Vox Populi
Boas, George

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THE PEOPLE IN LITERATURE

To identify the voice of the People with that of God is to attribute to them a superiority that no individual, except possibly the Pope, has ever claimed to possess. No one, to the best of my knowledge, has ever said that any man other than a prophet could be God's spokesman on earth. There have, to be sure, been mystics who have seen God face to face and have heard His voice; but their voices under day to day conditions were not held to be divinely inspired. According to our proverb it was the collective voice of the People that was divine, not the voice of any individual. But men who were sceptical of this notion could argue that the collective voice was simply a multiplication of individual voices and that the latter could be as ignorant as their history or inherent character made them. How could a hundred fools be collectively wise? This was the question of men like Cicero. On the other hand, there was in European literature the tradition of the Wise Fool. The Wise Fool is best known to modern readers in the person of King Lear’s Fool, who has the prerogative of telling the truth, however unpleasant, to his master. Moreover, he knows the truth. Sometimes the Wise Fool appears as the village simpleton, or, as in some of Grimm’s fairy tales, the third son, shrewder and more astute than his two older brothers, and even, in Puss-in-Boots, as an animal. He appears in Andersen’s story of “The Emperor’s Clothes” in the character of the little child who is innocent of flattery, as if maturity were an obstruction to wisdom. In the long

run this reduces to the doctrine that something called Nature is better than Art, that instinct is better than reason, that for certain kinds of knowledge “book learning” is a waste of time. Anti-intellectualism is nothing new. It is simply one form of cultural primitivism. For reasons that are no longer discoverable men seem to have thought that in primitive times the human race was able to steer its way among obstacles by some sort of unlearned congenital knowledge, which could be found only in those individuals who had not been tainted with instruction. Such individuals were identified during the course of history with the peasant or artisan, the madman, the seer, the child, and in the early nineteenth century with the woman, whose intuition was surer than man’s intellect. They were never members of the ruling class.

My first two essays have shown that there has been a basic ambiguity in the phrase, “The People.” At the risk of needless repetition, let me say that at times it meant a group within the state which held a certain political position—a group that elected its rulers and gave consent to the form of government under which it lived or proposed to live. At other times it meant a group selected from a religious context which acclaimed bishops on their election. And in yet other times it meant a social group of very low prestige—peasants, artisans, the poor, usually the uneducated. When we speak of government by popular consent we are using the term in the first sense and are not committing ourselves to any appraisal of the good taste or manners or religious insight of the People. But when we speak of “popular novels” or of “vulgarity,” we do so in a tone of disparagement. We seem to assume that social status is independent of political status. We seldom fuse the two and, at least in the United States, it has often been admitted in private conversation if not in print that the taste, manners, and literary background of our political potentates are not such as would be approved by the arbiters of the elegancies.

2. And sometimes, as when a case in court is termed “The People vs. So and So,” it seems to denote almost everyone.
The self-made man is highly regarded in terms of ecological success. But those who feel that they have the right to appraise the conduct of others will give him a low mark in social etiquette. This naturally will be called snobbishness, and in a democratic society snobbishness is condemned. But this requires qualification.

There is a historical link between the political and social senses of the term, “the People.” (The religious sense has not been used for years.) If the People are the plebs or the vulgus or the multitudo (hoi polloi), they will almost by definition be those men who have (a) no inherited property, (b) no individual political power or influence, (c) no experience of the arts or pastimes of the leisure class, and (d) none of the prestige that comes from wearing the proper clothes, speaking with the approved accent, knowing the right people, and so on ad nauseam. They are, as contemporary sociologists might say, the Out-group. Indeed, the very fact that there are so many of them lowers them in the eyes of the socially élite. We all grow up in the belief that “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare,” and by a simple conversion of Spinoza’s statement we infer that the rarer things are the more excellent. The tastes and manners of the Many make them undesirable associates. In books they may be said to have the noblest qualities as a mass, but in real life the social class that fixes the standards of approbation rarely substitutes courage, endurance, initiative, or plain hard work for good manners. And by good manners is meant the manners that may be in style at the time the appraisal is made. This is important, for sometimes through la nostalgie de la boue the manners and language that one generation considers to be those of the gutter turn into those of the drawing room. The characteristics of the vulgus have usually been dispraised, but sometimes the manners of the upper classes are taken over by the lower, and then those gestures which were thought of as the height of elegance become first quaint, and then amusing, and then downright vulgar. While this progress is going on, the reverse may be accompanying it, and those forms of be-
havior which were condemned in the time of one's grandparents become smart. The change is revealed even in the evolution of adjectives of praise: witness the word "genteel."

The People are not always the poor, but the poor are usually an important part of the People. Unfortunately, Western Europe had good reasons for not admiring them, assuming that reasons were needed. The court of last resort was always the Bible and, though both Testaments preached charity, brotherly love, alms, kindness, and the equality of all men in the sight of God, there were texts aplenty to justify the hard of heart. Biblical exegesis seldom paid much attention to contexts, except in self-defense.

Thus we find that "the poor shall never cease out of the land" (Deut. 15:11); "the Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich" (I Sam. 2:7); "the poor is hated even of his own neighbor: but the rich hath many friends" (Prov. 14:20); and finally, "Ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always" (Matt. 26:11). The one safe conclusion that can be drawn from the Bible concerning the poor is that they will always exist and that the only remedy for their condition is alms. Their poverty does not confer nobility upon them; it does not make their judgment or taste better than that of their benefactors. The curious thing is that no seer or prophet envisioned any remedy other than alms for the condition which all deplored. In Christian times, as everyone knows, voluntary poverty became a form of penance. Nor was there much comfort to be found in the New Testament for the rich. But the triumph of Christianity caused all qualms about riches to vanish, and not only the worldly but the Church itself gained wealth and sought wealth. The Church could hardly have become a worldwide organization without it. It was more pleasant to be rich, and, at least until that ultimate moment before the Gates of Paradise, the poor continued to be looked down upon. And as the People had a multitude of poor members who might at any time break loose and try to overthrow the rich, they were always a threat to the peace of mind of the dominant stratum of society. It was
essential that a man's uneasiness be pacified, if he were the type
to sympathize with his fellow men. And the easiest form of inner
pacification was to see that what one deplored was inescapable.

Although it is out of chronological order, it may not be ir-
relevant to cite here John Winthrop's Model of Christianity, in
which God is made responsible for this condition. "God Almighty,"
he says, "in His most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of
the condition of mankind as in all times some must be rich, some
poor; some high and eminent in power and dignity, some mean
and in subjection." The reason for this disposition is simple
enough: it is in conformity with the rest of Creation in which
variety and difference are the rule. Lest this diversity cause the
universe to fall apart, one kind must depend on another and all
things be interdependent. Therefore each class of men will have
its own virtues: in "the great ones" there will be manifested love,
mercy, gentleness, and temperance; in "the poor and inferior sort,"
faith, patience, and obedience. These words were written en route
to Massachusetts Bay aboard the Arabella, and their author may
not have had the leisure to think out the implications of his words.
But it was not unusual to find an apology for poverty in the oppor-
tunity it bestowed on the rich to give alms. Alms giving was a
virtue, and if there were no poor there would be no one to whom
to extend one's brotherly love. And obedience was also a virtue,
as is amply shown in Genesis. Hence, if there were no "great
ones," there would be no one to whom to be obedient.

I have found no Puritan who went so far as the Ancients in
ridiculing the poor. The Many in Greece and the mobile vulgus
in Rome were targets of both ridicule and contempt, and it
would be sheer pedantry to document this generalization, for it is
common knowledge.

3. I quote it as printed in Perry Miller's The American Puritans, p. 79.
4. Later, in Martial's time, there must have been a desire to appear poor,
perhaps because ostentation was either in bad taste or because of fear of
despilation. See his famous epigram Pauper videri Ciuna vult; at est pauper
(VIII, 19).
In pre-Conquest England social status was accompanied by inequality even before the law. The punishment meted for a crime was in harmony with the social hierarchy, the killing of a serf by a nobleman being less severely punished than the killing of a nobleman by one of his peers. In the eleventh century, Wulfstan (d. 1023) delivered a famous sermon “To the English” in which he deplored the unfair treatment of the lower orders. Many persons, he said, are reduced to poverty and humiliated, “and poor men are sorely tricked and cruelly betrayed, and [though] convicted of no crime are sold into the power of strangers far from this earth [of theirs], and for a trifling theft [by their parents] children still in the cradle are by harsh law enslaved far and wide throughout this folk; and freemen’s rights are taken away and thralldom is tightened and alms-right is curtailed, and—what is quickest to tell—the law of God is hated and scorned.”

