

The Uses of Shopping
Richard Hoggart Goes to Woolworth's

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Abstract

In *The Uses of Literacy* and in the many autobiographical works of his later years, Richard Hoggart wrote about shops and shopping. Taking a distance from the adverse stance of the mid-century literary world to 'consumer society' in all its forms, Hoggart consistently represented himself as someone who liked to shop. This essay looks at the changing shopping experiences that Hoggart described, and at the rare distinctiveness of this lifelong interest, for a man of his time and cultural places. It concentrates mainly on the shops he wrote about close to the various homes of his life, but it also briefly considers Hoggart's accounts of contrasting experiences of touristic consumption: the conviviality of the working-class coach trip, as opposed to the isolations of remote retirement travel.

Keywords

Richard Hoggart; *The Uses of Literacy*; Woolworth's; Argos; history of shopping; consumer culture; gender and shopping; Q.D. Leavis; coach trips; furniture stores; ageing; autobiography

From the time of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), and all through the numerous autobiographical works that he wrote in his later years, Richard Hoggart (1918-2014) was always writing about shops and shopping. Quietly resituating the adverse stance of the literary world of his time to consumer culture, Hoggart was happy to ponder and wander the shops. This essay looks at the changing consumerly experiences that Hoggart describes and at the distinctiveness, for a man of his time and cultural places, of this lifelong interest.

As for Hoggart himself, the focus is on shops and other consuming events that were physically and sometimes emotionally close to the various homes of his life. But the essay is also, more broadly, about the history of shopping in Britain over the past century: its representation as well as its practices. The negative rubric of 'consumer society', relentlessly used in the 1960s and 1970s, took no account of the variety and specificity of actual shops and practices of buying and selling, shopkeeping and shopping. And in most of the social history that developed strongly across that same period, shopping and shops are almost entirely neglected. It is difficult to document a neglect; I can only say that at least until recently, most works that sought to portray the social worlds of the past two hundred years barely glanced at this fundamental aspect of daily lives and local landscapes. Shops were everywhere.¹ But in the indexes, let alone the chapter topics, of these books, shops are almost never there (let alone the specific types or names of stores, whether new or continuing): no entries for high streets or supermarkets or department stores or even for possibly more respected or dated stalwarts like bakers or butchers, drapers or ironmongers. And there is usually no more success if you shift the perspective from common types to the economically technical: terms like *retail* or *distribution* rarely yield anything, either. To this widespread ignoring of the history of a huge part of everyday twentieth-century life, Richard Hoggart's work was a striking exception, and from the outset

Shops were important for Hoggart from the beginning. Throughout his writing life and his life in writing—he produced numerous versions of an autobiography—he takes shops, like books, as objects of analysis. In various ways, and with varying questions, he observes the goods on offer, the customers, the staff—and occasionally, himself. It is as if

shops are meant to be ‘read’ by means of equivalent skills to those required for thinking about a poem or a work of fiction: they may be quotidian and ordinary, but they are multi-faceted, and call for interpretation. And for both cases, literature and shops, this kind of close critique is seen as a job worth doing.

Take this extended passage from the book about English working-class culture that made and has maintained his name, *The Uses of Literacy*—first published (and twice reprinted) in 1957. This is the first shopping expedition:

The louder furniture stores are of unusual interest, especially because of an apparent paradox. At first glance these are surely the most hideously tasteless of modern shops. Every known value in decoration has been discarded: there is no evident design or pattern; the colours fight with one another; anything new is thrown in simply because it is new. There is strip-lighting together with imitation chandelier lighting; plastics, wood and glass are all glued and stuck and blown together; notice after blazing notice winks, glows or blushes luminously. Hardly a homely setting.²

Everything here hangs on the ‘first glance’. We know from the outset that there is going to be at least one further appraisal but for the time being, Hoggart is letting his rhetoric run with every cliché known to the critique of mass culture in the 1950s. In this preliminary stage, he gives us a wholesale abolition of both taste and familiarity, with ‘*Every known value*’, no less, thrown out. It’s now all fake, ‘imitation’ lighting flashing away, newness for newness’s sake—the standard objection of a lack of substance in mass-produced consumer goods. ‘Hardly a homely setting’, comfortably rueful and a bit sarcastic, then comes back to soften the initial screech at ‘surely the most hideously tasteless of modern shops’. Home, we understand—and it’s a significant assumption—is what a furniture shop should feel like.

Yet this is only the pre-amble, for there are second and third glances to come. These turn on the salesmen who come across to begin with as a continuation of the general alien environment:

Nor do the superficially elegant men who stand inside the doorway, and alternately tuck their hankies up their cuffs or adjust their ties, appear to belong to ‘Us’. They are not meant to. With their neat ready-made clothing, shiny though cheap shoes, well-creamed hair and ready smiles they are meant (like the equally harassed but flashier motor-car salesmen) to represent an ethos.³

All show and surface, just like the goods they are selling. On the one hand, there is no substance beneath. And on the other, this is a performance. The salesmen are standing for something (they ‘represent an ethos’): this is a show with a meaning. But also, quite simply, they are acting, putting it on, smiling to order.

