



Absolute Beginnings

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Reflections on *The Secondary Modern Generation*

To Sir, With Love, E. R. Braithwaite. Bodley Head, 13/6.
Journey Into a Fog, Margareta Berger-Hamerschlag, Ace Books, 2/6.

Absolute Beginners, Colin MacInnes. Macgibbon & Kee.
The Teenage Consumer, Dr. Mark Abrams for the London Press Exchange.

READING the first two of these four books is like re-living the best and worst moments of teaching and working amongst the Secondary Modern generation. They are both well written, sympathetic in their approach to young people, and full of insights. Mr. Braithwaite is a West Indian who went to teach in a Secondary Modern school in the East End. His chronicle is a record of how he managed to win the confidence of his young pupils, with some delicate sidelights (timely in the year of Notting Hill) on the ins and out of racial prejudice. Mrs. Berger-Hamerschlag taught Art in a youth club in a London slum. Her book (first published with Gollancz in 1955, and re-issued, with an appropriately sexy cover by Ace Books and a blurb about this "savage and sometimes shocking story of teenagers in a London slum") is not, perhaps, so sensational as it looks in its new format. But it must have been quite remarkable when it first appeared, and even now, it has much to add by way of detail and perception.

One cannot help feeling that Mr. Braithwaite was extremely fortunate in his headmaster. He emerges as a figure of extraordinary sympathy and gentleness, with intelligent ideas about his children and their background, about the attitude of staff to pupils, and about the relationship between discipline and freedom in education.

"It is said that here we practice free discipline. That's wrong, quite wrong. It would be more correct to say that we are seeking, as best we can, to establish disciplined freedom, that state in which the child feels free to work, play and express himself without fear of those whose job it is to direct and stimulate his efforts into constructive channels."

(*To Sir*, p. 32)

I don't want to go into the intricacies of the debates about "progressive education", but my experience of young boys' attitudes towards the school suggests that it is disciplined freedom, rather than absolute liberty, which most youngsters want and expect from school. They need, of course, the opportunities for participation and making decisions which the present authoritarian pattern of Secondary Modern schools prevents. But they are neither so self-reliant nor so confident as to expect "free discipline". They would not know what to do with it if they had it. Complete absence of discipline suggests to most Secondary Modern forms that the teacher has no sense of direction, no priorities and no targets. They dislike this drift even when they exploit it. What does matter is the *context* within which discipline is practised, the freedom from fear which Braithwaite's headmaster stressed, the sense of mutual give-and-take, the respect which teachers have for the people they teach. The only discipline worth having is the discipline of *purpose*, in the context of love.

It cannot be imposed by fear, formality or the cane. It is the most difficult balance to achieve.

Mr. Braithwaite's headmaster was singular, not in the fact that his relationship with his pupils was good (it very often is): but in the fact that he *cared* what the relationship was between his pupils *and the rest of his staff*, and that he prized directness and outspokenness, even if this appeared as "a form of rudeness at first". So many headmasters pander to the priggish sense of self-importance and prestige which is characteristic of the teaching profession. The teachers stand between the pupils and the head. He is often free to develop a close relationship with his students which is not put to the test of the class-room. In these circumstances, many headmasters "have a way" with the boys and girls which is purely personal, and which makes little or no impact at all upon the relationships which prevail through the rest of the school between staff and pupils.

Mr. Braithwaite was also particularly fortunate in his teaching associates. I do not mean to infer that there are no good, dedicated teachers. There are thousands. But I cannot get rid of the impression that by and large Secondary Modern teachers today suffer an acute lack of morale which has been consciously overlooked because teachers are in such short supply. They consider the Sec Mod to be inferior in status: and they are acutely status-conscious. Often, they despise the areas in which they teach, and the homes from which their students come. They are anxious not to be involved with the personal and informal problems of young people. Often, they have placed a safe distance between themselves and the school—protected from the realities of urban life by the green belt and the suburban line. It is most disturbing to count up the number of young teachers who would like their self-respect and their status to be protected by the agile and relentless use of the headmaster's cane. In many cases, Sec Mod teachers invert their affronted sense of status into an attack upon the supply teachers. How much of this is due to professional jealousy, how much to the fact that supply teachers are often foreigners—Australians, West Indians, Indians, Pakistanis, etc.—is difficult to judge. But the thing is there, and fostered at national level too (witness the disgusting sentiments expressed at a recent conference of the Schoolmasters' Association), in spite of the fact that, without the present numbers of supply teachers, many Secondary Modern schools would fold up tomorrow. This prejudice is merely one of many indications of a deep demoralisation among the shock-troops in the front line of the class struggle in secondary education today. They do not understand what the nature of that struggle is. Many of them are products of the "scholarship boy" revolution in education. They feel all the stresses and tensions of the *parvenu*. Caught themselves between generations, between social allegiances, they find it impossible to project or identify.