This sort of thing is well known to historians. But what does not seem to be realized is its concomitance with the whole notion of dignitates inherent not only in the feudal system but in the cosmos as a whole. That the universe was a hierarchy was an idea of Plotinus, foreshadowed by Philo Judaeus but not developed by him. In Plotinus the hierarchy had three characteristics: it was logical, running from the most general and abstract down to the least general and most concrete; it was ontological, running from the most real, the ens realissimum, down to the least real; it was axiological, running from the best down to the worst. On each level were beings of the same degree of generality, reality, and

5. As quoted in Margaret Schlauch, English Medieval Literature and Its Social Foundations, p. 93.

6. Plotinus’ pupil Porphyry, in his Introduction to the Categories of Aristotle, may even have thought that individuals were the last stage of the hierarchy, for his famous Tree had Being at the apex and the infima species at the base. But it is probably obvious that individuals cannot be produced from, e.g., humanity, the concept, by logical means alone, unless one has previously assumed that all potentialities must be realized. This is the principle called the Principle of Plenitude by A. O. Lovejoy.
worth. By the fifth century this was developed by Pseudo-Dionysius into the celestial hierarchy, in which the nine angelic choirs were expounded. But there was also an ecclesiastical hierarchy with the Pope at the top and the catechumens at the base. And on paper, if not in fact, when the feudal system was operating, one had the sovereign at the top and the various ranks of nobility under him running, let us say, from the royal dukes down to the serfs. In Anglo-Saxon England this seems to have been simpler. There were only four ranks: the nobles (eorlas), the free peasants (ceorlas), the freedmen (laetas), and the slaves (theowas).7 The word “hierarchy” itself appears for the first time in Pseudo-Dionysius, and it is surmised that it was taken over from the organization of the Egyptian priesthood. The most familiar instance of any hierarchy at present would be in the armed services, where rank corresponds to the amount of power which a given officer, commissioned or non-commissioned, may have. The organization of a large corporation might be a close parallel, and there is a similar type of constitution in the Roman Catholic Church. By equating power with worth (dignitas), it would be an easy step to equating privilege with worth and rank and power. There is no need to point out that this is precisely what one finds in the Army and Navy. Thus one can rationalize one’s feeling that the lower ranks are inherently less worthy than the upper.

Power can be of various kinds. It may amount to nothing more than social prestige which makes power effective. It may be economic or socioeconomic. But whatever it is, there is always either an overt or a concealed center of power. Once the system is fused into one’s way of thinking, one needs no conscious effort to equate rank with value. The human beings at the top of the hierarchy are by that fact alone better than those farther down. And those at the bottom of the pyramid are ipso facto ugly, or bad,

or stupid, or ridiculous. There is no sense to this if by sense one means a rational ground.

On the other hand, custom can itself make sense. There is no rational sense in the traditional submission of wives to husbands. There is to be sure the Pauline commandment: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their husbands in every thing" (Eph. 5:22-24). There is some sense in obeying the commands of the Apostle as emanating from God. But here "sense" is equivalent to "authority," and the man who accepts authoritative dicta does not demand reasons, causes, explanations. The wife who is self-assertive is not only a bad wife but a comic figure; and so is the private soldier who takes on the airs of a commander, or the layman who acts like a bishop. In fact, in ecclesiastic circles relief was sought from the rigidity of the system as in the Saturnalia, for example, when the hierarchy was inverted and a boy acted as bishop and a lord waited on his servants. In the nineteenth century such a reversal was taken seriously, and the pity that had been felt in earlier times became esteem for those who suffered simply because of their low rank. Figaro's well-known diatribe foreshadows this change in public opinion: "Because you are a great lord, you think yourself a great genius! . . . nobility, fortune, rank, position . . . it all makes for pride! But what have you done to have such benefits? You took the trouble to be born, nothing more."

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8. This has died out in the United States, but as late as Anthony Trollope's time it was taken for granted. For that matter, it was only recently that the word "obey" was dropped from the bride's marriage vows.

9. "Parce que vous êtes un grand Seigneur, vous vous croyez un grand Génie . . . noblesse, fortune, rang, des places; tout cela rend si fier! qu'avez-vous fait pour tant de biens? vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, rien de plus." (Act V, scene 3.)
The most I can do in an essay of this size is to take a few literary examples to illustrate how men of letters felt about the People. To begin with, no one would hesitate to qualify Aristophanes as a representative of Athenian opinion. He was, to be sure, a reactionary not only in politics but also in questions of behavior. He could swallow neither Euripides nor Socrates and his lampoons of both are famous. If he survived in spite of Christian prudishness, it must be because his insights into the human race or his way of expressing them, or both, seemed agreeable to his readers, though as far as ancient literature is concerned, survival is hardly a mark of excellence. Ovid’s *Ars amatoria*, Strato’s *Musa puerilis*, and at least half of Martial’s epigrams could well be exchanged for the lost works of Sappho, Livy, Aeschylus, or Sophocles. At any rate Aristophanes did survive in part, whatever the reason, and in one of his plays (*The Knights*) Demos appears as one of the characters. The People are the victim, and in the end of the play are transformed into the Victor by something of a miracle. Two of the main characters, Cleon the Demagogue and the Sausage Seller, are of the lower classes, “unbroken by the rules of art, untamed by education,” in the words of J. Hookham Frere’s translation. And the brawling and cursing in which they engage is in part a caricature of democratic argument which could easily be transferred to our own times. Even the manner of public oratory is mocked as in essence the speech of carpenters and smiths. In fact, the speeches of Cleon and the Sausage Seller are full of metaphors taken from their trades, that of the tanner and the pork butcher. And when the two of them begin to court Demos, their suits are based on promises to ruin the state by wasting its money on corruptive measures. They anticipate Plato’s picture of the artisan class as an incorporation of the appetitive faculties of the soul. But perhaps the most telling example of Aristophanes’
opinion of the people is the passage which in Rogers' translation runs:

Chorus: Proud, O Demus, thy sway.
Thee, as Tyrant and King,
All men fear and obey,
Yet, O yet, 'tis a thing
Easy, to lead thee astray.
Empty fawning and praise
Blessed thou art to receive;
All each orator says
Sure at once to believe;
Wit thou hast, but 'tis roaming;
N'er we find it its home in.

Demos: Wit there's none in your hair.
What, you think me a fool!
What, you know not I wear,
Wear my motley by rule!
Well all day do I fare,
Nursed and cockered by all;
Pleased to fatten and train
One prime thief in my stall.
When full gorged with his gain,
Up that instant I snatch him,
Strike one blow and dispatch him.10

Since The Knights ends with Demos restored to youth and vigor, through the good offices of the Sausage Seller, and with Cleon punished, the comedy cannot be said to be only an attack on popular government. It is, rather, an attack on a specific demagogue. On the other hand, the rejuvenescence of the People is simply a return to the good old days of our fathers, preached on almost every occasion by the poet. The Demos of the first part of the play is the People of contemporary Athens, flattered by a demagogue and a sausage seller, a victim of every sort of political corruption. The Demos of the last scene is quite different. For the Demos of our fathers was incorruptible, and sausage sellers

and tanners were kept in their place. The question of how a group of aristocrats could become so weak and so susceptible to the bribes of the vulgar is, needless to say, not broached.

