

## BOOKS IN AMERICAN CULTURE TODAY \*

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IS LITERATURE really important? The traditional answer is, of course, yes. Are the books being written, published, bought and sold and (presumably) read, today, important? If the answer to the first question is yes, so certainly should yes be the answer to the second.

The claim of literature, like that of religion, is so exalted as to put many of us in our common round of life upon the stretch. We vaguely remember noble words like Milton's about a good book being "the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life"; or Emerson's about "man's effort to indemnify himself for the wrongs of his condition"; or Pater's about "the representation of a specific personality in its volition and power"; or again, very fine, those words about literature being "the record of the best moments of the best and happiest minds." These *are* fine words, and we respond to them strongly. Literature, therefore, we are willing to acknowledge, is a kind of scripture, apt for instruction and inspiration, an availability and a resource. It is something, understood, that has always existed, always will—an accepted part of our heritage. In short, we take it, all too lightly, as something ceremonial and ornamental, rather than as something intrinsic and vital. Less likely are we to take it as the record and index of our civilization and culture, ever making, never completed, always extending, the work of many hands and many minds (the best, we hope), growing from month to month and year to year, a perpetual tally against our individual and collective lives, a forum of necessary judgments. "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Literature exists as the ever-renewed record of that vision.

Now what about literature in our country today? Does our literature match our science? Does the excellence and strength of our writing march with our economic and our military might?

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Literature obviously has many values; some would claim that it exists only in intangible values. However, literature, so far as it comes into print, takes on, like mankind, a physical existence; also, if literature is to be a public force, not a mere idle recreation for the few, it must have a body of readers—very many readers. So the data do come in, meaningfully. Let us look at some of them.

It is the boast of Britain that she still produces the books for the English-speaking world.<sup>1</sup> Last year the British produced about 18,000 titles of new or re-issued books to about 12,000 titles published here. Thirty-seven per cent of Britain's book production went abroad, not only to sustain the prestige of the British book around the world but to provide millions of pounds sterling for the balance of trade. In comparison only six per cent of our own book production was exported.

Further, it is interesting to note that in 1954 Russia produced 37,500 titles, West Germany 14,000, Japan better than 17,000; among smaller nations, France and Italy, each, about 10,000 titles; the Netherlands, 7,000.

Books in our country are sold through 4,500 bookshops, which dispose, all told, of about three-fourths of them. The remaining quarter is distributed through the sales agency, slightly disguised, of some seventy-four book clubs. Of the bookshops, it is estimated that not more than 1,500, perhaps fewer (some say as few as 500), are bookshops in the fullest sense; and of these, most are located within a 200-mile circle of New York City—still our literary capital both for publishers and writers—and chiefly in a dozen cities. Unflattering to our culture is the fact that quite commonly an American city of 100,000 to 150,000 population may be without a bookshop. It has been calculated that if bookshops were as plentiful among us as in literate Denmark, we should have 23,000 of them. Incredible figure? Let us remember that General Motors, one company, produced last year three and a quarter millions of passenger cars. The public will have what it wants. At present it just isn't wanting bookshops.

<sup>1</sup> For the data of this and the immediately following paragraphs, and for much else of like sort, consult the following: "British Books," *London Times Literary Supplement*, August 28, 1953, 549; "Publishing Problems and Responsibilities," *TLS*, September 17, 1954, lx; "The Common Reader's Choice," *TLS*, September 17, 1954, lvi; "British Book Publishing in 1954," *TLS*, January 7, 1955, 16; Malcolm Cowley, *The Literary Situation* (New York, 1954), Chapter VI, particularly 101-3.

Also making books available to the public are 7,500 public libraries—a seemingly large number. However, if we were relatively as library-rich as Sweden, we should have 77,000. Again, incredible? As against a population of 165,000,000, increasing at the rate of almost 4,000,000 a year, such a number should not seem incredible for a literate nation—libraries each with a constituency of 25,000 to 30,000.

The next question is to what extent our people read. George Gallup has reported that “fewer people buy or read books in the United States than in any other modern democracy.” The British are supposed to read three times as much as we. Specifically only twenty-one per cent of Americans admit to reading, as against fifty-one per cent of Britons. Of American college graduates more than half admit to not reading a book “for months.” It is interesting to note, in passing, that our college and university libraries are prodigious buyers of books, taking as many trade books as all other purchasers. Accordingly, our college graduates, if they are not readers, have not lacked the opportunity of books; rather, they have simply continued adhering to the strong popular mores.