But then, in a third glance (or rather with a longer listening), these men of unsubstance turn out after all to be decent underneath, to be just like you and me; the sound of them is familiar even if the look of them is not:

The proprietors realise that working-class people will be dazzled by the exuberance and glitter of their display, will be attracted and yet a little awed. The manner of their salesmen is usually, therefore, understandingly colloquial ... ‘I know what it’s like, madam,’ or, ‘I had a young couple just like you in only last week’; all in the tone of an understanding son who has done well and become cultured. ... [T]his type of shop—the huge, glossy affair aiming specifically at working-class customers—specialises in this approach.⁴

Hoggart’s portrayal both is and is not an indictment of ‘this type of shop’. For all the apparent turn or return to the sense of a relatably local boy who can after all be comfortably found inside the smart suit, the subsequent sentences are clear about the decisive agency of ‘Those who direct them’ and the way that the appeal of ‘the personal’ is a deliberate and deceptive ploy; it is described as ‘a pretty Trojan horse’.⁵ But most striking in the passage are

the many levels of the description. There are the superficial presentations, of the décor and the stuff for sale and the salesmen's outfits. There are the likely phrases to be used. And behind those there is the analysis of customer expectations, of how the 'understandably awed' are at the same time 'attracted'. On the part of the understated observer, the man of the first and the subsequent glances, who listens to the patter with a placing ear, there is an identification with each one of these always at least double parts. He puts himself in the place of the customer reacting to the new kind of shop; in the place of the entrepreneur considering the customers' likely reactions; and implicitly, also, in the place of the youngish salesman who is in one way part of the new furniture and in another a representative of home. This observer-narrator, Hoggart in person, does not draw attention to his own presence, either in the argument being laid out now, or in the original scene in the store.⁶ But I think we can fairly infer that in the 1950s Richard Hoggart was someone who spent a good deal of time in shops, and thinking about shops. And this was only the beginning—or the nearly middle, perhaps—of a lifelong enthusiasm for this particular mode of social study. It changed its form along with the man himself as he aged, and also along with newer new types of establishment that came into being; but it was a constant of all his writing about contemporary culture.

In his extended analysis, Hoggart describes the complex social dynamics of the furniture store of the 1950s with an attentiveness and elaboration not found in the quick-fire arguments against 'consumer society' that were commonplace in the 1960s in the UK and elsewhere. Much later, after retiring in 1983, he had lost none of his fascination for the specific encounters fostered by new types of shopping environment. In particular, he seems to have spent a great deal of time at the supermarket checkout—and not unhappily; reading his book of the mid-1990s on Farnham, the Surrey town where he and his wife lived by then, you sometimes wonder if he was ever anywhere else. Time and again, some insight or inference is attributed to what has been seen or heard from that useful vantage point, acknowledged and recommended as such. This is no ordinary view. Throughout the course of supermarkets' existence—a shorter time than Richard Hoggart's shopping life, but a good many decades by now—the checkout has been regarded as a perpetual problem, and the prevention of long queues as a topic of seemingly boundless scope for the worries of generations of marketing professionals. But for Hoggart, it is as though the default understanding of this point of obligatory pause had been entirely forgotten. The checkout is not an unwelcome hold-up so much as the best available place from which to watch and listen to how people talk and behave as they wait.

There are numerous examples in Hoggart's writings of the *ad hoc* checkout case study; here is one, from the Farnham book. The topic, quite specifically, is middle-class, middle-aged women, presented as a recognisable social type in which Hoggart takes a particular interest: 'I come back again and again to women of that age and class'.⁷ He goes on:

Another tiny but illustrative incident. I was in a supermarket one Friday morning, waiting behind such a middle-aged woman who was next to be served. The man who was checking out his groceries emptied the trolley and moved perhaps a yard away from it so as to have more space to sort out his shopping bags. He did not at that moment pull the trolley with him.

At this point, despite the framing as a 'tiny' event, the intricacy of detail might lead, generically, to the expectation of some kind of sudden assault. But the passage instead continues:

The hard-hatted lady next in line called to him without hesitation, in a voice which would have carried twenty yards, not the one yard needed to reach the man: 'Do you

intend to leave that trolley *there*?' It was premature, rude, stupid. What made her think she could call out in that tone of voice to anyone?'⁸

There are more sentences in this vein, countering the hypothetical objection that this might be simply one specific woman, or an off-day for this particular woman; the paragraph concludes instead with the summary conviction that the incident 'speaks of, reveals something of the common style of, a whole class of women, especially those of a certain age'.⁹ The move from the individual to the representative is typical for Hoggart; but equally vital is that it is to the supermarket, and in particular to the checkout, that he goes for the telling piece of evidence or corroboration about contemporary social types—or stereotypes.

Hoggart almost never draws attention to the peculiarity of his predilection for shopping, whether as a subject of thought or a practice in daily life; for the most part he just gets on with both, or with the constant conjunction between the two. The predilection is peculiar in the first case, as a subject of study and thought, for the reason described above: that shopping has been left out of so much of social history, even when social history is dedicated to giving a serious place to the time-taking, everyday occupations that fall outside the established historical categories. But in the second case, as a practice in his own daily life, Hoggart's habit was unusual for the simple reason that he was not a woman.