It is easy to forget, when talking about Athenian democracy, that the Demos was far from being the total male population of Athens. The term did not cover the slaves, some of whom were well-educated prisoners of war, nor the resident aliens, the Metoikoi, nor, of course, the women. In Herodotus (I, 196) it was a term contrasted with the “fortunate,” the commoners as contrasted with the Gentry. In Thucydides (V, 4) it distinguished the Plebeians from the Men-in-Power (hoi Dynatoi). Thus, after the fifth century it could be used with a pejorative connotation. In fact, as early as Solon, we find the distinction made between the “mass of the people” and “those who [are] rich in power, who in [wealth] are glorious and great,” as if such a division were inevitable. But there is a possibility that Aristotle’s dispraise of manual work led him to base the distinction on economic status. For we find him objecting to granting citizenship to artisans as men who cannot “practice virtue.” Since virtue, as defined in the Nicomachean Ethics, depends on one’s having leisure, the dogma appears understandable. There are plenty of sentences and anecdotes in Greek literature which assert the courage, the ingenuity, the candor of the poor, just as there are others which assert that the rich have antithetical traits. But it is not to be expected that a man of the common people will have the qualities of the nobleman. That would be, if nothing more, a contradiction in terms. Perhaps the best evidence of this is Odysseus’ different treatment of men “of noble birth or high rank” and “men of the Demos” in the Iliad

12. Politics, 1278 a: “In ancient times,” he says, “... the artisan class were slaves or foreigners and therefore a majority of them are so now.” And a bit later he adds, “No man can practice virtue who is living the life of a mechanic or laborer.” (Trans. Jowett, revised.)
(II, 188–206). To the latter he uses harsh names and threats, to the former friendly persuasion, a custom not unusual even in modern armies.

Plautus

One naturally turns to the plays of Plautus as examples of Roman comedy. But Plautus, unlike Aristophanes, is not a social critic. He has two stock comic figures, the Pimp and the Slave, both insolent. His humor is largely confined to verbal repartee and insult. Even the Miles Gloriosus, though the remote progenitor of Falstaff, is only a buffoon. That the comic characters come from the Plebs, when not slaves, is true, but that their comic traits are identified with their plebeian origin is not true. Plautus had a certain sympathy—or perhaps I should say “uncertain”—for some members of the Plebs. The chorus of fishermen in Rudens illustrates this.

The poor in every way live miserably
Especially if they have no trade and have never learned any skill.
Whatever they happen to have at home must suffice for them.
Now we, you can see how rich we are from our costume.
These hooks and these rods, they are our trade and our living.
Daily from the city to the sea we trudge for fodder.
That is our [sport] our gymnastics and our wrestling.
Sea urchins, limpets, oysters, sea-mussels, shell-fish, mussels, ribbed scallops, are our catch.
And then we go on to fishing with hook and stone.
Our food we get from the sea; if nothing turns up
And if we catch no fish, well, covered with salt washed clean,
Home we go secretly, to bed without supper.13

13.  
Omnia modis qui pauperes sunt homines miseri vivont, praesertim quibus nec quaestus est, nec artem didicere artem ullam: necessitate quidquid est domi id sat est habendum; nos iam de ornatu propemodum ut locupletes simus scitis: hisce hamis atque haec harundines sunt nobis quaestu et cultu. Cotidie ex urbe ad mare huc prodimus pabulatum: pro exercitu gymnastico et palaestrico hos habemus;
This speech is not a protest. That it was a funny speech one hardly dares assert, for to a modern reader it seems pathetic. But then *The Taming of the Shrew* is said to be funny, and not merely to Elizabethan ears. Shylock, too, may have been a comic character—as was Herod in the mystery plays.

The association of buffoonery with the lower classes, insofar as they are laborers and peasants, has been fairly consistent up to modern times. This clearly does not imply that the upper classes were uniformly praised. One would merely have to read Juvenal to be disabused of that idea. But in aesthetic matters the taste of the vulgus was held to be inherently lower than that of the aristocracy. Ben Jonson, translating Horace, has him say, “The Roman gentry, men of birth and mean, / Will take offence at this,” that is, “of ever-wanton verse, bawdy speeches and unclean.” Jonson must have suspected that the Roman gentry, like the English, were just as wanton, bawdy, and unclean in their speech as the “men street-born.” But it was the custom to overlook this and to attribute purity of taste to the gentry and impurity to the multitude, just as Shakespeare usually gives prose to the comic figures and blank verse to the serious. But this goes back at least to Scaliger.

In Scaliger’s opinion comedy uses characters from low city life or the country, whereas tragedy uses kings and princes. There seemed to be something intrinsically funny in both the appearance and

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echinos, lopadas, ostreas, balanos captamus, conchas, 
marinam urticam, musculos, plagias striatas;
post id piscatum hamatilem et saxaticem adgredimur.
cibum captamus e mari: si eventus non evenit
neque quicquam captum piscium, salsi lautique pure
domum redimus clanculum, dormimus incenati.

II, 290 ff., ed. C. E. Harrington. It is worth noting that the lot of the fisherman is almost always described as hard and melancholy, even in the piscatory eclogues. Cf. the *Letters of Alciphron*, probably third century A.D. Dr. Henry Marion Hall in his *Idylls of Fishermen* (p. 2) tries to explain this on mythological and historical grounds. See below, p. 149, for how the life of the shepherd became a happy motif in Christian literature, though four of the Apostles were fishermen and none of those named in the Gospels are called shepherds.
speech of boors, clowns, yokels, pedlars, grave-diggers, servants, private soldiers. They were just not to be taken seriously.\textsuperscript{14}

In fact, the very adjective “vulgar” as a term of dispraise is good enough evidence that whatever emanates from the \textit{Plebs} is in bad taste. Vulgar humor and vulgar speech, like popular opinion and popular songs, are all on the same aesthetic level—though the same humor, meanings, opinions, and songs when translated into the vocabulary of the upper classes will be acceptable. There is an analogy to this in the substitution of Greek and Latin derivatives for words of Anglo-Saxon origin where the latter are vulgar both in the sense of being low in the social scale and in the sense of being indecent. Warner and Lünt, to whose work I have already referred, have found that the speech of the upper-upper class sometimes coincides with that of the lower-lower class. But what amounts to affectation in the upper-upper comes naturally to the lower-lower. One may affect the manners and speech of a class one looks down on and never feel the need to endow it with one’s own political and social privileges. The southern aristocrat suckled by a Negro “Mammy” rarely felt it his duty to grant her the vote. The black blood of America’s mulattoes counts for more than their white blood. Yet even if one discounts racial prejudice, there exists also social prejudice, expressed in taboos regarding good and bad addresses, appropriate families into which one may marry, approved schools and colleges, and even Christian sects.\textsuperscript{15} This need not be tied to any economic factor at all. The upper social stratum may contain a large number of people with only moderate incomes, and the richest families in a community may be sneered at because of the newness of their wealth, the source of it, or the social stratum into which they were born. Any excuse will serve to justify one person’s contempt for another. The adjective “vulgar,” with all its ambiguities, will prove omnicient.

\textsuperscript{14} Roman opinion should be supplemented by Trimalchio’s account of his rise from rags to riches in the \textit{Satyricon}, chapters 75 and 76. It is a typical satire of the \textit{nouveau riche}.

The Mysteries

Social status is not always the measure of esteem when one comes to the English mystery and morality plays. Whereas in the Chester Pageant of *The Deluge* Noah's wife is the typical village scold, in the Coventry Nativity Play it is King Herod who is ridiculed. When seeing the former, surely one was supposed to be amused to hear Noah's wife say to her husband who was trying to induce her to enter the ark,

Yea, sir, set up your sail  
And row forth with evil heale,  
For without any fail,  
I will not out of this town.  
But I have gossibs every one,  
One foot further I will not go;  
They shall not drown, by St. John!  
If I may save their life.  
They loved me full well, by Christ!  
But thou will let them in thy chest,  
Else row forth, Noah, whether thou list,  
And get thee a new wife.

Yet Noah's wife, for some reason now lost, is usually represented as a scold in such plays. In the Towneley *Deluge* she delays the departure, scolds Noah for his self-centeredness, hits him—blows that he returns—and when she enters the ark, cannot find anything good to say about it.

I fa[i]th I can not fynd,  
Which is before, which is behynd,  
Bot shall we here be pynd,  
Noc, as hauc thou blis?

Whereupon she leaves the ark and has to be almost beaten into returning aboard. This, I assume, was funny. And similarly the

16. Text from *Everyman and Other Interludes* (Everyman ed.), p. 34.  
17. See John Matthews Manly, *Specimens of the Pre-Shaksperean Drama*, Vol. 1, pp. 21 ff. It is only fair to the memory of Noah's wife to say that in *Noah and Lamech* she behaves very well.
Shearmen and Tailors who put on the Nativity Play must have grinned when Herod, swearing by Mahound, spoke of himself as “he thatt made bothe hevin and hell,” “the cause of this lyght and thunder.”