Mr. Braithwaite's staff seemed, on the whole, both sympathetic and capable—not beaten down by the irritations of working with bad equipment in crowded classrooms, not disgusted with having to explain about washing and

sanitary napkins to the girls, not—with one exception—protected from the immense problems and responsibilities by a cheaply-attained cynicism.

But his success, undoubtedly, was with the boys and girls in the top form. Here, he managed what few good teachers in the best Secondary Modern schools seem able to accomplish: making the non-G.C.E. form of school-leavers find something worthwhile in school.

This group of school-leavers is really the alienated generation. Many people who do not view the problems of young people today from the vantage point of the school, see the crucial change in adolescent experience as falling between school and work. But I have little doubt that the most important formative point lies *between* the junior and adolescent phases—roughly at the breaking-point between the second and third years of the Secondary Modern career. Work, of course, adds responsibilities, new skills, a new environment, a wider pattern of movement from the home and its surroundings. But basically, work modifies a pattern of feeling, responses and attitudes already established by the age of fourteen. The next phase begins with marriage.

In spite of cramming for the 11-plus and the consequent neglect of late-starters, the quality of entrants to the Sec Mod from the Primary schools is good. These children have very little sense of how much their future is likely to be affected by having failed at the first jump of the social barrier. They are keen, enthusiastic, childish in their interests and their delights, they possess a high reserve of vitality and enthusiasm, and they are immensely educable. But at the age of 13/14, they begin to pass out of the direct influence of home-and-school, and into the wider world of their own groups, the friendships and rivalries of their local gangs, the culture of the youth club and skiffle group, the heady atmosphere of the mass entertainments. However inadequate, the home and school have, until this point, provided some sort of a framework of reference, within which primary experiences are ordered and understood. But in the local gang, the pattern is tribal and self-imposed. Its particular attraction lies in the fact that it draws little upon, and bears only a subterranean relationship with, the adult world. The youth club offers facilities for informal social contact which the school does not: but unless it is an outstanding example of its kind, it provides little "training"—even in the sense of training responses to new adolescent experiences. The youth club is very much the clash of opposing worlds. The pattern of activities, the "rules", the standards and codes of behaviour, the tone, imposed from above: the club drawing its particular vigour and character from the subterranean emotional life of its members, from below.

This is the point at which young people discover the relative irrelevance of the school. And after that, it is difficult to engage their real interests without the spur of academic achievement—(a try at G.C.E.). As Braithwaite says:

"It was as if I were trying to reach the children through a thick pane of glass, so remote and uninterested they seemed."

It's not that they long for the more "proper" ethos of the Grammar school. That kind of aspiration is non-existent—a reflection of how limited the appeal of the Ladder of Success is below a certain educational and social threshold. They consider the Grammar school too strict and too "posh". They prefer the informality which prevails, willy-nilly, in the Secondary Modern. And this in itself throws a certain light on the particular nature of the



lacks, the deprivations, which they experience at this point in adolescence. This is the point at which they begin to reflect upon their own sense of failure. They feel their second-class status. They are conscious of the lack of care: and they identify this lack of sympathy and understanding with the school itself. Their range of expectations close up. They are being trained for the semi-skilled positions, and for that limited end, the school has done its job by 13, and they are anxious to get out and get on with it. Much of the aimless frenzy of their leisure life is a displacement of the energies and aspirations which have been trained or drained out of them by school and work. They become in the end what many teachers have always believed they were: unteachable, unclubbable. One of the most disturbing experiences in a Secondary Modern school is the open, callous manner in which many teachers accept the fact that the lively, vital fourth stream class in the First Year will become, inevitably, the blase, disenchanted, inattentive "shower" in the Fourth—without asking how on earth this transformation ever takes place.

Mr. Braithwaite had to cope with all the external expressions of this state of cultural deprivation: noise (not occasional, but wilful and deliberately indulged as a kind of war of nerves), inattention, persistent clinical use of swear words, a single-track devotion to sex, the irritable and sudden explosions of violence towards authority and towards each other. These things bothered Mrs. Berger-Hamerschlag as well. She is continually reporting the

invasion of her Art class by groups of boys, wandering aimlessly about, spilling paint and daubing the desks with a kind of intent, impotent fury.