He was quite aware of this gender eccentricity himself. Towards the end of the middle book of his three-volume autobiography, he says this: 'Most professional men of my generation hate shopping for food, furniture or clothes; I enjoy it'.¹⁰ This sentence could have served as a text—in the old-fashioned pulpit sense—for the present essay. Almost everything I seek to understand about shopping and Richard Hoggart unfurls from its few simple words. First of all, there is the way of categorizing himself by as many as three amalgamated markers: social class, gender, and generation. The category of generation is potentially double; it may refer either to people of roughly his age, at any time (he is in his early seventies when he writes this), or else to his particular cohort, those with the shared formation of being born at a particular period and therefore living through the same times at the same stages of their lives. Secondly, class variations in consumption practices are a constant preoccupation of Hoggart's, to the point that he occasionally sounds barely distinguishable from a market research student, with lengthy listings of likely car models and supermarket choices for different socioeconomic groups. A glimpse of this tendency, perhaps, can be seen in the present example, with the semi-mechanical listing of the three hypothetical categories of merchandise: food, furniture, or clothes. More often, though, there is a more textured mode of differentiation, and that, as we shall see, is what follows straight after the declarative sentence.

The third category, gender, is the most surprising aspect of this distinctive shopper's self-description—or self-labelling. That is because at least until recently, and most certainly for people of all social groups from the same generation as himself, shopping of all kinds, whether hated or enjoyed, was almost exclusively the task or the privilege of women. In the twentieth century, the man shopper for anything, in any class, is the rarest of birds. It was women who 'did' the shopping, in the sense of the regular job or chore; and it was also women who 'went shopping', for pleasure, for an outing—in the other sense of shopping, not as a task but as an open-ended leisure activity. In neither mode, doing the shopping or going shopping, are men much to be found, whether in image or in reality.

Most pointedly, Hoggart's coming-out or going-out shopping sentence works across the hinge of its summary semicolon, both slick and silent: Most hate it, whereas (semicolon) I enjoy it. In that concisely marked contrast, Hoggart declares his own distinction, his difference from the majority of men of his time and place. And proud of it!

The paragraph continues, though, in a different direction, with an acknowledgement of the other world from which this late twentieth-century individual emerged:

Most professional men of my generation hate shopping for food, furniture or clothes; I enjoy it. The related interest [he means his own] in things which claim to be ‘bargains’ now seems increasingly comical to me, as it has done for years to the rest of the family. This is the bran-tub spirit (there may be gold there), the Woolworth’s syndrome, and as congenitally working-class as the addiction itself to those stores. Until I began to write this story—and found Woolworth’s appearing again and again in different contexts—I did not fully realise their importance in the theatre of working-class life during the first half of this century.¹¹

The rhetorical and logical steps of this passage are both characteristic and fascinating. It is narrated as a process of self-discovery, by means of autobiographical writing, that then transfers immediately into general social truth, applicable not just to Hoggart himself, to the particular author, but to the entire working class. I read my own story, the story I have just written; I see what it is; and what it is, as I thereby see, is the story of ‘working-class life’, equally unnoticed until now.

In Hoggart’s marketing identification mode there then follows an account of why Woolworth’s appeals or appealed to working-class people—by the fixed low prices along with the ‘open displays ... piled high’.¹² But then—when you thought he had said this was in the now ‘comical’ past—he reverts to the bargains:

Against all current reason, the love of bargains has stayed with me and with others I know from similar backgrounds: the love of advertisements which don’t try to be psychologically cunning but say straight out, ‘Look, this is a bargain; come and get it’; ads for food, cars, clothing, furniture; small ads in shop windows and classified ads in local newspapers. The big department store sales are attractive because they do have genuine bargains and you can now afford any you reasonably want. But so are bring-and-buys, jumble sales, displays of gear for making your own beer and wine, church and chapel bazaars, auctions (especially shabby auctions in small country towns), discount and second-hand shops and particularly those where they accept goods, agree on a price and put it in the window, taking a percentage if it’s sold; and now car-boot sales.¹³

This is a joyous accumulation, a piling up and buying it cheap over and over again—as not just more and more stuff, but more and more words to say it and ways and places and times to grab it are poured onto the page, like the classified listings in freebie local papers. There is more—of course there is more—and I must quote two more sentences, partly because of their poignance now, from the perspective of the online world, nearly thirty years since the words were written:

Today’s bargains are centred above all on the postal service and must appeal, do appeal, more widely than to émigrés from the working-class world; but they hook us particularly thoroughly. I make the routine objections to junk mail, but can scarcely bear to throw it away unopened.¹⁴

‘Scarcely bear’: he does it but hates to have to. The small tensions of tiny daily things are palpable in this sentence, which records a permanent self-division—the one who makes ‘routine objections’ as opposed to the one who really takes pleasure in these things—from a third perspective, that of the rueful and indulgent self-observation of this trivially complex being.