The schools at all levels provide through their demand for textbooks the American publisher's most lucrative field. There can be no question of American literacy *qua* literacy, if literacy is enough. Students still “pound” their books and use them up. Textbooks are tools: in the lower schools chiefly for building reading skills; in the higher, for “getting up” information. But the textbook cannot be regarded as more than a useful tool. Its very existence is for something beyond itself, and if that does not eventuate, it is for nothing.

At present, reading for pleasure, for curiosity, in short for civilized uses, would seem to be on the wane. The University of Delaware is not the only institution that feels that its expensive library is under-used. The complaint is widely heard. Someone has said that reading now begins at the college level—a time evidently too late. The many distractions of modern life are blamed. Professor Lionel Trilling is quoted as saying in a recent interview, of reading: “It's become too much of an enterprise. You do it alone. You don't go out that evening. You don't have anyone in. It's hard to get

even beginning scholars to read.”<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, the *London Times* in a leading article in its literary supplement deprecated: “Yet so strict are the demands of modern life upon time that such books as these [the classics] are rapidly becoming specialized aspects of work . . . they are read as a piece of professional equipment or never. . . . The modern tendency . . . is for more and more books to be regarded as textbooks.”<sup>3</sup> Or again, as that same journal editorialized in a recent number: “There is ground to fear that we may be moving into an age when everyone will know how to read and none will turn this knowledge to good purpose. . . . The age of universal literacy may be a short one. New means of mass communication—radio and television—may largely supersede the printed page. In that case literacy will become a luxury, much like horse-riding in England nowadays.”<sup>4</sup>

Meantime, while some millions of people to some extent are still reading, what is being provided for them and what are they in the popular phrase “taking”? The first, most notable fact is the great weather change in reading preference that has taken place over a generation. In the 1920’s, seventy per cent of books sold were fiction; thirty per cent, non-fiction. Today these proportions are exactly reversed. Remembering Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe—now all passed away—and John Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Farrell, Hemingway and Faulkner among the survivors who still visit us with occasional titles of considerably diminished worth—one understands why the public read novels in the 1920’s. Today non-fiction takes the field, led by the inspirational and “self-help” books of religion and applied psychology. On the fiction side there have been some notable successes, such as *The Naked and the Dead*, *From Here to Eternity*, *The Caine Mutiny*, and *Not as a Stranger*. The largest sellers, however, have been Erskine Caldwell’s *God’s Little Acre* and Mickey Spillane’s *The Big Kill*, each about 6,000,000 copies, made popular by earthiness and violence abetted by the paper-back publishers.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Lionel Trilling, quoted by John K. Hutchens, “On Books and Authors,” *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, March 6, 1955, 2.

<sup>3</sup> “The Holidays,” *TLS*, July 31, 1953, 493.

<sup>4</sup> “The Penalties of Literacy,” *TLS*, October 30, 1953, 693.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent full account of the Spillane phenomenon, read Malcolm Cowley, *op. cit.*, Chapter VI, part 2, 106-9.



Inspection of the best-seller lists from week to week in the *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune* Sunday book sections shows little of interest, or even of easy identification. Romantic historical fiction proliferates in a wonderful way. The society novel of love, marriage, and divorce abides, of course, forever. Poetry and published drama have developed remarkable powers of concealment. The great hold-over names from the past present us with little new of distinction. How really does Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* compare with his *The Sun Also Rises*, except for the purposes of a blurb? Or Steinbeck's *East of Eden* with his *Grapes of Wrath*? The new names unhappily show a tendency to remain unknown, and the critics don't seem very able in helping us to become acquainted. In short, there is a lack of excitement on the literary 'change. The atmosphere is doldromic. There are no heartening discoveries, no warm recommendations to read, no urgencies upon the reader's attention. The moment has been described as one of "stasis"—a good Greek word meaning "standing still"; or "an open situation," meaning "nothing doing at present but we have hopes."