"Chris's gang appeared this evening. They never walk in, these fifteen- to sixteen-year-old crazies, they rush in vehemently, as if in a commando raid . . . They are rebellious because they miss a lot which they think they can never have and their natural longing for love and fun is being twisted through their being beaten, rejected or badly used in other ways."
(*Journey Into A Fog*, p. 92-3)

There are really difficult distinctions to be made here. Working class children do not have the same respect or value of studious silence that is common among Grammar School children. Frequently, in a classroom of 40, the standard of work and application is high in spite of the continuous undertones of voices and exchanges. This can be irritating, particularly to those teachers who apply Grammar School standards of dress and behaviour to working class children. But this is a different aspect of their behaviour from the consciously-created interruption, which is really a form of inspired violence, and relates more closely to the aimless kicking of dustbins, the scraps and "giggles", the "bashing" and "doing" (including the more organised "doing" of Irish or West Indians) which is so much an integral part of working-class adolescent activity. I think the teenagers who explain all this in terms of boredom and bottled-up energy, rather than consciously thought out violence directed against any one group, are close to the truth. Particular prejudices about "niggers" or "paddies" or "yids" are inspired: they develop *out of* a deeper level of social frustration against the society and the adult world. They are not, in themselves, the source of violence.

When youngsters, who have been on a giggle to Notting Hill, talk about it afterwards, they are perfectly aware that it is a pointless, and degrading, kind of self-indulgence. But, at the moment, the urge to commit violence is quite clearly overpowering. "There's nothing to do, see, and you're tired of sitting around. They don't want to argue, and if you start an argument they just start swearing to shut you up. And then along comes someone, and there's something about him you don't like, see, he's a coloured man or an Irish or something, and one of the boys gets a thing about him. Let's rush him, he says, and before you know what's going on . . ."

Mrs. Berger-Hamerschlag never managed to surmount this problem with those who came only occasionally to her classes. Those who were interested, either in painting or in the company of the painting class—she found—could easily be involved in creative work: though their staying power was, naturally, limited. Mr. Braithwaite managed to sublimate their energy in the classroom and in work: in one case, he was obliged to take on the most surly of his students in a boxing bout, but I found this episode—even if true to life—an unrepresentative and arbitrary solution to a tough problem. It is interesting that, in their quite different situations, both authors came to much the same conclusions, and adopted the same variety of tactics. Braithwaite realised that, by fourteen, these youngsters were, in many ways, already adult. They had adult interests, and, in many cases, adult experiences. His decision to treat them as such, to honour their sense of importance and seriousness, transformed the relationship between himself and them. I am not sure that many Sec Mod boys would have agreed to call their classmates "Miss", or even that this kind of formality is advisable. Occasionally, when

he is on this track, Mr. Braithwaite's tone becomes smug and self-important. But it certainly turned the trick. Mrs. Berger-Hamerschlag discovered that, above all, the kids wanted to be taken seriously.

. . . "They are marvellous and respond easily when an atmosphere of 'art college' is being created. It means to them that they are taken seriously and that someone believes in their ability; the hobby idea is poison to them."
(*Journey*, p. 63)

And, more characteristically:

" 'Why do they dish out these rotten things to us?' asked Dave. 'Why don't we get white paper? Why don't we get decent brushes? These are brooms, wicked! I thought that this was a proper art class!' "
(*Journey*, p. 44)

Perhaps we ought to put alongside that, Mr. Braithwaite's description of his East End children listening to music:

"They listened, those rough looking, untidy children; every one of them sat still, unmoving and attentive, until the very last echo of the last clear note had died away. Their silence was not the result of boredom or apathy, nor were they quiet because it was expected of them or through fear of the consequences; but they were listening actively, attentively, listening to those records, with the same raptness they had shown in their jiving . . ."
(*To Sir*, p. 53)

II.

We have very little understanding of the roots of cultural deprivation, and of its relation to the pattern of class culture and education in this country. Where does it begin? In the school? In the family? In the give-and-take (or lack of it) between adolescent and adult generations?—and if so, why?

Clearly, the school itself is not wholly to blame, though what happens here is important, for it develops social tendencies which may originate elsewhere. In its own way, the Secondary Modern school—its whole conception as a second-class educational stream, the idea that any kind of modern education can be given in the old school environment—is a careful adjustment to Welfare State Britain. The same double standards which apply elsewhere (see, for example, *Conviction*) can be seen at work in the Secondary Modern. Even where the school is doing its best, the general impression is that in education there is one law for some and another for the rest. The Secondary Modern generation are not only treated as if they are second rate: they *know* they are being treated in this way. The sense of failure, of rejection runs deep in the psychology of this generation: it influences both their attitudes towards the society and their evaluation of themselves.