Who wrote the plays is not always known, but the original authors must have been literate—though no doubt the actors also inserted improvisations. The identity of the authors would be of use in determining their probable prejudices. If they were abbots or nobles they might have made their shepherds and artisans crude and farcical. On the other hand, the fact that the plays were given for town rather than gown to some degree explains the simplicity of their subject matter. And to that consideration must be adjoined the historical fact that the end of the fourteenth century was the period of peasants’ and workers’ rebellions. Of this more below.

Chaucer

That the People are inherently crude in their tastes comes out vividly in The Canterbury Tales, which, it should not be forgotten, were written in the same period as Piers Plowman. The stories are by and large in conformity with the character of their narrators, though presumably Chaucer wanted his readers to think that all the pilgrims enjoyed all the tales. The tales of the Miller and the Reeve are, one imagines, the kind of story that Chaucer thought millers and reeves would be likely to tell. But whereas he has his fun with Miller and Reeve, with Merchant and Man of Law, with the Wife of Bath and the Doctor, he treats the poor Plowman, the Clerk, the Shipman, and the Parson with respect.

18. Ibid., p. 137.
19. This should be supplemented by a reading of the Second Shepherd’s Play (Towneley) and the opening of Johan Johan Tyb and Syr Johan, with its 110 lines on how Johan Johan is going to beat his wife. Or, to take a later example, see Act 3, scene 3, of Gammer Gurton’s Needle.
Hence there would seem to be no relation between professional or economic status, and decency or indecency. As a matter of fact, he writes an apology for the Miller’s tale in the prologue, and adds,

And therefor, who-so list it nat y-here,
Turne over the leaf, and chese another tale.

And in the Shipman’s prologue, after the Man of Law has dilated on patience, kindness, and charity, and the Priest has rebuked the Host for his swearing, Chaucer has the Host say, “I smelle a looler in the wind,” as today in the United States one would smell a communist. There is no concluding any social philosophy in Chaucer.

So much is probably obvious. There is no simplifying a great poet like Chaucer. He satirizes even himself, as in the prologue to Sir Thopas and the Host’s interruption of that tiresome ballad. Chaucer was able to understand every human character and to give each full empathy. He did not take himself so seriously as scholars have taken him. The one character about whom he is really bitter is the Pardoner. It would be prudent, if over-cautious, to say merely that he was more interested in individuals than in classes of men. That he accepted rank and its privileges is indubitable; but that he held any theories about their origin or development is very questionable. The closest approach to a generalization about manners and social class is in the tale of the Wife of Bath (ll. 1146–59), strange though that may seem:

Heer may ye see wel how that genterye
Is nat annexed to possessioun
Sith folk ne doon the fyr, lo! in his kinde.
A lords eone do shame and vileinyc;
And he that wol han prys of his gentrye
For he was boren of a gentil hous,
And hadde hisc eldres noble and vertvous,
And nil himselven do no gentil dedis,
Ne folwe his gentil auncestre that deed is,
Ne nis nat gentil, be he duk or erl;
For vileyns sinful dedes make a cherl . . .
Thy gentillesse cometh fro god allone;
Than comth our verray gentillesse of grace,
It was no-thing biquethe us with our place.


88 / vox populi
But this was a commonplace even in the fourteenth century. Another commonplace is found in the Clerk’s tale, in the author’s interpolation beginning (lines 995–1001).

O stormy peple! unsad and ever untrewe!
Ay undiscreet and chaunging as a vane,
Delyting ever in rumbel that is newe,
For lyk the mone ay wexe ye and wane;
Ay ful of clapping, dere y-nogh a jane;
Your doom is fals, your constance yvel preveth,
A ful greet fool is he that on yow leveth.

It is usually wrong to attribute to an author the opinions expressed by one of his fictional characters, but this particular passage is given to the author himself by the editors and presumably he is speaking in it in propria persona.

Anonymous Authors

There is a large assortment of poems and prose passages which could be chosen to indicate opinion about the People in the Middle Ages. But only an anthology would do them justice. One very curious attack is printed by Thomas Wright in his Anecdota Literaria. It is entitled Des vilains.20

Or escoutez un autre conte.
A toz les vilains doint Dex honte
Qui je hui matin se leverent;
Et si di-je pechie, qu’il erent
Les terres qui portent lo blé:
Ne en iver, ne en esté
Ne finent-il de travailier,
Chascuns jor, por ce gaaigner
Don clerç juvent, et autre gent.
Lo pain et lo vin en semant,
Tot lo gaaignent li vilain,
Et tot l’avon-nos par lor main,
Il sofrent lo froit et lo chatt,
Por gaaignier; mais moi ne chatt,

Dex male honte li envoit.
Or ne sofrent ne chaut ne frot
Por nos, mais il font por argent,
Il nos selent moult chierement
Tote la rien que il nos vandent;
Totjerz à nos enginer tandent,
Moult sont felon, si con moi sanble.
Se il voient.iiiij.clers ensanble,
O .iiiij. en une compeignie,
Don n’i a vilain qui ne die,
“Esgardez de ces clerbs bolastres;
Par ma foi, il est plus clerjastes
Que berbiz ne que autres bestes.”
Max feus !ors broissc !es testes
As vilains qui ce vont disant!
Plaust à Deu lo roi puissant,
Que je fusse roi des vilains,
Je fcissc plus de mil ainez
Et autretant de laz feisse:
Dont je par les cos les preisse:
A mal port fussent arive!
Jà vilains ne fust tant osé,
Que il un mot osast parler,
Ne mais por del pain demander,
O por sa pastrenostre dire.
Moult aussent en moi mal sire,
Et totjors m’apclassent maistre;
Mais por ce que rois ne puis estre,
Vos en lairai atant lo conte.
Dex lor doint à toz male honte,
Si voirement, con je voldroie,
Dame-Dex ma proière en oie.21

21. Professor Grace Frank has been kind enough to provide me with the following translation of these verses:

Now listen to another tale.
May God give ill fortune to all the peasants
Who arise this morning;
And even though I speak sinfully, may they keep wandering over
The lands that bear the grain:
Neither in winter nor in summer
May they cease working,
Each day in order to obtain
That which clerks and others enjoy.
In sowing bread and wine
Peasants gain everything
Campanella

The number of verses written in contempt of the peasant is probably no greater than the number of satires against women, of which some are ferocious, or those against the clergy. The fourteenth century was given to satire, and it would require a large volume to include even a fair sample of it. But there is a poem

And everything we have from their hands.
They suffer cold and heat
To gain [those things], but I do not care.
God gives them this ill fortune.
They do not suffer heat or cold
For us, but for money.
They ladle out to us very dearly
Everything that they sell us;
They always tend to cheat us,
Very wicked they are, it seems to me.
If they see three clerks together
Or four in a group
There is no peasant who does not say,
"See those deceitful clerks;
By my faith there are more bad clerks
Than sheep or other animals."
May evil fire brush the heads
Of the peasants who go saying these things.
Would to God, the powerful King,
That I were king of the peasants.
I would make more than a thousand fish-hooks
And just as many snares
By which I might take them by their cods.
They would have arrived at a sorry port.
Never would a peasant be so bold
As to dare to speak a word, not even
To beg for bread
Or say his paternoster.
He would have a harsh lord in me
And would always call me master.
But since I cannot be king
I'll now leave off telling this tale.
May God give them all ill fortune
As truly as I should wish
That the Lord hear my prayer.

This should be contrasted with another poem printed by Wright in the same volume (p. 64), entitled *Des putains et des Lecheoirs*, in which God is said to have established three orders of men: clerks to whom He gave alms and tithes; knights (*chevaliers*) to whom He gave lands; and peasants to whom He gave plowing.
dating from two centuries later which deserves a special place in an essay such as this, for it emphasizes a new aspect of the social question. It is written by Campanella.