Without accepting business management's credo that "the public is always right," the public's present preference for factual over imaginative literature appears not unreasonable. On that side of the account, much good writing, good both in idea and expression, is being done in history (as distinguished from historical fiction) and social criticism; and is being accepted, as indicate the lower echelons of the best-seller lists. Accordingly, there is matter for rejoicing that while multitudes seek "peace of mind" (or soul or psyche), lesser multitudes desire better grounding in the experience of the race and in the theory of our historic liberties. But why should imaginative literature be comparatively abandoned; why this turning away? Are we too concerned in our lives to be in the mood for it? Or have we become too practical to waste our time upon it as a thing inutile? Or has something happened to the literature itself to make it less attractive?

Obviously, the excellences of literature like all absolute excellences are not the creatures of mere popular suffrage. A book is not worthy because it is a popular success. Neither is it worthy—as Mr. Van Wyck Brooks warns us that some would have us believe

—because few or scarcely any like it.<sup>6</sup> We all want to believe that an enlightened popular taste will, in the long run, incline to the best. Sometimes it does so, as in the case of Dr. Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. But again popular favor will fall upon a book like the late Morton Thompson's *Not As a Stranger*, a huge book of egregiously bad writing whose appeal seems to follow largely from a panoramic survey of medical pathology with a generous offering of sex for bonus. It has been said that books have now become too expensive, that priced between \$3.50 and \$5.00 they are luxuries, and that literature can never again know prosperity for all those involved in it until some new kind of imaginative assault on the public is devised on literature's behalf—possibly, it has been suggested daringly, through turning TV against itself to sell books.<sup>7</sup> Yet within six months under present conditions 150,000 copies of *Not As a Stranger* sold themselves at \$4.75 a copy. Not advertising nor the critics but the word of the satisfied reader, it is demonstrated thereby, is still potent in selling books. On the other hand it is claimed, and lamented, that we have lost as an institution the old-time bookman, the aficionado of the book, who by his discriminating relish for books helped to create a demand for them.<sup>8</sup> That may or may not, of course, be the fact, in the light of certain existing estimable names; the point is that books can still sell, and sell themselves, irrespective of merit. Again the question recurs: Why the relative falling off in imaginative literature? Can the fault be in our writers or behind them in pervading weaknesses of our society and age?

Upon approach to the delicacies involved in any analysis of our literary situation, the outstanding fact is the alienation of the great public from our writers and their books; or *vice versa*, according to the point of view. Certainly there is a failure of communication. Who has withdrawn from whom may be moot, but the cleavage undeniably exists. By and large, the public seems uninterested in what our writers are offering. It is sus-

<sup>6</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "From a Writer's Notebook, II," *Nation*, CLXXVII (1953), No. 23, 490.

<sup>7</sup> Ashley Montague, "Publishing for the New Age," *Nation*, CLXXVII (1953), No. 1, 319.

<sup>8</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, "From a Writer's Notebook," *op. cit.*, CLXXIX (1954), No. 7, 14.

pected, on the other hand, that many writers are not interested in the public, or in purveying to it. Nevertheless, the separation between the public and the writer in the long run must prove injurious to both parties. For literature is communication—by definition, the communication of important matters. The writer in his psychology as a kind of mute actor, a reciter through print of self-written lines, must by the nature of that process be conscious of an audience. Further, he must be a man under some interior impulse or pressure, perhaps of a veritably demonic sort, as with D. H. Lawrence, to communicate with his fellows. He must be egotistical enough to believe that he has something to say. Perhaps in these characteristics he shows psychic imbalance; but in this also he is not different from the rest of us, except in degree, for in perfect balance there would be perfect rest and entire inactivity on the part of all of us. So the writer needs his audience, even as the audience needs his thought. The writer's work in truth is a public function: and true writing is public discourse. When the writer's work becomes, instead, private discourse, a mere talking to the self, his role is forfeit. Too much writing today is of that cast; and justly it falls under the indictment of insignificance.

In the tragic separation of literature from the common life one may suspect that the difficulties come from both sides. The predilection of the American people for sentiment and for the "happy ending" works very really against the acceptance of tragic work. For instance, it is said that the word "death" or any synonym for it in a title is "poison at the box office." On point, one may wonder about the now classic *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: perhaps the public believes hopefully that death is reserved for archbishops only. Or again *The Naked and the Dead* comes to mind; but with it there was trouble, censorship and many unkind words. Indeed our people seem so afraid of unhappiness that they fear unhappiness even as by contagion from books. "There is enough unhappiness in the world without reading about it," is the customary phrase. Of Aristotle's purging by pity and tears, they have never heard; nor hearing, one feels, would they believe—"and turn and be converted." Not only pain and poverty but any sharp question to which no pat answer comes is likely to be regarded as "unhappy." Hence, the many evasions, "pulled punches," or downright omissions in popular works in respect to the problems

of a pluralistic culture such as ours (whether we like it or not) has become.