Streaming takes place at an early stage in the Secondary Modern school, and this is done according to the different class evaluations of "academic" and "vocational" aptitudes, and the differing rewards which these kinds of talents merit in the labour market. There are considerable academic talents going to waste in the Secondary Modern. The top streams receive a poor-man's Grammar School education. By the age of fourteen, in their G.C.E. class, it is clear to everyone in the school that they would have been perfectly capable of coping with a Grammar School curriculum. The effect of the Secondary School upon the more academically advanced is simply that they come to realise, at the school leaving age, what they have missed. They

are "Grammar School boys", with the tell-tale stigma of a Secondary Modern on their progress reports.

For the rest, the level of educational challenge offered is abysmally low. This does not mean that all children deserve an academically-biased education—though in my experience the evaluation of their intellectual aptitudes is pitched far below their capacities. That is because most subjects are taught as academic "disciplines" rather than as transmission of social skills. It is possible for both history and geography to be taught as social studies, to a level far in advance of those currently attained in the Sec Mod, provided the subjects are approached within the context of the lives of the students, rather than within the arbitrary framework of the G.C.E. syllabus. Very little work of this kind, which is taking root in the Comprehensives, is attempted in the Secondary Moderns.

Here again, the social valuations established outside the school play a determining role within the school. Thus certain subjects—foreign languages, literature, science, history—are considered suitable for the "academic" streams, and not for the others. This bears little or no relationship to the actual interests or capacities of the pupils concerned. I have yet to meet the average "vocational" or "technical" child who had no interest whatever in any of the so-called "academic" subjects. Every boy in my fifth stream First Year Class for example, wanted to learn French. There is no doubt that, dim-witted as they are considered, they are in fact lively and active, and their imaginative capacities, to judge from their drawings and paintings and essays, are quite equal to it. Any one of these boys would have picked up French inside of six months, had he been living in the country.

But French is an "academic discipline"—the special privilege of the top streams. It is treated not as a linguistic skill but rather as a kind of cultural status-badge. It "belongs" to academic children, preparing for a semi-professional or white-collar career. I have heard teachers threaten "A" stream classes that "if they did not live up to" their special position, they would be deprived of their French classes! This is only one example of the way in which working class boys and girls are still adjusted, through the school, to their "proper" cultural and social position. What has been said of French could be equally applied to other subjects—in spite of the fact that in every class it is clear that there is a tremendous range of *combinations* of talents and skills.

The Secondary Modern school is, in essence, an *adaptive* social institution. A level of culture, a certain social status is prescribed from above, and the children are roughly attuned to it. There is, comparatively, little or no breaking through this cultural-social barrier. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that these boys and girls develop early an hostility to intellectual pursuits. They consider a serious interest in art (at which, being uninhibited, they are often very good indeed), or drama, or literature or biology not merely beyond their particular abilities, but outside their social stratosphere. These distinctions, moreover, are social and cultural rather than educational. The children are said to be unequipped to deal with art or literature or biology: yet they adore to paint or to read and perform plays, and they are fascinated by the world of nature and the laboratory. Clearly, the natural aptitudes and interests in the school are at sharp variance with the education provided: why not adjust the education to the interests, rather than squeeze the children into pre-digested categories? At least, the experiment should be tried; though in my view,

it would not be successful outside the framework of the Comprehensive School.

Secondary Modern education, then, is not a matter of the extension of the range of experiences and skills beyond the normal level. It is much more a matter of making students familiar, through education, with the social and class barriers to education and culture which the society has already imposed. The cultural frontiers of working class boys and girls cannot, in the normal way, be expected to broaden out. Whatever the economic position of working class teenagers today, their cultural status is pretty plain. Here is a deep-rooted dislocation in the society, a social crisis in every way as sharp and as class-bound as economic crises have been in the past. It is ridiculous to talk of economic prosperity working, in the natural course of events, to break down established barriers between social classes. Class distinctions based upon attitudes, taste, education, and rooted in the educational system itself, do not wither away any more quickly than the State Department. A common culture does not "just grow" out of a socially differentiated society, any more than grass roots flourish in stone.

The Secondary Modern pattern of education gives us the most important clue we need for an explanation of the increasing gap between "high" and "popular" culture, and for the degeneration of "popular" culture into "mass culture". Mass culture, of course, is largely a creation by the commercial world for a literate society at an advanced technological stage. But the cultural gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" of the education world provides the conditions within which the purveyors of mass culture operate. Without this gap, the exploitation and manipulation of tastes, needs and interests by an educated elite would be impossible. Or, to put it differently, a common culture, available to all and modified by the experiences of different social groups is the only guarantee we possess of a genuinely democratic society. Mass culture is the culture of a mass democracy without democracy. Needless to say, young people are one of the most culturally exposed groups to mass culture. They expend their generous emotional responses in an attachment to its commodities: whilst "high culture" is increasingly taken over by dilletantism, preciosity and narrowness, and marked by that thinness of response and lack of social relevance which characterises so much minority art.