This is by no means the end of this excursion among the varied shopping scenes of Hoggart’s memoirs. The following page has a paragraph listing just about every item he can remember having succumbed to as a mail order bargain, with parenthetical ratings as to its usefulness or otherwise, and an irrepressible sense of fun, as one silly item after another is mentioned and then discarded:

I have not yet sent for a small electric shaver for the hairs within the nose and do not expect to; nor for an ioniser (*Which?* says it's not at all sure about them). I would hate to find I have won a Personal Organiser. I have bought a car-boot tidy (not very useful), Able-Labels (handy), little quartz travel alarm-clocks, an anti-wrinkle steamer (not worth the trouble) ...¹⁵

The list goes on. But all these many things, the useful and the not useful, the fantastical and the really practical, are then set aside as basically irrelevant in light of the underlying function: 'one should allow something for the pleasure of sending off, and of opening the packet; it might be a real bargain'. And then, setting off in another analytical direction: 'What causes all the little spurts of pleasure as bargains are sniffed out?'¹⁶

But here, it is time to leave behind the dubious arrivals through the letterbox and go back to the real shops evoked at the start of the autobiographical shopping pages, where Hoggart referred to what he called 'the Woolworth's syndrome' and his surprise at finding that store appearing so frequently in the present memoir—as though it took writing and representing to see what was really going on with the raw name that seemed to surface so often. Woolworth's, of course, is not just any old shop; in this passage, it is glossed as being central to what is engagingly called 'the theatre of working-class life in the first half of the twentieth century'. Woolworth's puts in an appearance of one kind or another in practically all Hoggart's books, including the one on Farnham, where it figures in its later declining mode. It is a passage that combines Hoggart's characteristically dual rhetorical mode for descriptions of shops. On the one hand he offers a light form of nonetheless serious interpretation: 'The allure, and that word is not excessive, of the old-style Woolies lay in both its sense of being an Arabian bazaar and in its psychological accessibility. It didn't frighten you; it belonged to your class'.¹⁷ On the other hand, further on, he seems to abandon what now seems more like a scholarly façade—while also knowingly winking in the act of doing so. Thus we now get a new sort of list, consisting of what you can no longer buy in the place. It is punctuated not by cool writerly semicolons, but by a self-mockingly dramatic exclamation mark: 'I have by now lost count of the useful things Woolworth's no longer stocks. ... Woolworth's not stocking household polishes and shaving cream! It's against nature.' You may think this is mainly bluff and self-parody, and probably it is; but the paragraph changes tack once again to end with this solemn concessive overview: 'Still, in many branches, their gardening and DIY sections remain valuable and competitive'.¹⁸

Hoggart did not ignore more recent incarnations of the cheap city-centre variety chain store selling anything and everything. *Townscape with Figures*, in 1994, opens with a scene in front of the Farnham branch of Argos, where old men hang about in the same way, Hoggart says, that in past times they might have found an outdoor home round a town square. The store itself, though, is presented as representing a sad decline from the lovably showy frivolity of Woolies. 'Among British town shops Woolworth's used to be, was for decades, the chief working-class point of reference; now it has lost its magic'.¹⁹ Argos's stock of what he calls 'consumer durables and nondurables and unendurables'²⁰ is mostly hidden from view:

no display but that huge coloured book representing all the stuff stacked on shelves at the back, called up by computer once you have made your choice. Late twentieth-century marketing which has creamed off much High Street trade and will itself, they say, be succeeded in ten or twenty years by home-computer-shopping.²¹

How accurate he was about the distinctive Argos set-up as a precursor of internet shopping. And also, how he would have loved Poundland and the rest of the internet-bucking fixed-price bricks-and-mortar stores that emerged in the 2010s, against all entrepreneurially expert predictions.

But the starring role of Woolworth's throughout Hoggart's *œuvre*—and his life—has another meaning and purpose, which may be summarised with the help of another kind of familiar name. The critic Q.D. Leavis was the wife of the famous critic F.R. Leavis; her book *Fiction and the Reading Public* was published in 1932. It is a social history of working-class reading in England, and true to my thesis its index has no entry for anything in the orbit of shopping or retailing, let alone individual stores. There is Smollett but not Smith's—and there is 'Woolf, V.', but not Woolworth's. Yet the book begins with a prolonged and detailed account of the many different types of shop that presently stock reading matter for borrowing, hiring, or sale. Among these named outlets is none other than Woolworth's, which enters the picture with these mostly uncontentious words: 'Where multiple stores have a branch there is usually to be found a bazaar of the American firm, Messrs. Woolworth; here for 3d. or 6d. nearly everything necessary to existence may be bought, including literature'.²² So far, apart from the moderate sneer of the 'Messrs.', this could be neutral or even extolling. But the account of the literature on offer soon deteriorates into palpable condescension as Leavis describes various cheap series of popular classics and not yet classics. 'There appears to be money in "literature associated with the film"'; the inverted commas around that phrase do special work.²³

