fire, whistles, or rustles the communal letter from his brother in the army which has been lying on the mantelpiece behind the photo of his sister's wedding; the little girl bursts into a whine because she is too tired to be up at all, the budgerigar twitters. [24]

The description does not distance those it describes, but encourages the reader to enter into the scene, to recognise the density of the world described. It demonstrates a sympathy, in the strict sense of the word, with those represented, who are seen as rounded characters, members of a community and culture. This process of locating figures within a social landscape is repeated throughout the text, sometimes in unexpected contexts. Imagining a picture of a 'beautiful girl trapped by a savage band' used to advertise a magazine story 'with a title like *Law of the Pagans*', for example, Hoggart writes,

she will have the face and the attractively-waved auburn hair of the girl who smiles from the fourpenny patterns for knitting jumpers. It is clear that the moment she is released she will hide that not-altogether-nice bathing costume masquerading as a wild animal's pelt beneath the cable-stitch cardigans she made for twelve-and-six and the rather fashionable skirt she got half-price at the C & A sale. [194]

The passage, with its Dickensian attention to detail, not only deflates the serials' claims to daring, but recognises that such models have lives and identities beyond the magazines that employ them. Like the text as a whole, it does not regard the people it discusses as material, simplified figures who become significant only once they are transformed by intellectual labour, but as complex and interesting in their own right.

These qualities of *The Uses of Literacy* not only demonstrate Hoggart's capacity for empathy, but his skill as a writer, his eye for significant details and ability to rapidly sketch a scene. He also has a considerable talent for pastiche. This was tested when Chatto & Windus's lawyer insisted, shortly before publication, that all references to actual texts should be removed for fear of libel. The decision might easily have led to the abandonment or fundamental alteration of the book, which relied heavily on the close reading of newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and popular novels, particularly in its second half. Instead, Hoggart invented his examples, producing passages in a variety of styles, from tabloid articles ('the Archprelate could do with meeting *ordinary folk* a bit more and with getting a better understanding of their *good sense*' (216)), to romantic fiction ('One great big hunk of luscious manhood! Marlon Brando and Humph. Bogart in one' (209)), to 'hard-boiled' gangster novels ('Fatsy ground his foot straight on to the squelchy mess that useter be Herb's face' (237)). These are not parodies of popular culture, advertising their own absurdity, but faithful recreations of their sources. Indeed, Robert Young argues that the very success of his imitations complicates his criticism of popular culture, as 'everywhere that Hoggart gives us examples of the debased new writing that the working class are reading it leaps from the page with its energy and sauce'. (Owen, 132) The argument identifies one of the text's productive tensions, its simultaneous fascination with mass culture and keen sensitivity to the ways in which it constrains and exploits its audience. Hoggart wrote elsewhere that, '[p]erhaps no one should engage in the work who is not, in a certain sense, himself in love with popular art',⁶ and his willingness to consider its appeal is one of the things that separates him from predecessors such as Q.D. Leavis.

The Uses of Literacy is not a period piece, significant only because it marks a stage in the early development of cultural studies; rather, it offers a distinctive, challenging vision of intellectual work. Its accessible, self-reflexive form of cultural

analysis is more sensitive to the complexities of its subjects and more conscious of its own form than much preceding sociological work and indeed much current scholarship. It is a subtle book, which is perhaps one of the reasons its radicalism has frequently been overlooked, and it benefits from careful rereading. This new Penguin edition, which includes a lucid, perceptive introduction by Lynsey Hanley, as well as John Corner's fascinating 1990 interview with Hoggart, offers a welcome opportunity to become reacquainted with the text.

The Uses of Literacy is central to Hoggart's achievement, but is only part of an extensive, varied body of work that spans more than fifty years. *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies* reflects this, and although it contains some excellent readings of Hoggart's most famous text, the collection as a whole offers a wide-ranging view of both his writing and significance. It is not a hagiography, the kind of gentle celebration of an elderly scholar that marks the end of meaningful consideration of their work, but a serious, critical engagement with his ideas. As befits a study of a pioneer of interdisciplinary scholarship, the contributors are drawn from a variety of fields, including literature, history, politics and, of course, cultural studies. A number of them, including Stefan Collini, Melissa Gregg, Mark Dixon and Sue Owen herself have already produced notable work on Hoggart, and there are also essays from figures such as Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg, who worked with Hoggart at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The involvement of others is less expected, though no less welcome. Robert Young, for example, contributes an innovative reading of *The Uses of Literacy*, which explores the absence of 'communities of Jews, Irish, and then later Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Pakistani' (126) immigrants from the text, and juxtaposes Hoggart's narrative with what it argues is its 'counter figure, the alter ego of the book' (129), Joyce's Leopold Bloom. Though the form of essay, which is organised as an interwoven series of short readings and makes liberal use of contemporary slang ('Hoggart? He's well nang! Later!' (135)) might at first seem to have little in common with Hoggart's measured texts, there are clear parallels to *The Uses of Literacy*. Young's use of demotic English and personal asides playfully echo the text he analyses at the same time as it emphasises a process of social and cultural change. His essay illustrates the critical possibilities of Hoggart's work, the various and sometimes unexpected contexts within which it resonates.