But the Secondary Modern school is, by and large, so well adjusted to the social norms of the society, that it cannot afford to recognise the interpenetration of "school" and "leisure" attitudes in young people, or the playback of "teenage" interests in the school and classroom. Needless to say, the School is wholly unequipped to deal critically or responsibly with the "leisure" world, blotting the whole thing out like an unpleasant nightmare. Teachers are to be seen struggling with the symptoms of cynicism, boredom and confusion in the classroom which cannot be explained without reference to the emotional and "personal" interests of young people in the really formative worlds which they inhabit. For the same reason, the "leisure" world of the teenager assumes an importance unrivalled by school or home, an independence of the adult world and a freedom from the constraints of maturity and conformity which constitutes, in itself, its major attraction. In response to the cultural exploitation, which the school assists in, many teenagers erect cultural barriers themselves: so that their leisure world absorbs and consumes all the emotional vitality and the fantasy and imaginative projections of adolescence, and becomes a wholly self-enclosed universe.

The school, then, is constantly competing with the leisure

world for the emotional attachments of young people—and losing the battle into the bargain. Neither the family nor the youth club in any sense adequately compensates. Left to themselves, young people develop very much according to the lights and lessons of each other's experiences—a school of life both limited, frustrating and self-enclosed. The gulf between themselves and adult life becomes unbridgeable. The quarrel between the generations becomes a vast, deadly silence of incomprehension.

It is only fair to say that neither Mr. Braithwaite nor Mrs. Berger-Hamerschlag come anywhere within striking distance of this problem. Their books are therefore interesting and humane (which, God knows, is almost enough these days)—but somehow not compelling. There are really crucial connections to be made which never get made. Mrs. Hamerschlag, for example, finds that her girls are interested "in nothing but their own beauty": but she brings them fashion magazines! She recognises the fantasy element in the cinema—"Hollywood is fairyland . . ."—but she speaks as if she considers their addiction to the cinema as if it were, by definition, a sign of wholesale waste. After all, a few pages later, she makes some very perceptive remarks about her students' passion for "realism" in art. ". . . I can't get any of them to do anything imaginative . . . Perhaps it's not so strange after all. They are at the age where they change from that introvert period of childhood into the adult stage of realism." Precisely. If that is the case, then the passion for "realism", particularly in the cinema, is a natural and healthy taste: the only problem is *what they are being shown*, what kind of realism are they being fed. Paragraphs of her book, which begin with the good sense of this one:

"Relationships, usually fleeting and sensual, can be developed into humane ones in which warmth, comradeship and mutual interests play their part"



have a way of ending up in rhapsodies like this:

"Why, wine has been grown in this island in Roman times, so why shouldn't we hope for a freer and happier youth, carried into being on a wave of living art and religion—neither imaginable without the other."

In such passages as these, Mrs. Berger-Hamerschlag seeks a romantic escape from the immense social pressures which are at work in the situation she is describing.

What we have to do is to begin to disentangle what is real and what is phony in the responses of young people today. What is real are the feelings and attitudes involved, the interests aroused: what is phony are the *ways* the feelings are engaged, the trivial and inconsequential directions in which the aroused interests are channelled. The revolt and iconoclasm of youth today arises because of the contradictions between the true and the false elements in their culture: because the wave of post-war prosperity has raised them to cultural thresholds which offer rewards unequal to the expectations aroused. Instead, therefore, most young people compensate for their frustrations by an escape into the womb-world of mass entertainments, by an aggressive revolt against conformist adulthood, by pioneering the frontiers of experience in search of the *feel of living*, or by an aggressive affirmation of the self against the world through violence. This is no temporary, diverting "phenomenon". It is a major social trauma, generalised for a whole generation.

The street or school gang, for example, which is so often criticised because of its anti-social tendencies, must also be understood as the search for a meaningful social group, for real face-to-face relations. As one lad put it, "The gang is always 'us' and 'them'. England against the rest, London against somewhere else, your part of London against another part, your street against the next, you and your mate, even, against the others." His use of the words "us" and "others" represents a serious challenge to the general quality of human relationships in our society. It gives voice to frustration arising from the apparent impossibility to "know other people", from the anonymity of human society and its institutions, and from the lack of care. And these are responses which, if we are honest with ourselves, we know as well, but which we have often consciously shoved to the back of our mind because we have lost the capacity to criticise and understand the working of society *on this human level*, or because we feel it is all somehow "inevitable in the age of mass technology". The truth is that we live in an age in which the very flow between human beings—a truly human and personal thing—has become distorted, part of a total crisis which eats through into the family life, and personal relationships as well. If we are willing to accept this state of affairs for the sake of a high rate of technical and industrial growth, then we are laying in store for our society deep social disturbances, of which racial riots, floating juvenile delinquency and petty crimes are merely unpleasant forerunners. A breakdown in the passage between youth and maturity represents a general condition, and cannot be explained without reference to the social relationships between groups and people in general. What we find in the detail of teenage attitudes today is the distorted moral response to a bureaucratic age. That is why the complex of feelings, pin-pointed, say in the James Dean portrayal of father-son relationships in *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, achieves so immediate a response in England and Western Europe, in Poland and the Soviet Union as well.