Later on in Leavis's book, a typical Woolworth's store is brought into focus, in language that could not be more different from Hoggart's:

Here, while passing from counter to counter to buy cheap crockery, strings of beads, lamp-shades, and toffee, toys, soap, and flower-bulbs, and under the stimulus of 6d. gramophone records filling the air with 'Headin' for Hollywood' and 'Love Never Dies,' the customer is beguiled into patronising literature. If it is a country town, the bazaar is packed on market-day with the country folk who come in once a week to do their shopping, so that Woolworth literature supplies the county with reading; if it is a city, the housewives of the district make their regular tour on Saturdays, though a constant stream passes along the counters handling the goods throughout the week.²⁴

The comparison of rural and urban shopping habits is suggestive, not least for the unelaborated contrast of the 'country folk' with the city's 'housewives'. Momentarily, Leavis does seem to be interested in the determinations of shopping differences, with geography and gender both getting a glance at this point. But the main concern of the summary is to insist on the deviously persuasive ambiance—'under the stimulus ... the customer is beguiled'. Linguistically, it is a quaintly hybrid description, in which the exotic suggestion of beguiling, straight out of the caption to an orientalisising advertising image, fails to bond with the semi-behaviouristic perspective of the word 'stimulus'. And is this also the first ever scholarly reference to in-store muzak? If something called literature appears along with the rest of the assorted merchandise on Woolworth's tables, that is only because—as Leavis has already concluded from a librarian's report of borrowing practices in relation to mass-market literature—'the reading habit is now often a form of the drug habit'.²⁵

Quite simply, Q.D. Leavis's critique is here the mirror image of Hoggart's. Contrast her description with his, in the first volume of his autobiography, where he says: 'To go round a Woolworth's in any town or city you land in, no matter how far away it may be from home, is like having a quick fix from a drug you became addicted to very early'.²⁶ Apart from the obvious reversal between the good and the bad shopping trip, there is also the simple difference of placement. For Hoggart, every Woolie's is a home from home; whereas Leavis remains on the outside, observing the strange powers of an orchestrated environment that touches her personally not at all. Shopping has nothing to do with, nothing to offer, the critic objecting to sub-standard literature; there is just no connection. With Hoggart, on the other hand, those two personae, the present writer and the one-time youth, are not divided, even if they are not one and the same.

Hoggart himself points out the link, or rather the disjunction, between his own perspective and Leavis's, in a late interview with Nicolas Tredell. Referring to what he is calling his 'documentary' writing method, he speaks of one prompt for *The Uses of Literacy* having been his 'dissatisfaction with Mrs Leavis's contrasts, in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, between popular novels and a much earlier generation of working people; that did not seem a true match. Mrs Leavis', he goes on to say, 'did not realise that I was, there, ... implicitly and politely making a criticism of her approach'.²⁷

Q.D. Leavis's reference to housewives takes us back to what is surely, as noted earlier, the most striking and exceptional feature of Hoggart's shopping habit. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, as Leavis implies, household shopping—indeed shopping of almost every kind—was almost always done by women: both in fact and in public images of the practice, whether promotional or critical. Hoggart stands out, and knows he stands out, as going against that norm. But it is frustrating, given how much he does say, that in none of his memoirs does he tell us to what extent he actually did the Hoggarts' household shopping—that is, went and bought what was routinely needed from local shops, or later from supermarkets, as opposed to going shopping: wandering about Woolworth's of a weekend, or earnestly checking the pages of *Which?* for the best-value washing machine. Also annoying, if not exasperating, for my purposes and curiosities, is that two periods of living abroad—for a year in upstate New York and for five years, no less, in Paris, no less—pass with almost no mention of the shops in either of these places: shops so different in type from England's, and from one another. Especially given Hoggart's usual preoccupations, it is a remarkable lacuna.

The Hoggarts spent an academic year in Rochester, NY in the second half of the 1950s. At this time sizeable supermarkets were firm fixtures everywhere in the US; since their beginnings in the 1930s they had become the default mode of household food shopping. But they had yet to appear in significant numbers in Britain, and those that did exist were far smaller in selling area (and numbers of checkouts) than their American counterparts.²⁸ Even the most shopping-uninterested cultural commentators from Europe, and indeed from within the US itself, habitually seized on the American supermarket of this period as emblematic of new extremes of a consumer society only just beginning to cross the Atlantic; and for literary men the rhetorical contrasts are well established, even ready-made. The supermarket represents the antithesis of literary culture, and the visible, garish sign of its manifest decline. This is the decade of Allen Ginsberg's poem 'A Supermarket in California' and of the poet Randall Jarrell's essay, 'A Sad Heart at the Supermarket'. Jarrell's piece was first included in a 1959 collection of essays on mass culture by various writers; it was a title that he liked well enough to make it the name of a whole book of his own, as well.²⁹ What did Hoggart make of this extraordinary new shopping phenomenon, as yet unseen in England? There is barely a word—only a couple of oddly formulaic sentences. In the chapter describing this American year in the second volume of the three-part autobiography there is a general reference to 'wasteful and meaningless accumulation in the vast supermarkets', as if it is all too much, somehow beyond depiction. This vaguely economic and existential complaint is followed, a little later, by what sounds like a downmarket version of *The Stepford Wives*, when Hoggart refers to 'the sheer stylelessness of the almost ubiquitous bulging trousers, loose nylon blouses and TV-lipstick of thirty-five-year-old women trundling round supermarkets'.³⁰ And that is all he has to say about the so different American stores of the mid-1950s.