In any case frankness is likely to be confused with obscenity, and the statutes of law appealed to. Books and "comics" are not too often condemned together, but the new paper-backs have had a hard time of it in many places and with a Congressional investigating committee. Much of their trouble has been self-made, as the paper-backs upon any news stall show by their lurid covers of "cheesecake" or violence and their "come-on" captions. Iowa, California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Illinois have been the scenes of recent police activity. In Brooklyn and other cities vigilante committees of citizens have assumed the role of censors armed with the threat of boycott. In the Illinois state libraries, during an hysterical flurry, 6,000 books were removed from circulation and such titles as *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* were labelled "for adults only."<sup>9</sup>

These suppressions are usually made under the pretense of protecting youth. Very often the books are such as youth would not or could not ordinarily obtain—as witness those titles taken up in the famous police raid on the reputable book shops of Philadelphia in 1948. In any case, the wisdom of treating, in the interest of juveniles or of immature adults, the whole population as though it were juvenile, is open to question; and appositely Judge Bok's aphorism in the Philadelphia judgment clearing the books seems well worth pondering: "We are so fearful for other people's morals: they so seldom have the courage of our own convictions."<sup>10</sup>

The writer in a timid time is distrusted as a man of ideas. Corporations have their "idea men," who are highly paid, but woe to the free lance of the idea. The writer is almost surely an "egg-head"—a contemptuous term; a member of the intelligensia—another contemptuous term. In the often quoted phrase of Senator McCarthy's Roy Cohn, "Any writer is out." In keeping, it has

<sup>9</sup> For a review of this subject, see *America's Need: A New Birth of Freedom* (34th Annual Report of the American Civil Liberties Union, 1953-4, New York, n. d.), 9-13.

<sup>10</sup> Judge Curtis Bok's precedent-making opinion in the case of the Commonwealth *vs. Gordon et al* is notable also for its rapid, lucid survey of literary censorship from classical times to the present. See the Pennsylvania law reports, 66 D & C (Pa.) 101 (1949); also *Philadelphia Legal Intelligencer*, March 23, 1949, 1, 4-6.



been said that the public wants the writer to be merely "a non-committed, nice guy."<sup>11</sup> Hence has followed the alleged "failure of nerve." This failure of nerve has not exactly been proved but it is discussed and theorized about variously: (1) as a withdrawal by the writer altogether from his task, with the result of a "silent generation"; (2) as a retreat into "private worlds" or into the creation of "pure" literature, i. e., one dealing with some small fragment of existence as far as possible dissociated from any social engagement; (3) or as a "writing falsely," i. e., the writer letting himself be drawn into passive conformity to popular opinion and at best writing "tongue in cheek." To what extent this last has happened is somewhat conjectural. Writers are said to feel guilty because they feel out of touch with their public; to have become infected with the prevalent notion that loneliness and isolation are failure; and in consequence to have flip-flopped from the role of intellectual leadership to one of uncritical or insincere affirmation. Such is the charge being bandied about. If it is so, our writers are really in a bad way, and one can only hope that they will heed Mr. V. S. Pritchett's admonition that "it is time the intellectuals started thinking America was guilty for being out of touch with them."<sup>12</sup>

But the writer is suspect not only in his ideational life but in his personal life as well. As a type he is thought of as possibly dyspomaniac, sexually deviant, or if married, promiscuous. Mr. Malcolm Cowley in his recent study of the American writer has pretty well cleared away these slanders for those who want them cleared; and the American writer stands forth scarcely distinguishable from other members of the large minority who enjoy according to their means suburban living, informal clothes, good schooling for their children, travel, music, good talk, and interesting food and drink. Still this writer is somewhat eccentric in that he is most likely self-employed as well as inner-directed; and content, if fairly successful, to make do on an income approximately that of a college professor.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The phrase is William Harlan Hale's. His article "The Boom in American History," *Reporter*, XII (1955), No. 4, 42, deprecates the seeming tendency to avoid judgments even in objective writing.