III.

It is, therefore, with something of a shock that one turns to this paragraph in the Editorial introduction to Dr. Mark Abrams's recent L.P.E. Pamphlet, *The Teenage Consumer*:

"The teenager is newly enfranchised, in an economic sense. This has given him the chance to be himself and show himself, and has misled a number of people, especially some elderly ones, into the belief that the young of mid-twentieth-century Britain are something new and perhaps ominous. We ourselves see no cause for alarm, and not much for diagnosing novelty except in the new levels of spending power and their commercial effects. There remains the ancient need for the older to understand the younger, and we now confront a business necessity for this understanding, as well as the older moral and psychological imperatives." (p. 3)

The "commercial effects" of the teenage revolution are, of course, staggering—perhaps not quite in the sense that the London Press Exchange (Britain's largest Advertising Agency) use the words. Every other fact recorded by Dr. Abrams in the pamphlet (which is, in its way, an attractively illustrated job) is not merely "new", but startling in both its "business" and "social" implications. Dr. Abrams reckons that Britain's 5,000,000 unmarried teenagers (up to 25) have a total annual uncommitted spending power of £900,000,000—a rise in *real* earnings over 1938 of 50%, and in real "discretionary" spending of over 100%. He goes on to point out that this is a market clearly distinguished in its tastes, constantly renewing itself: that it is almost entirely working class, and predominantly male. Nearly a quarter of teenagers' uncommitted money goes on clothing and footwear, another 14% on drink and tobacco, and another 12% on sweets, soft drinks and snacks in cafes and restaurants. If we add together the teenage expenditure on records, record-players, books, papers and magazines, "recreational goods", cinema admissions and "other entertainments", we can estimate that the teenage market for "pop" entertainments is about £125,000,000, or about 14% of their total uncommitted spending power. The amount spent on clothes, cosmetics, etc., is about £225,000,000.

The pattern of consumption is, of course, extraordinarily specialised. Their spending on "other goods and services"—which includes most adult and "home" consumer goods—is less than 3% of the total. Moreover, their expenditure on tobacco and alcohol is comparatively unimportant. "The teenage population visits the cinema more frequently than do its elders; it watches less television than does the rest of the population, and it tends to concentrate its reading on a few newspapers and magazines with very large circulations." The *Mirror* reaches over two-fifths of them, and the *News of the World* and *Sunday Pictorial* each reach approximately half all teenagers.

In his summing up, Mr. Abrams makes three points of wider interest: that the teenage market depends very heavily upon the one industrial country which has experience of a prosperous working class adolescent market—the United States; that teenagers are looking for goods and commodities which are "highly charged emotionally": and that, with the rise of the teenage market as a distinctive age group, "ideas, values and experiences" tend to become "superannuated" at an earlier age. The "turn-over" in attitudes and values is just about as rapid as the multiple stores or the advertisers manage on the Charing Cross Road, or the song-writers in Tin Pan Alley.

Prosperity is the backdrop to every other thing which we can say about the Secondary Modern generation today.

And while the superficial changes of style and taste ring out successively, there are some important underlying patterns to observe. In London, at any rate, we are witnessing a "quiet" revolution within the teenage revolution itself. The outlines of the Secondary Modern generation in the 1960's are beginning to form. The Teddy Boy era is playing itself out. The L-P, Hi-Fi generation is on the way in. The butcher-boy jeans, velvet lapel coats and three-inch crepes are considered coarse and tasteless. They exist—but they no longer set the "tone". "Teds" are *almost* square. Here are the very smart, sophisticated young men and women of the metropolitan jazz clubs, the Flamingo Club devotees—the *other* Marquee generation. Suits are dark, sober and casual-formal, severely cut and narrow on the Italian pattern. Hair cuts are "modern"—a brisk, flat-topped French version of the now-juvenile American crew-cut, modestly called "College style". Shirts are either white-stiff or solid colour close-knit wool in the Continental manner. Jeans are *de rigueur*, less blue-denim American, striped narrowly or black or khaki. The girls are short-skirted, sleekly groomed, pin-pointed on stiletto heels, with set hair and Paris-boutique dead-pan make-up and mascara. Italian pointed shoes are absolute and universal.