Just as striking is the absence of the shops and markets of Paris. For a few years in the early 1970s the Hoggarts were living on the boulevard Haussmann, with two of the city's iconic department stores, Printemps and Galeries Lafayette, just along the street from their splendid apartment. Yet of these or any other grand stores, or small stores, there is not a word.

Perhaps the shops that interest Hoggart have to have some connection to home. For if supermarkets are all but omitted from his account of the time when he encountered the vast American version, then this is more than made up for in the later works of his English retirement. In *Townscape with Figures*, as already suggested, it is as if Hoggart is almost never not in a large self-service store of some kind. He begins the book with that cluster of old men who regularly congregate outside Farnham's Argos; but he himself, from the evidence of the pages that follow, is surely the town's principal loiterer in and around retail spaces—as he is the first to admit. He refers to 'the conversation I heard today, at the check-out of course', and on the next page he responds to hypothetically sceptical readers by saying: 'I only ask them to keep their eyes and ears open at key points where the different social groups inevitably meet, for example at those "junctions" I have constantly returned to—railway booking offices and supermarket check-outs'.³¹

The final works also return to long left scenes. One of Hoggart's later collections of essays is called *First and Last Things*. A plain formulation that also has many possible resonances, the title is characteristic of his distinctive style; or, to use a favourite word of his, it is 'telling'. Simply, the book is about his early life and his later life. That is a description of most autobiographies; but here, for someone who had already written a long one, it is as if the first and last things are meant to suggest a changed choice of emphasis, a kind of paring down or filtering out. This new memoir contains not quite the last of the many life-writings, and for the most part what is presented in it only says once again, and in similar ways, what he had written before: in that sense the final version is simply a repetition, now growing a little weary, of the first. But as he goes through the old stories one more time it turns out that there is still, after all, some possibility of surprise—for the seasoned Hoggart-reader, but also, most movingly, for the writer himself. It is only now, he says, speaking once again of his childhood, that I have remembered I had a dog. It was kind of them to let me have her. In that moment of the present telling, so much is contained—is potentially there, and is revealed as having been held back, unknowingly, for all these years and decades. How is it possible to forget that you had a dog, even a dog of your very own? But he did, he finds that he did; and only now, at the very end, she has returned to his consciousness during the process of writing—but far from it being the first time—about that ancient period of life.

The long lost dog—unnamed, undescribed, but a she—returns to memory late in life, a creature of the past who suddenly appears in the midst of the ageing present. It is rare for Hoggart's recollections to be so laden with possible individual meanings. Most often, it is as though his own story, while it is deeply felt—to use that formulation so dear to mid-twentieth-century literary criticism—must remain, if not impersonal, then representative, its value for recording to be found in its indication of a certain kind of working-class experience. The little lost dog, though, both her discovery now and her having been there at the beginning, for once disturbs the settled ways of that style. It is something that is Richard Hoggart's story alone, an object of early love that had disappeared from his own picture.

The stories of shops and shopping that Hoggart tells were mostly of that generally comfortable and affectionate type that is the hallmark of his relationship to the places of his past when he brings them out as illustrations of the styles of life he has known—*The Way We Live Now*, in the Trollopian title of yet one more of the final books. But there are two consumerly moments in his memoirs whose power to speak of what they do not actually say has more in common with the episode of the dog than with the many scenes of chain-store cheerfulness or cheeky checkout curiosity. One is from young boyhood, and the other from the time of old age. The word 'moments' here is meant as an echo of Hoggart's own quasi-Wordsworthian term for a small number of recollected childhood experiences of fulfilment, of having had a sudden sense of perfect being in the here and now. Such moments are recounted at long intervals in the three-volume autobiography.

The first of these moments has many of the pleasurable associations of the childhood moments to which he gives that name himself. It concerns a neighbour from the first place where Richard lived, with both the siblings from whom he was to be separated in later childhood, following the death of their mother. This neighbour was a small-scale baker who sold cakes from home on Saturdays; ‘The smell in the yard was then all warm, yeasty, curranty and sugary.’ When there were some cakes left over, they might be given to the Hoggarts. ‘Even now, the smell and taste, the cushiony butteryness of a toasted teacake, not only seem marvellous but instantly bring back, with warmth, life in Potternewton Lane, even if I am having tea in a posh hotel’.³² The story is about consumption in the primary sense of eating—and eating for pleasure rather than need: this special delicacy that, Hoggart says now, has forever imbued the toasted teacake, however grand the setting of its serving, with an aura that comes from that first fine Saturday perfection.