<sup>12</sup> V. S. Pritchett, "Man or Mass Man?" *Reporter*, XI (1954), No. 11, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm Cowley, in his "A Natural History of the American Writer," (comprising Chapters VIII, IX, X, and XI of *The Literary Situation*), spells out all the details of this interesting subject.

In the early post-war years, when hopes were still high for a literary renaissance like that following World War I, publishers were optimistic and expectant. Contracts were freely offered and money advances made by which the writer's economic lot was temporarily made easy. Now the genial current has rather frozen. Because 5,000 copies of a title must be sold for a publisher to break even, and 12,000 for a book to enjoy only a modest success, publishers are understandably chary about commitments. Moreover, rising production costs have, as already noted, put the trade book in somewhat the luxury class. In Britain, it is said, high fixed charges have worked to make publishers take chances more readily, especially in the fiction field; but not here.<sup>14</sup>

Meantime some of the older resources of the imaginative writer have tended to disappear, as for example magazines of the better class. Great names like those of the *Century* and *Scribner's* grow dim in history; and the honorable survivors like the *Atlantic* and *Harper's* present a new balance of fare in keeping with the predilection of the time—an abundance of excellent articles but a paucity of stories and poems.

Where then can the writer turn? It was one time thought that radio would open a great realm for creative endeavor and a school of young dramatists<sup>15</sup> was believed incubating in that medium; but radio is passé. Now TV is the mass medium of choice and is in process of being explored like a vast continent whose farther reaches are still unknown. Many hard things are said of it. Some unrealistically have wished aloud that the public would tire of it. It has been described as "a death sentence passed hourly on the creative impulse of our young."<sup>16</sup> In more moderate language with which perhaps many can agree: "Never before has such an infant of fabulous promise been nourished on such thin milk."<sup>17</sup> However, in spite of fears that TV would be the end of reading, Malcolm Cowley admits that "TV and other new forms of mass entertainment haven't destroyed the reading habit, at least not among adults." From the British Library Association actually comes the report: "Britons are reading more library books than

<sup>14</sup> "British Book Publishing in 1954," *loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Norman Corwin, Arch Oboler, *et al.*

<sup>16</sup> Kay Boyle, "A Declaration for 1955," *Nation*, CLXXX (1955), No. 5, 103.

<sup>17</sup> "Radio, Television and the Writer," *TLS*, September 17, 1954, lxviii.

ever—270,000,000, because TV shows have increased interests in such subjects as archeology, ballet, and social problems.”<sup>18</sup> That testimony must fall strangely on our ears. Yet it must be acknowledged that such stimulation could follow here from more programs like our *Omnibus* replacing the usual scud of banal dramas, vaudeville medleys, and everlasting commercial “plugs.” But where does the capable man of letters fit in with the present state of TV? Some respectable experimental drama is being done; and at least one TV dramatist has graduated to the stage.<sup>19</sup> However, if we are to believe TV’s best critic, John Crosby, the conditions of work there are both exhausting and unrewarding; the latter both in respect to remuneration and control over one’s work, of which apparently there is none.<sup>20</sup> In short, the writers for TV are compelled always to tailor their script to popular taste; they must, in the words of another critic, “strip their work of so much reality and truth as to make them literary cripples.”<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, whatever is the promise of TV for the writers of the future, either as that medium seeks them out or develops them from within itself, it is but little a present actuality.

That popular taste is at a low ebb should require no demonstration. In view of the cars our people buy and drive, the houses they buy and live in; among little things, the neckties our men buy and wear, hand painted or simulated so—“the thing speaks for itself.” Accordingly, that literature should have a sub-sub-cellar, the realm of “the comic,” is no surprise. More money is spent for comics each year than for textbooks, our largest book item. A billion copies sold gross a hundred million dollars, an amount four times the book budgets of all our libraries. In addition to the general public, comics are read by 16 per cent of college graduates and even 12 per cent of teachers.<sup>22</sup> No one familiar with college students will be surprised, for there is no general uniformity in the product, nor indeed any ascertainable general standards set for it.

As is well known, the comics have been cited for promoting

<sup>18</sup> Kay Boyle, *loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Henry Foote, whose *Trip to Bountiful* starring Lillian Gish was successful on the stage in Philadelphia and New York in the 1953 season.