The range of *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies* is one of its major strengths. The book is diverse but not disjointed, and is connected by two closely related concerns. In the first place, it attempts to reassess Hoggart's work, and to challenge its dismissal as nostalgic, conservative or theoretically naïve. This involves exploring his relation to other critical works and movements, sometimes with unexpected results. Owen, for example, argues convincingly that his work demonstrates a 'proto-feminist' (240) concern with the experience of working-class women, whose lives had been trivialised, not only by society at large but by many left-wing narratives focused on male manual workers. Secondly, the collection explores the ways in which Hoggart's writing might inform not only our understanding of the history of cultural studies, but its present methods and objectives. These two projects are interwoven in many of the essays, which work out from an exploration of Hoggart's texts to broader questions. Jim McGuigan, for example, uses a discussion of *The Way We Live Now* to argue for a renewed critical engagement with the popular media framed by an idea of cultural studies as 'an interdisciplinary space for critical scholarship inspired by socialism and oppositional politics of a left-wing kind'. (75) Mark Gibson draws on Hoggart's work to explore Australian writing on the 'ordinary', arguing that while he does 'not think it is useful to attempt simply to "apply" Hoggart to Australia' (191), Hoggart's ideas provide a 'reminder of the possibilities that are being missed' (196) in abandoning the idea of 'ordinariness' to conservatives. Lawrence Grossberg argues that Hoggart's writing implicitly addressed epistemological questions, aiming not 'to create a new academic norm or field, but to articulate a different kind of intellectual project, a different way of asking and answering questions'. (64) As a consequence, it offers 'important lessons' (72) to those trying to analyse and resist current challenges to 'the very concept and value of knowledge' (70) in the United States. In each of these instances, Hoggart's work is not simply a point of departure but a critical resource.

As *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies* demonstrates, Hoggart is a more significant, more complex and simply more interesting figure than much recent scholarship has allowed. It is perhaps too early to talk of a new 'Hoggartian' criticism, but there are suggestions of what this might look like, not least in the very strong essays by Charlie Ellis and Bill Hughes, both at the start of their publishing

careers. Ellis locates Hoggart alongside Orwell in a 'left-conservative tradition' (208) that uses a 'desire to maintain traditional values' to oppose 'the "brutal radicalism" of the free market' (209), while Hughes draws on Marx and Frankfurt theory in his article on the commodification of working-class culture, arguing that current 'anti-elitism, despite its claims, subverts democracy' and is 'a powerful factor in limiting working-class aspirations and in undermining any radical social change'. (219) Both indicate possible directions for future research and, more broadly, some of the ways in which Hoggart's ideas might function within left-wing criticism and politics. As Sue Owen argues, 'the time for a re-evaluation of Hoggart [is] exactly right'. (227) Rereading *The Uses of Literacy* is an excellent place to start.

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¹ Richard Hoggart, *An Imagined Life: Life and Times, Volume III: 1959–61*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1992, p. 5.

² E.P. Thompson, 'The New Left', *The New Reasoner*, no. 9, Summer 1959, p. 12.

³ Eliot Freidson, 'The Uses of Literacy: Changing Patterns in English Mass Culture by Richard Hoggart', *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 64, no. 1, July 1958, p. 98.

⁴ Asher Tropp, 'The Uses of Literacy: Changing Patterns in English Mass Culture', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 23, no. 2, April 1958, p. 221.

⁵ Stefan Collini, 'Critical Minds: Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart', *English Pasts: Essays in History and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 226.

⁶ Richard Hoggart, 'Schools of English and Contemporary Society', *Speaking to Each Other, Volume Two: About Literature*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1970, p. 258.