Il popolo è una bestia varia e grossa ch'ignora le sue forze; e però stassi a pesi e botte di legni e di sassi, guidato da un fanciul che non ha possa, ch'egli portria disfar con una scossa: me lo t'eco e lo serve a tutti spassi. Né sa quanto à tcmuto, ché i bombassi fanno un incanto, ché i sensi gli ingrossa.

Cosa stupenda! e s'appicca e imprigiona con le man proprie, e si dá morte e guerre per un carlin di quanti egli al re dona. Tutto à suo quanto sta fra ciclo e terra ma nol conosce; c se qualche persona di ciò avise, é l’uccida ed attterra.22

Here we happen to know that the author was involved in an uprising in Naples, spent twenty years in prison, and presumably was speaking with deep feeling. His sonnet does more than repeat platitudes. It is the one poem I have found in this field which expresses the irony of popular stupidity combined with power. It anticipates the lament that has been heard in the nineteenth century and occasionally in the twentieth, that the People do not realize how easily they could liberate themselves. And to add to

22. John Addington Symonds in his Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarrotti and Tommaso Campanella (p. 143) translated this sonnet as follows:

The People is a beast of muddy brain,
That knows not its own force, and therefore stands
Loaded with wood and stone; the powerless hands
Of a mere child guide it with bit and rein:
One kick would be enough to break the chain;
But the beast fears, and what the child demands,
It does; nor its own terror understands,
Confused and stupefied by bugbears vain,
Most wonderful! With its own hand it ties
And gags itself—gives itself death and war
For pence doled out by kings from its own store.
Its own are all things between earth and heaven;
But this it knows not; and if one arise
To tell the truth, it kills him unforgiven.
the irony, they would kill the man who would tell them. Campanella told them, and should one wish to know the fate he suffered, one has only to read the sonnets he wrote in prison.

Spenser

Campanella's sonnet, as I say, refers to the People as unrealized political power. But in France and in England this power had been realized and had made itself felt in rebellions that terrified the propertied class. One finds echoes of the revolts in strange places. Echoes of Lollardry, for example, recur even in The Faerie Queene, as we have heard them in Chaucer. In the Second Canto of Book V we find the People personified as the Mighty Gyant, satirizing the whole movement of class rebellion as a process of leveling which is against the decrees of God and Nature.

He sayd that he would all the earth uptake
And all the sea, divided each from either:
So would he of the fire one ballance make,
And one of th'ayre, without or wind or wether;
Then would he ballance heaven and hell together,
And all that did within them all conteine,
Of all whose weight he would not misse a fether:
And looke what surplus did of each remaine,
He would to his owne part restore the same againe:

For-why, he sayd, they all unequall were,
And had encroched uppon others share;
Like as the sea (wiche plaine he shewed there)
Had wonne the earth; so did the fire the aire;
So all the rest did others parts cmpaire,
And so were realmes and nations run awry.23

Obviously the remedy is to reduce all things "unto equality."

Therefore the vulgar did about him flocke,
And cluster thicke unto his leasings vaine,
Like foolish flics about an hony-croke;
In hope by him great benefits to gaine.

But Artegall, the Man of Justice, sets the Gyant and his disciples right. Based on the doctrine of cosmic balance, his doctrine is one of stability: “All change is perillous, and all chaunce unsound.” But this has little effect upon the Gyant, who replies:

Therefore I will throwe downe these mountaines hie,
And make them levell with the lowly plaine;
These towring rocks, which reach unto the skie,
I will thrust downe into the deepest maine,
And as they were, them equalize againe.
Tyrants, that make men subject to their law,
I will suppress, that they no more may raine;
And Lordlings curbe that commons over-aw,
And all the wealth of rich men to the poore will draw.

But Artegall retorts with the familiar answer: all is in the hands of God whose ways are beyond our understanding.

What ever thing is done by him is donene,
Ne any may his mighty will withstand;
Ne any may his soveraine power shonne,
Ne loose that he hath bound with stedfast band.
In vaine therefore doest thou now take in hand
To call to count, or weigh his workes anew,
Whose counsels depth thou canst not understand;
Sith of things subject to thy daily vew
Though doest not know the causés, nor their courses dew.

The result is that Artegall’s companion, iron Talus, pushes the Gyant off his eminence and “down the rock him throwing, in the sea him drowned.” This arouses the people who “rose in armes, and all in battell order stood.” But they, like the Gyant, are exterminated by Talus, since Artegall had qualms “his noble hands t’imbrew in the base blood of such a rascall crew.” Lest one think this to be of only dramatic relevance, reference should be made also to Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, in which the remedy for Ireland’s troubles is not very different.

Spenser also seems to have had a feeling that social rank endowed people with special qualities which were congenital. In one place he goes to a ridiculous extreme in maintaining that skill in equitation is innate in men of noble blood:
In brave poursuit of honorable deed,
There is I know not [what] great difference
Betweene the vulgar and the noble seed,
Which unto things of valorous pretence
Seemes to be borne by native influence;
As feates of armes, and love to entertaine:
But chiefly skill to ride seemes a science
Proper to gentle blood: some other faine
To menage steeds, as did this vaunter, but in vaine.24

He even goes so far as to be able to spot in a foundling—a wild man, living in the woods and unable to speak any recognizable language—his noble forebears.

O what an easie thing is to descry
The gentle bloud, how ever it be wrapt
In sad misfortunes foule deformity
And wretched sorrowes, which have often hapt!
For howsoever it may grow mis-shapt,
Like this wylcl man being undisciplynd,
That to all vertue it may secme unapt,
Yet will it shew some sparkes of gentle mynd,
And at the last breaks forth in his owne proper kynd.25

The rebels of whom Spenser is thinking are probably those who took part in the rising of 1549 in the reign of Edward VI. These men of Exeter and Norfolk were presumably fighting the increasing enclosures. Their leader was the famous Robert Ket, a tanner. The charge of communism raised by Spenser was as common then as it is today in the United States, for one of the few

24. Book 2, canto 4, stanza 1. “This vaunter” is Braggadocchio.
25. Book 6, canto 5, stanza 1. In stanza 2 we find that this wild man has been “rudely borne and bred/Ne never saw faire guize, ne learned good,” but nevertheless showed “some token of his gentle bloud,” in his treatment of Serena. We are told that “when time shall be to tell,” we shall find out who the wild man really was. But The Faerie Queene comes to an end before we are told. In the case of another foundling, Pastorelle, a birthmark serves as identification; she too had the bearing of a woman of noble birth though brought up by those marvelous shepherds in whom Spenser had a special interest.
universal traits of historical mankind seems to be the fear of losing property.  

Shakespeare

It is inevitable in an essay like this one to say a word about Shakespeare. Coriolanus is the tragedy of a man beaten down by the people whom he had tried to help. Shakespeare shared with Chaucer the ability to put himself inside his characters, so that their speeches become precisely what one would have expected them to say. In the case of Coriolanus he had some help from Plutarch. He follows the tradition of introducing artisans and the lower classes for comic relief, but he does not confine his satire to them.

One might think that the choice of Gaius Marcius for a hero was evidence of anti-popular sentiment on Shakespeare’s part. But that the plebs are fickle was nothing new in literature, and that Marcius was notoriously opposed to their demands is clear from history. Indeed, Shakespeare makes good use of this information to open the play. The one significant particular in which Shakespeare and Plutarch differ is in Plutarch’s justification of the resentment of the plebs against the patricians: they had lost their property, were destitute and hungry, and had been reduced to servitude. Plutarch also maintains that the Senate did nothing to alleviate their suffering and, when some of the more moderate senators favored helping them, that Marcius sternly opposed them. He says that even those who admired Marcius for his courage and austerity were disgusted by his haughtiness and imperious temper. None of this appears in Shakespeare. The angry citizens who open the tragedy mince no words and make their accusations without dramatic motivation. Marcius is called “chief enemy to the people”; he is to be killed at once; he is “very dog to the common-

26. See G. M. Trevelyan’s England in the Age of Wycliffe on this charge during the rebellion of 1381.
alty”; and the good that he has done was done “to please his mother and to be partly proud.” Dramatically the whole of the plot is contained, as in a germ, in this opening passage. The dénouement is occasioned by his mother’s intercession; his pride blocks every attempt to reconcile him to the people. He mocks at popular approval:

    Bid them wash their faces and keep their teeth clean . . .
    'Twas never my desire yet to trouble the poor with begging . . .
    Better it is to die, better to starve,
    Than crave the hire which first we do deserve.