<sup>20</sup> John Crosby, *New York Herald Tribune*, March 27, 1955, Sec. 4, 1.

<sup>21</sup> “Radio, Television and the Writer,” *loc. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, April 10, 1955, Sec. 2, 1.

juvenile delinquency; and no doubt at their worst they are deleterious. But the plea is often entered for "good" or "clean comics"—comics that retell the classics. What of them? Pictures for story telling are of course as old as the race. The caves at Altamira or the deer-skin histories of the Sioux show that. But also we have progressed beyond pictures. From their simplicity we have passed to the complex symbols of speech by which we are able to reproduce permanently all the subtlety of human thought for him who can construe the symbols. The discipline is exacting, but in corresponding measure rewarding. Shall we now turn our backs on all this? The comic bids us do so. Let us remember that in things intellectual as in other relations there operates a kind of Gresham's law whereby the bad tends to drive out the good. The comic militates against reading habits; in itself it is capable only of gross primary effects. If, as some fear, we are faced by a falling national intelligence quotient, we can do no better to hasten the intellectual debacle than by advancing mindlessness through the comic book. With all this, of course, the writer has and can have nothing to do. The comic book simply represents for him an area of exclusion from any possible public.

With the problem of the paper-back book the writer has much to do.<sup>23</sup> Presumably the paper-back could become his greatest opportunity, whereby through books selling at 25 cents, 35 cents, 50 cents (or latterly 85 cents and 95 cents) he could not only recoup the public lost in the expensive trade book market but also gain millions of new readers. Today the paper-backs constitute a great, chaotic, not very healthy industry, distributing a list of a thousand titles per year in 260,000,000 copies, through tens of thousands of outlets by the so-called "saturation method." About 150,000,000 paper-backs remain on the stalls unsold, and these are systematically removed in favor of fresh titles, and pulped. The titles have been said to represent "the best and the worst in a grand medley." Most are gotten up in excessively tawdry style in order to attract the wanton eye of the casual passer-by. Almost any title that one could want to read is on the racks at some moment. The problem is to find it. And once found, it must be purchased at once, for these cheap reprints are like the bubbles on

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed account of the writer's problems in this new market, read Malcolm Cowley, *op. cit.*, Chapters VI and VII.



the stream—they are, then disappear forever. The purchase of these books therefore is casual and accidental. The buyer is not buying so much an author as a book, or shall we say a piece of print, at random; and the author himself has no contact with any identifiable public or the satisfaction derived from such a contact; no expressed reader-writer communication ensues.

In terms of writer morale this is an ill situation, but on the practical side there are hazards too. For an author to "place," his title must sell 75,000 of a 35 cent book, 150,000 of a 25 cent one. These are high hurdles, and only one out of four or five writers can clear them. Therefore the increasing alliance between trade book and paper-back becomes dangerous to the author. In the words of the *London Times Literary Supplement*: "It has become almost standard practice for American publishers to try to secure acceptance of a manuscript by one of the reprint firms before agreeing to institute publication; the tail is wagging the dog with a vengeance."<sup>24</sup> A still later development, that of the paper-back publisher's directly commissioning work instead of relying on existing titles for his supply, is even more ominous. James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*, Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*—harsh naturalistic books though they be, but powerful and talented—floating off in the reprints, are one thing; original writing calculated to the meridian of broadest public taste is quite another. The effect of the latter is bound to be lowering, and although work is provided to the writer by his commission, it will not leave him free to be at his best. A current example of the genre, and perhaps a portent, is provided by *Bad Day at Black Rock*, a Gold Medal Original in which sleezy writing is used to convey outrageously illogical melodrama laced with equally outrageous sex. The moving picture of the same title may be a great hit, but the Gold Medal Original is surely not literature above the old "dime-novel" level.<sup>25</sup>

As other resources have failed, our writers have turned increasingly to the colleges. There are grants and fellowships, writerships in residence, some professorships and many instructorships. Our

<sup>24</sup> "British Book Publishing in 1954," *loc. cit.*; also, for a British view, "Paper-Back Publishing," *TLS*, September 17, 1954, lxii.