This primal and Proustian moment of consumerly pleasure is homely in every way. The shop is more or less next door, it is ‘on the premises’ of someone’s house, and in any case it is not like a regular shop with regular hours. The moment is a treat, yet a regular treat. But the delicious vignette of repeated teacake heaven is striking for a further reason. In the chronology of Richard Hoggart’s life as told, it is the very first instance of anything to do with a shop, the first hint of buying and selling as a part of life. Yet while it comes from a sort of shop and was baked to be sold, the teacake has not been bought; it has been given. Given to a family known to be ‘hard-up’ (Hoggart’s word) but also, you infer, given out of kindness and neighbourly hospitality, and consciously against the grain of monetary concerns.

The second moment comes from the other end of Hoggart’s life, and it appears in the very last of the memoirs, a short book called *Promises to Keep*. This moment is given as having occurred in the late 1980s—quite early in the retirement years. The Hoggarts, Mary and Richard, are on a trip to Australia, and the later narrating Hoggart begins by setting the scene of an ordinary coach excursion—while also highlighting his own special knowledge and role in relation to the historic site they are about to visit:

We joined a group to see the remarkable cave paintings, so remarkable that they have special international status with UNESCO. They came within my portfolio during my time in Paris.

Apart from the two of us, almost all the passengers were middle-aged American couples. After about an hour the coach stopped and the driver waved at a single small cave with a few faint drawings on its walls. I was astonished, since the important cave to which the coach company promised a visit was about two hours from Darwin and had a substantial series of well-preserved paintings on several walls.

I went to the driver, indicated that I knew what had happened and asked him to drive on. He mulishly and silently ignored me. The other passengers were now back in their seats after looking at the feeble drawings. I told them we were not at all at our chosen destination and that I was sure of this because of my UNESCO connection. I asked them to join me in asking the driver to go further.³³

The next sentence is set off like a display quote, a miniature paragraph in the centre of the page and in italics :

*They sat stolidly in their seats, most with their heads down, and all silent.*³⁴

Hoggart comments beneath it:

Collective cowardice, reinforced by their shared national habits; ‘do nothing so as to avoid a fuss.’ How ‘English’ the Americans can be. I tried again, with the same result. I was both surprised and shocked. The driver engaged the gears and we went back to Darwin. No moral courage there.³⁵

He is not done yet. The next paragraph begins : ‘Perhaps I should have made an even greater fuss on the spot’, and goes on to analyse his own by then passive behaviour, ‘enough of the English disinclination to cause a fuss’ along with an ‘anger at “being done”’.³⁶

In the end, none of the characters in this episode does anything different: neither the fellow tourists, nor the coach driver, nor Hoggart himself, who gives up the effort at protest. The passage is partly about the failure to modify an evident wrong, or to interest others in the fact that they are being conned. It is about the helplessness and frustration of a futile consumer complaint: no one is listening, everyone just wants a quiet life (‘most with their heads down and all silent’). But most of all, the sadness of the passage lies in Hoggart’s own loss of authority. The man who not long ago was head of a major wing of a famous international organisation, UNESCO, is now unable to get a few passengers on a bus trip to pay him attention; worse than that, they seem to cower away, to try to pretend he is not making a fool of himself. The travellers are nowhere in particular, in an outback where one cave is much like another; they are notionally Americans but they may as well be English, Hoggart suggests, to judge from their comfortable coach potato capitulation. Like the contented visitors to ‘the most photographed barn in America’, promoted as such, in Don DeLillo’s novel of 1985, *White Noise*, these people, Hoggart apart, or possibly Hoggart and Mrs Hoggart apart (we don’t know), are happy to think they have seen what they want to have seen; they don’t want to know that they haven’t.³⁷

It is as if there are no active witnesses to what amounts to a collective outrage. The driver takes no notice, the passengers take no notice of either the initial exchange or the speech that is made for their educational and consciousness-raising benefit. It is as if the recounting in the present book is meant as one more attempt to expose the holiday scam. A last resort. But the telling of the story now only reinforces the picture of powerlessness, of a Richard Hoggart reduced to appearing as an eccentric old man haranguing an unlistening and ignorant coachload of tourists in the back of beyond. Geographically and culturally he is transported away from his consumerly comfort zones, as he dwindles into the far distance.

One other scene, less extreme, seems like an echo of this one. Again, it is part of an otherwise unrecounted vacation in the retirement years; again, it takes place not just far from home, but far from present-day human settlement—in the one motel for miles and miles somewhere in the remotest reaches of America: ‘We were driving across the dire agoraphobic wastes of Death Valley, California, at the turn into the 1990s’.³⁸ It is at this ghastly and god-forsaken intersection that Richard and Mary find themselves; the place is unwelcoming and filthy and the only available food is something that goes by the name of a Desert Stew. Rather than that, he says, ‘We retreated to an unkempt, chill cabin outside’.³⁹ Hoggart was not of the TripAdvisor generation—but even so, this is clearly a one-star experience. There is no choice; there is no warmth; there is no more to say. It is as if he had come to the end of all the vitality and variety, of all that Richard Hoggart had been as a writer and as an enjoyer of the consumer experiences of his time.