And so it goes. Yet Shakespeare realizes that a mob without a leader is impotent and shows us the citizens swaying first toward Coriolianus and then, under the suggestions of Sicinius and Brutus, abandoning him. It is the technique of mob rule, which he uses also in Julius Caesar, the technique of flattery skillfully blended with suggestion. But anyone likely to read these pages will have recalled the lines I have in mind (Act II, scene 3) and can be spared their repetition. The one conclusion that seems reasonable is that Coriolianus is the tragedy of pride, superbia, and that it is only accidentally the expression of its author’s social views. The most one can say is that the voice of the people echoes the voice of the demagogue.

We have mentioned Mark Antony’s oration and it may be useful to compare the attitude of the people toward Coriolianus with their attitude toward Caesar. In the opening of Julius Caesar the Tribunes, Flavius and Marullus, drive the Carpenter and the Cobbler, along with their fellows, from the streets, where they have assembled to celebrate Caesar’s triumph. In words resembling those of Coriolianus, they are called blocks, stones, “worse than senseless things.” And they “vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness.” Their guilt is ingratitude to Pompey. And in Casca’s account of Antony’s offering the crown to Caesar we find that “the rabblement hooted, and clapped their hands; and threw up their sweaty night-caps, and uttered such a deal of stinking breath because
Caesar refus'd the crown, that it had, almost, chok'd Caesar.” But the uncomplimentary description goes on in the dialogue between Casca and Cassius (Act I, scene 3), where the Romans are sheep to Caesar's wolf, hinds to his lion. So in the funeral scenes, the people swing from Brutus to Antony at the touch of oratory. And probably the most frightful scene in Shakespeare is that in which the mob attacks Cinna, the poet, a scene which is irrelevant to the tragedy of either Brutus or Caesar but shows how fiercely and irrationally the People will behave when aroused (Act III, scene 3). The one dramatic purpose of this scene would seem to be a demonstration of mob violence stimulated by oratory, and hence a denunciation of policy determined by popular acclamation.

Some consideration should perhaps be given to the Second Part of Henry VI, of which Jack Cade's revolt is an incident. But though Cade's forces are described as “a ragged multitude of hinds and peasants, rude and merciless,” calling “all scholars, lawyers, courtiers, gentlemen” “false caterpillars” (Act IV, scene 4), it is only by inference that one can uncover a definitely hostile judgment of the People as a whole. For there is an equally severe judgment of all the villains in all the plays, be they commoner or noble. Cade's rebellion may have been justified by the condition of the peasants and maybe Shakespeare should have tried to justify it in his play. It took place one hundred and fifty years before Henry VI was written, and it is treated almost as a farcical interlude, with Cade's insistence on being addressed as Lord Mortimer, ordering the burning of London Bridge and the Tower, and the destruction of all records—“my mouth shall be the parliament of England” (Act IV, scene 7)—and his decreeing the common ownership of all things. Shakespeare follows history in having Buckingham and Lord Clifford offer pardon to all who will forsake Cade and return home. And he follows tradition in having Cade himself berate his troops for their vacillation. Again, as in Julius Caesar and Coriolanus, we find the populace swinging over, to their leader for a time, only to switch once more after a speech
from Clifford. The topos of the fickle crowd has to be carried out. Small wonder that Cade leaves the scene crying, “Was ever feather so lightly blown to and fro as this multitude?” But before jumping to any conclusions about Shakespeare’s contempt for the People, it would be best to recall Richard II’s dethronement (Richard II, Act IV, scene 1) and the king’s comments on courtiers.27 The fairest conclusion on Shakespeare’s views of society and popular control of its destiny is that he shows no sympathy either with the mob or with demagogues, regardless of status. He occasionally shows some sympathy for individuals of the lower classes but on the whole has no interest in them as serious dramatic material. Nor did his contemporary dramatists.

Shakespeare was living in a time when England was free from Rome, when a queen of unquestioned popularity was on the throne, and when the realm as a whole was quiet. It remained, moreover, internally peaceful until the time of the Puritan Rebellion. But this was not typical of English history; revolt and anarchy, despotism and invasion, had punctuated it from the earliest recorded times. It has been said that in the beginning the king was elected by the free choice of the People, an opinion based in all probability on Tacitus’s Germania.28 Regardless of the vagueness of the word “people,” one can envision the history of England as the growth of popular freedom and the decline of royal power. There was progress and retrogression in this history. Revolts against vested authority with accompanying disorder amounting to something close to anarchy occurred in the eighth century, in the middle of the tenth, in the early thirteenth under Richard I, as well as under John and later under Henry III. Simon Montford

27. See also Act 5, scene 2: York’s account of Bolingbroke’s reception by the London crowds. For an interesting but superficial attack on Shakespeare’s social views, see Upton Sinclair’s Mammonart, chapters 35 and 36.

28. See J. R. Green, History of the English People, Vol. 1, p. 35. This work, though no longer in style, was based on original sources and should be revived.
and the Communes kept the middle part of the century in turmoil, though for a good cause, and in the fourteenth century came the Peasants' Revolt. One can see in this constant warfare of king against king, king against baronage, populace against feudal superior, something symptomatic of an atmosphere of discontent and the determination to appease it. Two kings were dethroned and subsequently murdered; one was forced by his barons to limit his sovereignty. The Lollards, John Ball and Wat Tyler, Jack Cade, Langland, Wyclif, these are names which show the way the winds of doctrine were beginning to blow.

The history of the French peasantry differs from that of the English only in that we have earlier records of their rebellions. Beginning with the revolt of Mariccus and his 8000 peasants (Tacitus, Historiae, II, 61), a revolt put down by Vitellius, the story continues with the bands known as the Bagaudae about 284. Then, skipping the centuries of which we have but the most meager information, we come to the Parlements des paysans Normands, roughly A.D. 1000; the Capuchonnés of Durand the carpenter in 1182; the Pastoureaux, headed by Jacob, the Master of Hungary, in the thirteenth century; the second Pastorale of 1320; the Jacquerie and the Tuchins in the fourteenth century; and the Ecorcheurs in the fifteenth, with increasing misery among the peasants. The waves of discontent mounted; they culminated in the Commune de Romans, with Jean Serve le Pommier as its chief, in the Croquants towards the end of the sixteenth century, and in the rebellion of the Nu-Pieds of 1639. None of these revolts was lasting, none was successful. It was not until 1789 that the Third Estate supported by the nobility was able to bring about a successful revolution and finally rid France of the Old Regime.29 (An analogous account could be written of Rome.)

Meanwhile Englishmen were being slaughtered and towns devastated not only in foreign adventures but at home. The lower-

29. The detailed story, fully documented, of peasant revolts in France is given in Gérard Walter's Histoire des paysans de France.
class Englishman of the fourteenth century suffered from unusual poverty. To this poverty were added the revolt of Kent, the Statute of Laborers of 1351, the Black Death, the uprising of men like Owen Glendower, which ran into the first years of the fifteenth century, and the War of the Roses from 1453 to 1497. Then in the sixteenth century came the resistance of Parliament in 1523 to Wolsey’s demands for money for the king, the Reformation, the execution of Anne Boleyn, and the religious troubles under Edward VI and Mary Tudor. Surely no contemporary of Shakespeare wanted any more treasons, stratagems, and spoils; what he wanted was peace and order. There was no peace, however, and England had to undergo another series of wars, both international and civil, and whatever merriement there was in Merrie England came by the way. Yet there was manifested throughout those centuries a determination to secure freedom from arbitrary authority, whether vested in king, noble, or prelate.30

Prose Fiction

Meanwhile prose fiction was undergoing a development which was to culminate in the modern novel. The miseries of the poor had been expressed eloquently by Langland, but it was not until the appearance of Lazarillo de Tormes (1554) that realistic description of their lives was written down as something for the literate to read.31 The picaresque novel, whether Spanish or French (Gil Blas) or English (Colonel Jack), was presumably read as comic literature, but nevertheless the tricks played by the heroes, the insight which their stories gave into low life, the poverty and

30. Most of this is well known; but for the somber side of the reign of Edward III, one of the longest reigns in English history, see Traill’s Social England, Vol. 2, pp. 11 ff.