<sup>25</sup> In spite of the ill things often said about Hollywood, it is interesting to note the superiority, both in dialogue and "story-line," of the film over the "novel."

universities are very little the "ivory tower" today; so entrance there does not connote "leaving the world." There are consequences, however. The atmosphere of a college is not so creative as critical. Perhaps because universities are just now so much given to practical studies, they are the more willing, by way of rectifying the balance and for the *chic* of it, to leave a little corner to the hair-splitting dialectic of literary theory and the ever finer sifting of historical literary studies. The latter, however, have mined out their strata of fact over three generations to the last tailings—"more and more about less and less"—to come at last to hard-pan. And so their long-enjoyed prestige has passed or is passing to its great competitor, aesthetic theory.

In fact, the development of the doctrine of literary ontology has enabled the New Critics relatively to discredit formal historical studies of authors, periods, influences, things hitherto of utmost weight, by a mere turn of the hand. Ontology, the theory of the thing in and by itself, is based upon the analogy of biological parturition. As the mother by giving birth brings into being a creature henceforth independent, to be judged for itself in its own qualities and by its own acts, so, it is reasoned, the author by his composition puts forth from himself a free creation, which can and ought to be judged in and of itself without reference to him. Literary intentions and circumstances, therefore, become of little importance. What does this thing say of and by itself? they ask. Let us look at it, study it, extract all its possible meanings (for they are as many as we can find—levels of meaning, meanings explicit and meanings implicit). This is the ontological approach; and it promises tasks of ingenuity, subtlety, and utmost contrivance.

In the exchange of the college, presumably the non-creative teaching faculty has been beneficially affected by the presence of the creative artists. Certainly it is a possible boon that the complacency of academic routines should be broken in upon from outside, that courses in writing for undergraduates should come into the hands of experienced writers, and that the jargon of the schools should be freshened perhaps by "the language actually spoken among men." On the other hand, the artist or writer is liable to be equally affected, or even more so, by the school. If engaged in a program of regular teaching, he becomes caught up by daily tasks that must keep him to greater or less degree from

realizing his personal goals. "The hand of the dyer is subdued to that it works in." In a critical atmosphere, the literary aspirant tends to become critical rather than creative. As a result criticism has become "the central focus" of American literary endeavor, its method being largely that of the explication of texts and "subtle linguistics." Accordingly, the *London Times*, noting "the recent increase of critical writers in the U. S.," can remark that "critical articles actually outnumber writings of the imagination . . . and a rather bleak criticism of criticism has become usual."<sup>26</sup> It is against this situation that John W. Aldridge inveighs, asserting that criticism itself has become "frozen and crystallized" and literature become "a corporate body, official, institutionalized and closed . . . conceived in the name of orthodoxy and dedicated to the principle that all authors are created equal provided they confess to the rules of the canon"<sup>27</sup>—as per the formulation of the New Critics. Confirmation of this extreme and disturbing view is yielded by John Crowe Ransom's own phrasing of the doctrine of the new literature (as a chief among the New Critics, he ought to know): "In manners, aristocratic; in religion, ritualistic; in art, traditional."<sup>28</sup> If this is to be our literature, it will certainly be one remote from our past; from Emerson, Whitman, Melville, Mark Twain and Dreiser and all the goodly train of our prophets. The deep perspicuities of the reviews and the learned lucubrations issuing from all the forty-one university presses can in those terms scarcely provide us with the impetus to a literature. Our once flowing stream will have become a still and stagnant pond. We wish for humility on the part of some of our new literary arbiters matching that of Cyril Connolly, one of the ablest of British critics, who admits to moments of self-doubt and of asking himself whether he was not "trying to externalize a guilty sterility on the world."<sup>29</sup> A question indeed to be asked by the many critics who fail to include themselves among the objects of their scrutiny.

But even the critics admit our impotence. One argument runs that our writers cannot write because there are no common

<sup>26</sup> "Poetic Background: a Period of Consolidation," *TLS*, September 17, 1954, ii.

<sup>27</sup> John W. Aldridge, "The American Writer, I," *Nation*, CLXXIX (1954), No. 16, 330, the first of three articles bringing up to date the argument of Mr. Aldridge's *After the Lost Generation*.

<sup>28</sup> "Literary Criticism," *TLS*, September 17, 1954, x.