But it would be wrong to finish with these sad images of an exiled, ancient, and (to put it less tragically) a straightforwardly dissatisfied consumer: with Richard and Mary ending up in far-off places imbued with the disappointments or downright deceptions of some forms of international tourism. The Australian coach trip has a distant affinity, and therefore a visible contrast, with the lovingly detailed description of a wholly different kind of tourist experience, at the other end of Hoggart’s life, which is the charabanc day trip to Scarborough described in *The Uses of Literacy*. There, in a couple of pages, Hoggart packs in all the pleasure of the outfits, the fish and chips, the ice creams, the banter, all the hour-by-hour rituals of the once-in-a-summertime seaside enjoyments of his Leeds childhood. Even the inevitable queue for the ladies’ is a chance for fun—and a moment that gets its moment in his account. Embarking on his account of the journey back at the end of the day, he then goes on:

If the men are there, and certainly if it is a men's outing, there will probably be several stops and a crate or two of beer in the back for drinking on the move. Somewhere in the middle of the moors the men's parties all tumble out, with much horseplay and noisy jokes about bladder-capacity.⁴⁰

'Somewhere in the middle of the moors'—as with the Australian site, it is out of range, but here are no ageing, well-off passengers, couples keeping their careful, frosty distance. Instead, back there in the early middle of the twentieth century, we are given a community of sometimes women, sometimes men, and sometimes all together, the children along for the ride as well, all spending their pennies together, idealized in the memory and the gentle analysis of the sometime small boy. All in it together : one coach, one day, one still vivid narrator of stopping and shopping pleasures.

This essay began as a Richard Hoggart Lecture in Literature and Culture at Goldsmiths, University of London, in October, 2018. Hoggart was Warden at Goldsmiths from 1976 to 1984, the years prior to his retirement. Many thanks to Carole Sweeney for the invitation, and to members of the audience for their responses.

¹ In more recent years, David Kynaston's trilogy of social histories of Britain after the war has broken this pattern, with lively accounts of the shops and shopping of the time. See Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007); *Family Britain 1951-57* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009); and *Modernity Britain 1957-62* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

² Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London: Chatto and Windus 1957), p. 90.

³ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 90.

⁴ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 90.

⁵ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, pp. 90-1.

⁶ For more on male observation of the new furniture shops of the postwar decades, with *The Uses of Literacy* alongside a passage from B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969), see Rachel Bowlby, *Back to the Shops* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), ch. 25.

⁷ Richard Hoggart, *Townscape with Figures: Farnham: Portrait of an English Town* (London: Chatto & Windus 1994), p. 51.

⁸ Hoggart, *Townscape*, pp. 51-2.

⁹ Hoggart, *Townscape*, p. 52.

¹⁰ Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning : Life and Times, Volume II: 1940-59* (1990 ; Oxford : Oxford University Press 1991), p. 188.

¹¹ Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning*, p. 188.

¹² Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning*, p. 189.

¹³ Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning*, p. 189.

¹⁴ Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning*, p. 189.

¹⁵ Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning*, p. 190.

¹⁶ Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning*, p. 190.

¹⁷ Hoggart, *Townscape*, p. 110.

¹⁸ Hoggart, *Townscape*, p. 111.

¹⁹ Hoggart, *Townscape*, p. 24.

²⁰ Hoggart, *Townscape*, p. 4.

²¹ Hoggart, *Townscape*, p. 5.

²² Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 14.

²³ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 16.

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- ²⁴ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, pp. 17-18.
- ²⁵ Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 7.
- ²⁶ Hoggart, *A Local Habitation: Life and Times: 1918-1940* (1988; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 121.
- ²⁷ Hoggart, *Between Two Worlds: Essays* (London: Aurum Press, 2001), p. 306
- ²⁸ On the contrasting developments of American and (later) British supermarkets, see Rachel Bowlby, *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping* (London: Faber, 2000). On the (relatively) very small scale of newly opened British supermarkets in the late 1950s, see also Bowlby, *Back to the Shops*, ch. 7.
- ²⁹ See Allen Ginsberg, 'A Supermarket in California', in *Howl* (1956; San Francisco: City Lights, 1986); Norman Jacob (ed.), *Culture for the Millions? Mass Media in Modern Society* (1959; Boston: Beacon Press, 1965); Randall Jarrell, *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* (London : Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1965).
- ³⁰ Hoggart, *A Sort of Clowning*, p. 164.
- ³¹ Hoggart, *Townscape*, pp. 177, 178.
- ³² Hoggart, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 213.
- ³³ Hoggart, *Promises to Keep: Thoughts in Old Age* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 93-4.
- ³⁴ Hoggart, *Promises to Keep*, p. 94.
- ³⁵ Hoggart, *Promises to Keep*, p. 94.
- ³⁶ Hoggart, *Promises to Keep*, p. 94.
- ³⁷ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985 ; New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 12.
- ³⁸ Hoggart, *First and Last Things* (London: Aurum Press, 1999), p. 192.
- ³⁹ Hoggart, *First and Last Things*, p. 153.
- ⁴⁰ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 122.