31. Though there were farces on the theme of the blindman and his boy, Le Garçon et l’Aveugle. See Grace Frank, The Medieval French Drama, pp. 221 ff.
suffering of their characters, the courage and skill with which these were borne, must have elicited some sympathy from their readers. Certainly it would be difficult for a modern reader to go through Lazarillo and simply laugh. Laughter there is aplenty in such books, but there is as much serious criticism of life as in Don Quixote or Gargantua or, for that matter, in the comedies of Molière. The criticism comes clearly and tellingly through the humor. One has only to compare Gil Blas, for instance, with the Satyricon to see this. When Petronius wishes to condemn orientalism, to take but one example, he condemns it in so many words, stepping out of character to do so. But when Le Sage wishes to condemn Gongorism, he invents an episode in which one of his characters becomes involved. In short, the social criticism is intricately woven into the narrative.

It is a curiosity of literary history that social satire is often expressed through the mouth of an exotic—a Persian, an American Indian, a Chinese—as if a certain distance were necessary if one were to look objectively at one's society. But the same end is achieved by selecting a character from a social stratum which is not in favor—a workman, a parasite, a vagabond, a prostitute, an adventurer. Whether an author is aware of this or not, he writes as if a Gil Blas, a Roxana, a Figaro, had the distance that was needed. These people are out of society; they are foreigners to all intents and purposes. If they manifest shrewdness of insight, it comes not from applying the standards of their class to the behavior of a superior class but by utilizing generally accepted standards of behavior which are not believed to have any relevance to social status or national origin. Like the Wise Fool, the Innocent Child, the Simpleton of the fairy tales, l'Ingénu, they are able to penetrate the shams and pretenses of society. From the realistic point of view, it is surely fanciful to say that an artisan, a prostitute, a private soldier, has more valid knowledge of society than a doctor, a priest, or a general officer in the army. To be exploited or unfortunate confers no special intelligence on a
man. In fact, if it did, the aesthetic shock of the picaresque novel would fall flat. Just as we are pleased that the youngest of the Three Little Pigs turns out to be the most intelligent, so we are pleased when a crude peasant kills a dragon and wins a king’s daughter. If this were an everyday event, we should be bored to death hearing about it. Yet the Cinderella theme continues to divert the public, and even so sophisticated a writer as Bernard Shaw made effective use of it.

The picaresque novel and the accounts of low life, as in Restif de la Bretonne, prepared the public mind in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for taking the lower classes seriously. But before that could happen one had to pass through the dreary stage of heroizing the middle classes. Once that was done, then stories of the nobility, of the court, of the rich, became as tiresome as romances of chivalry became in the eyes of Cervantes. To read a novel by Ouida is to laugh or to be bored. Yet there is a real possibility that her incidents, if not her psychology, were plausible. After all, very rich people have existed and have lived lives that sound as fabulous to us who read them as do the happenings in the Arabian Nights. Again, it is unlikely that the real Giton, if there was one, would have thought the Satyricon of much interest. And one has yet to find a decayed southern aristocrat who looked upon Faulkner with much appreciation. Novels, like plays, give what seems to be information about society to their readers. This possibility of going beyond life as one knows it must be admitted to be a powerful element of interest in reading fiction. I do not say that “escapism” or information is the main interest in a novel. Like every work of art, a novel is a complex of many interests. But still, one that simply tells you what you already know is a dull book indeed. I suspect that the emphasis which is put upon eroticism in contemporary fiction captures the interest of the general public for the simple reason that in their daily lives they have suppressed their interest in it. To see it come out in the open is a refreshing experience, like that of seeing
"dirty words" written on a wall. So sympathy for the oppressed in fiction is a good substitute for helping them.

English Lyric Poetry

I have examined a large anthology of English poems\(^{32}\) to see how the People appeared in them. This anthology contains some of the work of three hundred and fifteen poets and has about one thousand poems. Most of the poetry would be called lyrical, having to do with the feelings of the poet about various subjects. Of the poems examined, only fourteen have anything to do with the fate of the underdog. In chronological order one might begin with Johnson’s London, where a few lines of sympathy for the poor are found:

Has Heaven reserved, in pity to the poor,  
No pathless waste, or undiscovered shore?  
No secret island in the boundless main?  
No peaceful desert yet unclaimed by Spain?  
Quick let us rise, the happy seats explore,  
And bear oppression’s insolence no more.  
This mournful truth is everywhere confessed,  
Slow rises worth by poverty depressed.

A vaguely similar sympathy is expressed by Goldsmith in The Deserted Village:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay:  
Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade;  
A breath can make them, as a breath has made;  
But a bold peasantry, their country’s pride,  
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

There follows a lament for the spread of towns which has made it impossible for the poet to retire to “humble bowers and die at home.” But this is purely personal and says nothing about the

32. Great Poems of the English Language, an Anthology of Verse in English from Chaucer to the Moderns, compiled by Wallace Alvin Briggs.
character of the peasantry except in the most general terms. It is simply sentimental nostalgia for the country, and a critic would be foolish to attempt to drag anything more out of it. Blake, however, in his little poem _London_ is more forceful in his condemnation of the town, in which he hears

How the chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackening church appalls,

or,

How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,  
And blasts with plagues the marriage-hearse.

It was not until the nineteenth century was well underway that a poet struck a more violent note. Shelley's _Song to the Men of England_, like Hood's _Song of the Shirt_, was a bitter exclamation of disgust and a call to action. It is, I imagine, unique in its intensity and must be about the first poem in English to address itself to the working class and urge rebellion. Hood's poem is tempered with pity for the woman and says nothing about the social system which made her employment necessary. Burns's _Cotter's Saturday Night_, Browning's _Why I am a Liberal_, in both of which one might expect something to the point, are equally empty as far as our theme is concerned. Edwin Markham's _The Man with the Hoe_, based on Millet's painting of the same title, is at best a statement of the horror that one painting excited in one man and a plea that the wrong done to God's image be righted.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,  
Is this the handiwork you give to God,  
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quench't?  
How will you ever straighten up this shape;  
Touch it again with immortality;  
Give back the upward looking and the light;  
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;  
Make right the immemorial infamies,  
Perfidious wrongs, irremediable woes?
A reply was written to Markham by John Vance Cheney (1842-1922) in which the poet calmed him by pointing out the inevitable variety of kinds in the world: The Man with the Hoe fills his place in the universal scheme of things just as everyone else does: “Need was, need is, and need will ever be/For him and such as he . . .” This might comfort the man who feels sorry for the peasant but it is questionable how the peasant himself would receive it. One similarly questions Masefield who in *A Consecration* may reject “. . . the Be-medalled Commander, beloved of the throne,/Riding cock-horse to parade when the bugles are blown,” in favor of “. . . the ranker, the tramp of the road,/The slave with the sack on his shoulders pricked on with the goad,” the man with too weighty a burden, too weary a load, the sailor, the stoker, the chantyman. But again, though one is interested to read of Masefield’s preference for such men, one cannot suppress the question of what he thinks should be done about their problem. Hence one is grateful for Louis Untermeyer’s *Caliban in the Coal Mines*, where the poet is at least capable of identifying himself with the miners and does not simply look at them and weep. But is it intimated that the unfortunate are sanctified by suffering, that being exploited confers upon one rights that the exploiters do not have? In spite of Shelley’s defense of poetry, poets may indeed be the trumpets that sing unto battle, but they are hardly the legislators of the world. And those who have tried their hand at legislation, like Lamartine, were hardly great successes. In fact, after a close survey of hundreds of English poems, I should conclude that poets are more interested in their own feelings about women, landscapes, the four seasons, wine, death, their sins, and their relationship to God, than they are in the lot of their fellowmen. A more self-centered collection of writings could scarcely be found. The paradox of lyricism lies in its being put down on paper and printed: why should a man who is totally uninterested in the feelings of his fellows think they should be interested in his?
The Novel

