

were they distorted to suit the whim of a snob, or a demagogue?

There are various questions one could ask. Would the prestige of the church be increased in the minds of the readers of *The Cathedral*? Do the many clergymen who pass through his pages tell the reader something of Walpole's opinion of religion? Is the effect of a diet of Walpole's novels to lull people into contentment with the moment, and to conceal from them the wrath to come? Is there anything in the charge that popular novelists merely give us optimistic pap; and if it is true is it dangerous? Is it a worthy function for the novelist to provide in the novel comfort for the citizen and reassurance about his position in the social order? Is Walpole's partial picture of English society, his picture of cathedral towns and of London, calculated to distract the reader's attention from the black spots of England in the twenties and thirties—from mass unemployment and from the grim spectacle of the depressed areas in the industrial north? And even if it is not intended to distract does it in fact do so? Books like Walpole's historical novels build up a romantic picture of the past; what effect has this picture on popular ideas of history?

All these are interesting questions, but I am going to try to answer only one or two. First, his treatment of people. In a rough and ready way Walpole was of help to his readers. The grosser snobberies such as you get in the novels of Gilbert Frankau and Warwick Deeping do not disfigure his books. He could see the institution tyrannizing over the individual, could see and object. Consider a group of novels written in the first half of his career—*Mr. Perrin*, *The Captives*, *The Dark Forest*, *The Cathedral*. There is, in these earlier novels at least, a voice raised against the constrictions imposed by society when it makes victims of human beings. In *Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill* it is the little private autocracy of a minor public school presided over by a tyrannical headmaster. In *The Captives* Maggie is borne down by a repressive society represented by her strong-minded, religious aunts and her equally strong-minded but more conventional sister-in-law. In *The Cathedral* the personal tyranny of