A fast-talking, smooth-running, hustling generation with an ad-lib gift of the gab, quick sensitivities and responses, and an acquired taste for the Modern Jazz Quartet. They are the "prosperity" boys—not in the sense that they have a fortune stashed away, but in that they are familiar with the in-and-out flow of money. In the age of super-inflation, money is a highly volatile thing. They have the spending habit, and the sophisticated tastes to go along with it. They are city birds. They know their way around. They are remarkably self-possessed, though often very inexperienced, and eager beneath the eyes. Their attitude to adults is less resentful than scornful. Adults are simply "square". Mugs. They are not "with it". They don't know "how the wind blows". School has passed through this generation like a dose of salts—but they are by no means intellectually backward. They are, in fact, sharp and self-inclined. Office-boys—even van-boys—by day, they are record-sleeve boys by night. They relish a spontaneous giggle, or a sudden midnight trip to Southend: they are capable of a certain cool violence. The "Teds" are their alter-egos.

They despise "the masses" (the evening-paper lot on the tubes in the evening), "traditionals", "cops", (cowboys), "peasants" and "bohemians". But they know how to talk to journalists and TV "merchants", debs and holiday businessmen. Their experiences are, primarily, personal, urban and sensational: sensational in the sense that the test of beatitude is being able to get so close you feel you are "part of the act, the scene". They know that the teenage market is a racket, but they are subtly adjusted to it nonetheless. They seem culturally exploited rather than socially deprived. They stand at the end of the Teddy-boy era of the Welfare State. They could be the first generation of the Common Market.

The hero of Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* comes straight at us out of this changing panorama, with a flow and authenticity which marks the book as an excellent and distinguished piece of social documentary. The book asks to be tested against "life"—and this is no mean accomplishment. His social observation is keen, representative, detailed and engaged. He is not afraid of handling the material of teenage life within the framework of his own clearly-articulated values. But he has managed, without too many nuances, to embody his attitudes in his hero, and through him, to figure out the contemporary attitudes of a



whole range of teenagers. The novel has a backdrop of little deals and rackets which is almost certain to make some distinguished reviewer say, "Mr. MacInnes has overdone it a little. Surely there are too many crooks, prostitutes, perverts and spivs?" I refer to Mr. MacInnes's judgment on this one: this hustling quarter at least of today's teenagers are second-generation spivs. That is one of the things which the War and the floating amorality of the Welfare State have done for the young. (You have to look at *Ashes and Diamonds* to see what a different kind of War and a different, harsher brand of amorality have done for the Poles).

Mr. MacInnes deliberately takes us on a tour of "modern" attitudes. The Teds and the bottle-throwers lurk in the background—and at the end of the novel, which is set graphically in the Notting Hill riots, they emerge to take their proper place in the roll-call of urban violence. If Mr. MacInnes concentrates on the "modern" advance guard I described above, it is not because the cruder, simpler "moral" view of the Ted has ceased to function. In Notting Hill, and elsewhere, their writ runs. I think it is because Mr. MacInnes would have found it impossible to embody his very healthy and humane views about contemporary life in the thwarted, suffocated consciousness of the Teddy Boy. His views need the light and freshness—also the sophistication and sensitivity—of the more "contemporary" article. The Modern Jazz Quartet generation may also be the generation that *could* lift its eyes above the slums of Paddington. Its horizons may be carefully manipulated by Fleet Street and A.R. TV: they are somehow broader, more comprehensive and basically more humane. Are they in any sense "socially" more responsible? No. But they are socially more responsive. They have views which include people other than themselves. And now that the "teenage thing" is a constant source of copy for both the Press and Television, they are both self-conscious about it, and beginning to think and articulate about it. Both things are good, provided the discussion can be made to broaden out and include other subjects besides the inter-generation struggle.

MacInnes "on tour" is, at first reading, a little irritating, and occasionally transparent. But the second reading persuades. He knows where he is going, and he has managed to impose a certain unity on the tale. What is more, he has done it with remarkable personal feeling, and without straining or forcing the sequence of incidents. The novel could easily have degenerated into a series of isolated episodes. In fact, the incidents are related to each other through the hero, and the "plot" provides a kind of loose moral pattern—or at least, the book achieves a unity in its moral tone and attitude towards the different types and points of view portrayed. This makes *Absolute Beginners* more than mere *rapportage*: the hero, in spite of his typicality in many respects, has very strong moral views on certain subjects—coloured people, for example—and an attitude to life and a love for London which is at once sympathetic and at the same time humane and committed. In that sense he is more than a roving camera of the teenage scene: he brings to bear upon it a moral point of view. This makes *Absolute Beginners* a novel rather than a piece of inspired journalism—though, of course, it is a novel in the social documentary genre.