By the middle of the eighteenth century the bourgeoisie began to be effective politically, at least in England, and had begun also to make its way into literature. Pamela in England,33 Le Fils naturel in France, Miss Sara Sampson in Germany, had as those who were not their main characters members of the upper class. These books are weathervanes indicating a shift in the wind. Maybe the exploited, maybe the working class, were not so comic as had been imagined. By the end of the first third of the nineteenth century, novels began to depict what one historian calls "the really acute phases of labor and poverty."34 Such novels include Disraeli's Sybil, Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton and North and South, Charlotte Brontë's Shirley, Kingsley's Alton Locke, and perhaps Dickens' Hard Times. George Eliot's Adam Bede is in a class by itself, not only because its hero is a rural workman, and thus not of the proletariat, but also because the causes that move the plot are psychological, not economic. Its author had no social doctrine to preach. Though all of these books utilize the old machinery of plot, love interest, coincidence, happy endings, nevertheless they all depict sympathetically the life of the poor, even when their authors become oversentimental. Mary Barton shows Mrs. Gaskell's intimate knowledge of the ideas, as well as the living conditions, of the factory worker. Whether Engel's The Condition of the Working Class in England (1844) had any influence upon English novelists I do not know, but the novelists present a similar picture in fictional form. In any event, as Mario Praz has said in The Hero in Eclipse (pp. 349-50), Adam Bede is presented as "the model of a hard-working intelligent man who accepts life as it is and has a deep respect

33. Pamela, though it seemed absurd to Fielding, was taken seriously enough to be turned into an opera, La Buona Figliuola, by Piccinni, with a libretto by Goldoni.
for the social organism,” and Felix Holt is a “man of the people who is a paragon of loyalty to his own social class, an incarnation of the dignity of labor.” That such figures could become the protagonists of novels certainly indicates a profound change in one’s appraisal of both the rural and the urban working class. After reading a certain number of such novels one begins to share the feelings of Anthony Trollope when he says in The Warden (1855): “Divine peeresses are no longer interesting, though possessed of every virtue; but a pattern peasant or an immaculate manufacturing hero may talk as much twaddle as one of Mrs. Ratcliffe’s heroines and still be listened to.” Trollope was hardly the man to identify misfortune with virtue and, though the “realistic” novel had its day in England, both Dickens and Thackeray continued to hold the public’s attention. People were just getting tired of the Underdog as Hero.

It was not until 1865, and in France, that a novel appeared with a heroine from the lower classes, whose character was not prettified or romanticized. I refer to the Goncourts’ Germinie Lacerteux.

Yet the Goncourt brothers felt the need to justify their novel by saying in a preface to the second edition:

Living in the nineteenth century, in a time of universal suffrage, of democracy, of liberalism, we have wondered whether those who are called “the lower classes” did not have a right to a novel; whether this society beneath a society, the people, should remain under the pressure of a literary interdict and the contempt of authors who up to now have kept silent regarding the heart and soul which such people might have. We have wondered if there existed still for the writer, and for the reader too, in these years of equality in which we live, unworthy classes, misfortunes too low, dramas too foul mouthed, catastrophes too ignobly terrible. We became curious to find out whether this conventional form of literature, forgotten and belonging to a society that has disappeared, Tragedy, was definitively dead; whether in a country without caste and without a legal aristocracy the miseries of the lowly and the peasants might appeal to the interest, the emotions, the pity as deeply as the miseries of the great and the rich; whether in a word the tears which are shed be-
low stairs might bring on tears as well as those that are shed in the
drawing room.

Germinie Lacerteux is the sad tale of a servant girl working for a
Mlle de Varandeuil. She becomes the mistress of a worthless
youth, son of a dealer in dairy products, Mme Jupillon, and under
the influence of her infatuation for him, steals, drinks, wastes her
savings on him, and finally dies in poverty, leaving debts which
Mlle de Varandeuil feels she must pay. But though the heroine
is only a servant girl, her fate is not a function of her social class
at all; it is the result of passion, a passion which in other novels
produces the same effect in people of the upper classes. They
might not rob their employers, but would rob their parents and
friends; they could also become sodden with drink, gamble away
their substance, and, moreover, die in poverty. Similar comments
could be made about Esther Waters, published thirty years later.
Here too the heroine is a servant. She too is the victim of passion,
and though she does not die in the end, she is reduced to the
economic misery with which she began. Neither the social class
nor the poverty of the main figures, nor their illiteracy and lack
of formal education, play any role in determining the outcome of
their lives. They provide the authors with local color and that is
all.

Hugo

No consideration of French literature of the nineteenth cen-
tury, however scanty, would be complete without some mention
of Victor Hugo.

Hugo's Les Châtiments contains a strong plea for popular
sovereignty, undefined. The poems which make up this volume
were all written in exile and are diatribes against Napoleon III.
Like all diatribes their basis is simply fierce antipathy and anger.
But sometimes as in "L'Art et le peuple," Hugo forgets his anger
and turns to praise, to praise in this case of art, which is "human
thought which breaks all chains," which liberates peoples who are enslaved and turns a free people into a great people. Or, again, as in "Chanson"—"Courtisans! attablés dans la splendide orgie"—he puts himself in the place of those who are the victims of these courtiers and who live for truth, probity, honor (la gloire), and freedom. His ode "Au Peuple" (Book II, 2) is a cry to the People, who lie dead like Lazarus, to arise. In "A l'Obéissance passive" (Book II, 7) he recalls the triumphs of the revolutionary armies and laments their descendants who have fallen into ignominy, being used to assault the laws of their country, to kill women and children. Or, as in "Ainsi les plus abjects" (Book III, 4), he gives a brutal picture of "Napoléon le Petit" as a false Bonaparte, a royal "croquant, ce maraud couronné," whom the vox populi has elected, and of the People who, like terror-stricken sheep, graze between the sacristan and the game-keeper. They have been tricked into submission, but there remains in some a spark of freedom which they have the right and the duty to kindle into flame. Hugo, who wrote these lines in Jersey in 1852, may well have been thinking of himself when he wrote,

Un français, c'est la France; un romain contient Rome,
Et ce qui brise un peuple avorte aux pieds d'un homme.

To snatch the heart from these verses, one might say that Hugo, like Emerson, Carlyle, and before them, Hegel, was thinking that the People may be a single "representative man."

Les Châtiments is a good example of the incorporation of abstractions into concrete works of art. Whether the poems are good poems or not is of no importance to us here: what is of importance is Hugo's use of the idea that the People, however vaguely defined, can have rights, be deprived of them, rebel to regain them. The book as a whole is an exclamation, not an argument, and must not be analyzed into an extended enthymeme. Hugo simply hated Louis Napoleon and expressed his hatred as eloquently as he could. Just what role is played by the idea of
popular rights in a case of this sort is unclear. The emotional connotations of its verbal symbol probably predominate. "The People" by the middle of the nineteenth century carried with it an intense affective charge, and similarly words like "freedom," "honor," "courage," all became names for qualities which one was supposed to admire. But a philosophic analysis of the meaning of such terms would rob them of their pathos and leave them in a state of denotative nudity. The most that could be expected of them, so far as the history of ideas is concerned, would be inferences logically deduced from sentences containing them either as subjects or predicates. Logically, Les Châtiments is at most dogma. The reiteration of a given dogma may prove to be historically more effective than attempts to prove or disprove it. In "Le parti du crime" (Book VI, 11) Hugo writes,

... ce gouvernement dont l'ongle est une griffe,  
Ce masque impérial, Bonaparte apocryphe,  
A coup sûr Beauharnais, peut-être Berhueil,  
Qui, pour la mettre en croix, livre, sibire cruel,  
Rome républicaine à Rome catholique,  
Cet homme, l'assassin de la chose publique,  
Ce parvenu, choisi par le destin sans yeux...

What has he done, logically speaking, except vilify Louis Napoleon by means of epithets? The poem was stimulated by the creation of the Second Empire out of the Second Republic. At best it charges the Prince-President with breaking his word. But that is of small moment. Hugo can assume, he thinks, that his epithets will be gratefully received by a public incapable of finding them for itself. The time was at hand when the vox populi, as Michelet said, could be heard in the words of one man. Yet why was not Napoleon III that man?

35. In prose translation: "This government whose nails are claws, this imperial mask, fake Bonaparte, surely Beauharnais, maybe Berhueil, who to crucify republican Rome hands her over, cruel stool pigeon, to Catholic Rome, this man, assassin of the state, this upstart chosen by blind destiny."