<sup>29</sup> "Literary Outlook," *TLS*, January 1, 1954, 8.

standards, no shared values, no "public truth" in the light of which they can write and to which they can appeal: "Public truth has been broken down by science into countless, isolated individual truths." Further, it is maintained that the literary efflorescence of the 1920's was made in courageous protest against standards breaking and betrayed but still existing as a moral umbrella and as a point of universal reference; whereas today there is but chaos.<sup>30</sup> To this, in turn, it is countered that competing, if not generally accepted, systems of value do exist and that these offer to writers the drama of rivalry and the opportunity of moral advocacy.<sup>31</sup> How shall one answer here? One thing is clear: Ours is a pluralistic society with strong competitive systems of ideas in faith, in morals, in many motivations. It seems unlikely that unity in all these departments shall be arrived at within foreseeable time, or indeed that this conclusion would be desirable. And meanwhile shall literature cease its work? Or exist only in terms of a traditional standard not natively our own?

Again it is maintained that the very force and variety of experiment in the last fifty years have brought literature at last to a pause of emptiness. Some speak of the end of a tradition, others feel that the forms and methods of literature have themselves run through all their possibilities to come at last to a standstill. Naturalism and the stream of consciousness have done their work to completion and repletion. Language has been pressed to its limits. The preoccupation with violence, given a real occasion by the war, continues as a vain effort to secure new impact through novelty; likewise, the large exploitation of sexual abnormality and pathological mental states may be regarded as other efforts to recover strength through new materials. But the force of all these novelties, with their growing into commonplaces, is soon dissipated. With a certain desperation the literary horizon is scanned for new trends. A new school of "brotherly communion"

<sup>30</sup> John W. Aldridge, *After the Lost Generation* (New York, 1951), Part II, Chapter VI.

<sup>31</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV, part 3, gives the answer to Aldridge. On the whole, his argument is most persuasive. As telling against it, the continued flourishing of letters in the South, the only part of the nation retaining a fairly uniform culture of the older American pattern—Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, agrarian-small-town—seems to provide the only major item of evidence. But that is substantial; the British have noticed the assistance of the Southern legend. See "The Southern Writer's Inheritance," *TLS*, September 17, 1954. xlviii.



is descried, heralded, and denounced;<sup>32</sup> a new school of "personalists" rising from the ruins of naturalism is hopefully espied.<sup>33</sup> The only unanimity is concerning a kind of terminus, however arrived at, from which departure is most desirable.

In view of this discouraging consensus, it is good to hear a few voices speaking in another fashion. "We must turn to life itself rather than to our ideas about life."<sup>34</sup> The voice is that of Mr. James Jones. "My advice to all ambitious young writers is to go and live in Iowa for 40 years. After that it's a cinch."<sup>35</sup> The words are Mr. Richard Bissell's, author of *A Stretch on the River* and *The Pajama Game*. His accent, like that of Mr. Jones, is on life. "The artist must partake of the world around him if his work is to come alive and stay alive."<sup>36</sup> The utterance is that of Kay Boyle, whose work has abundantly proved her perceptiveness and competency. So the old doctrine of the primacy of experience is still alive and in time may bear again good fruit.

Before that happy result can come to pass, however, one thing most often overlooked is necessary: namely, the transforming presence among us of a few at least of those persons of extraordinary talent and energy who for want of a better name we call geniuses. There is and can be no substitute for genius; and our literary impasse will probably not be broken until genius comes. It is, of course, not a thing upon order. We can merely await it and trustingly expect its coming. Many talents we have, but their work has not proved engaging. Greater talents, we can be sure, will not be satisfied with "the shadow of a tradition," with scholastic quiddities of irony, symbolism, and "significant form"; but will return to immediacy and through it recapture strength and the sense of mystery, wonder, and joy in life that is literature's validation. And further, they will set others in motion after them. Any analytical finesse that ignores this central requirement is merely like a meticulous counting over of the stones set in a wall while ignoring the open door that can lead through it.

<sup>32</sup> Kay Boyle, *loc. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *op. cit.*, 95.

<sup>34</sup> James Jones, in "Six Young Authors in Search . . .," *Nation*, CLXXVI (1953), No. 22, 639—a symposium including, together with that of Jones, statements by William Styron, Maude Hutchins, Leonard Bishop, Jefferson Young, and John H. Griffin. In the face of "a peculiarly silencing situation" and "withdrawal," Griffin, like Jones, would affirm the common and the universal as the substance of literature.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Bissell, *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, October 24, 1954, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Kay Boyle, *loc. cit.*