Mr. MacInnes catches the different kinds of "hustling" and petty rackets of the teenagers very well. One lad has adventured into the call-girl business, but most of them are making a fast line with the TV cats who have made a big investment in the "teenage thing", or with journalists who want to know "what young people are thinking today",

with ex-debs on the make or sharp business men in the advertising money. He covers, one way or another, most teenage attitudes, without appearing to drag them in by design. Hustling (everybody who is not a square is in some kind of racket), drinking ("either you drink a lot or else you don't drink anything at all"), Sex (it really matters: "you can't say 'How's your sex life?' like you say 'How's the weather?'"), Jazz ("if anybody doesn't rave about it, all you can feel for them is pity"), traditionals ("here was this trad child, alone among the teenagers, in the days of prosperity, still living like a bum and a bohemian . . ."), Jews ("when the Jewish population have all made enough loot to take off to America, or Israel, then I'm leaving too), dancing ("your whole damn brain and sex and personality have actually become that dance, *are it*. . ."), ad men's offices ("the joint . . . was like a very expensive tomb . . ."), Notting Hill ("Napoli was like a prison, or a concentration camp; inside, blue murder, outside, buses and evening papers and hurrying home to sausages and mash and tea.").

There are some very nice bits. The dialogue all the way through is close to being right—right at least in flow, speed, slickness, cool enough to be off-beat, but still English and cockney in rhythm and idiom. It achieves a kind of mid-Atlantic sophistication. There is one very fine passage, where the hero's queer friend, the Fabulous Hoplite, makes a hit on a TV programme in which he and a retired Admiral make splendid sense together, and defeat the interviewer—an intrepid Aussie called Call-Me-Cobber—on a "challenging" TV series called, suitably, *Junction!* The scene in the studio is memorable:

"The Hop was terrific: boy! If they don't line that cat up for a series, they're no talent-spotters. He hogged the camera—in fact, the damn thing had to keep chasing him about the studio—and spoke up like he was King Henry V in a Shakespearean performance. He told us that what he believed in was the flowering of the human personality, such as his own, and how could a personality flower in the boiler-room of a destroyer." *(Absolute Beginners, p. 158)*

Moreover, MacInnes manages to achieve certain moments of real feeling, without strain: the hero and his father at a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan, with his coloured house-mate, Cool, and on a trip up the river. On the river trip—a scene different from the others because it involves emotional response rather than the portrayal of attitudes—the hero becomes excited by the little row-boats on the Thames:

"A club, it must have been, of athletic juniors each in white vest and pants and brown legs and arms and a red neck—it was cyclists they made me think of, weaving their way at speed through the city traffic—and we, of course, had to slow down almost to zero as they shot by both sides of us in their dozens. And I got up and cheered, and even old Dad did. Wonderful kiddies on that hot-pot cracking day, racing downstream as if only the salt sea would stop them."

Neither so sensitive nor so lyrical as Salinger, *Absolute Beginners* is still the closest we have come to a "British" (Mr. MacInnes is Australian!) *Catcher In The Rye*.

If anything, Mr. MacInnes has made his hero both too sophisticated and too critical. I do not mean that he is merely a vehicle for Mr. MacInnes's values, for we feel him as an authentic character in his own right. But he is, unfortunately, not as typical as we should like. It is characteristic, for example, that he should combine a kind of generous amorality in his attitude to himself and his teenage world, with a more strenuous moral dislike of the fake.

the phony, the callous and the inhuman (for example, his attitude to West Indians). But he is altogether more knowing than is, I think, possible for such a "teenage" teenager to be.

Perhaps, on the other hand, Mr. MacInnes has done this generation more justice than others who have written about the same subject. I do not believe that humane attitudes to people and to social justice are bred only in conditions of want and deprivation. If post-war prosperity have lifted this working class generation up out of poverty, and raised their cultural experiences and their social con-

tacts—that is an unqualified gain. It is the sophisticated advance guard of the teenage revolution who are—at universities and training colleges and art schools and in apprenticeships—the most articulate in their protest about social issues, and who feel most strongly about South Africa or the Bomb. If the cool young men of today were to become the social conscience of tomorrow, it would be because they had seen sights in the Twentieth Century closed to many eyes before. It would not be the first revolution which came out of social deprivation, nor the first Utopia with absolute beginnings.

