THE NOVELIST'S PREDICAMENT TODAY

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There may have been times in the past when the serious novelist's proper subject and concern were, in more ways than not, compatible with the common culture, when his creations could further the creative processes of the society he lived in, but that unfortunately for the serious novelist at least, is not now the case. At his best the novelist today is undermining the concerted efforts of his society. He is the reader's enemy, seeking it often seems to annihilate good with bad indiscriminately. His best work is subversive, and yet it is to the best in his work, the act of sabotage, that his readers must be won. The fact that contact between the serious novelist and the reading-public has broken down so badly in this century seems to me plain evidence that the price in cultural revolution demanded by the writer is too much for the reader to pay.

That I'm well aware sounds suspiciously like the sort of statement which led to C.P.Snow's indictment of the Literary Culture. I belong, it would seem, to that reactionary element he called "natural Luddites"; I have fallen victim to those writers "most influential on the literature of the 20th century" who, giving up "any serious concern for the progress of their fellow men", set about fostering ideas "which would have been thought slightly reactionary at the court of the early Plantagenets."

You will recall that in The Rede Lecture, given at Cambridge in 1959, C.P.Snow turned his attention to the cultural crisis in Britain, and through what he himself called "the mysterious operation... of the Zeitgeist", found himself giving voice to ideas that were "in the air" not

only in Britain but throughout the world. The situation as he saw it was this: "the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups", into what amounts to two cultures seperated by "a gulf of mutual incomprehension": an old moribund culture represented by the literary intellectual, and a young energetic culture represented by the scientist. The culture of the literary intellectual, being the established culture, frequently assumes a snobbish sense of superiority so that the young scientist who tries unsuccessfully to read Dickens is despised as uncultured. However, on that young scientist's terms it is the literary intellectual who is uncultured: "How many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics?" Snow asks, and explains that this is "the scientific equivalent of 'Have you read a work of Shakespeare's ?'" Looking out from "the great edifice of modern physics", literary men seem little better than "their neolithic ancestors." Ideally the modern intellectual should be able like Snow himself to partake of both cultures, but in practice this is rarely possible, not so much because of the difficulties scientists face in their attempts to share the traditional culture as the outright refusal of the artists to acknowledge the scientific culture.

Viewed as a feature of the technologically developed societies, this critical state of affairs is serious enough, but seen in the context of massive suffering and deprivation presented by the rest of the world, the situation is nothing less than catastrophic. Health, food and education, the "primary gains" of the industrial-scientific revolution, are needed on a world scale, and it is the scientist not the artist who is going to meet that need; not only does he have the technical know-how, he has the moral will. "There is a moral trap," Snow explains, "which comes through the insight into man's loneliness : it tempts one to sit back, complacent in one's unique tragedy, and let the others go without a meal." The scientist, looking out at the suffering face of man, has a faith in material

progress which enables him to get on with the important job of helping others in a practical way; the writer meanwhile turning away from the suffering face of man and looking in upon himself, founders in despair. It is here that Snow's indictment of the literary intellectual is meant to strike home. If the scientific culture which Snow values so highly had the moral priorities he suggests it has, it would be difficult to defend the writer against his charge. The fact is, however, it hasn't; and I would suggest that it is to some extent at least because it hasn't that the writer is so aggressively antagonistic. If the scientist in this century had, as Snow suggests, been primarily concerned with the task of eradicating starvation, disease and ignorance from the world, then the best of our writers would not have reacted with such violent and bitter desperation.

Planting the flag of the United States of America on the deserts of the Moon may seem to some, may seem to many, "one giant leap for mankind", but while half the population of the Earth continue to die of hunger, as they did a thousand years ago, it seems to others just one more example of the scientist's indifference to those very issues which Snow chooses to focus upon. Transplanting a heart into the chest of a dying man so that he can survive for a few extra months or days of invalid-life, may be the latest miracle of modern science, but when in Africa and Asia there are tens of thousands of young people dying of diseases that could be cured with penicillin discovered forty years ago, it seems only the latest example of science for science's sake. There may well be scientists engaged in the practical problem of how to eradicate the hunger and disease still ravaging the world, but if there are then their silence is difficult to account for at a time when so many of their best fellow scientists are ignoring the problem, at a time when so many more are engaged in research and experiment leading to the manufacture not only of weapons and warheads of greater and greater destructive power, but techniques for the actual creation of hunger and disease: of defoliant-sprays and chemical

bombs, of nerve-gas and bacteriological devices. Scientists, C.P.Snow tells us, have "the future in their bones", and the writer "responds by wishing the future did not exist". That, I venture to suggest, is hardly surprising. If the scientist with claims to amorality, which give him licence to irresponsible adventurism and thanatology, is to decide what is best for the future when clearly he can reject what is best from the past, can reject the humanism in his own tradition, the prospect is bleak for us all.

In The Richmond Lecture delivered at Cambridge in 1962, Dr. Leavis declared that Snow's Rede Lecture exhibited "an utter lack of intellectual distinction and an embarrassing vulgarity of style". He said a good deal more and in the ferocity of his attack was generally thought to have gone too far. Aldous Huxley, with no great sympathy for Snow, called the lecture "violent and ill-mannered", and it was thought by Leavis's publishers that Snow might even take legal action. The personal invective was unfortunate, but what was a good deal more unfortunate was that Leavis, with forty years of what might be called counter-revolutionary experience behind him, should have allowed his anger and irritability to get the better of him and be swept up into a rhetorical overstatement of his own position. "Who will assert," he exclaims," that the average member of a modern society is more fully human, or more fully alive, than a Bushman, an Indian peasant, or a member of one of those poignantly surviving primitive peoples, with their marvellous art and skills and vital intelligence?" Machine breaker! —one can imagine Snow's contemptuous retort as he turns away. But Leavis's basic criticism is nevertheless sound: he states the case, even if he then goes on to overstate it. "We think of cliché commonly as a matter of style," he says more soberly. "But style is a habit of expression, and a habit of expression that runs to cliché tells us something adverse about the quality of the thought expressed." According to Snow, the

industrialisation of Russia and China was "made with inordinate effort and with great suffering", with suffering that was often "unnecessary" and with "horror hard to look at", but it had "proved that common men can show astonishing fortitude in chasing jam tomorrow." Leavis takes this up. "The callously ugly insensitiveness of the mode of expression is wholly significant," he says, and goes on, "if jam means (as it does) the prosperity and leisure enjoyed by our well-to-do working classes, then the significant fact not noticed by Snow is that the felicity it represents cannot be regarded by a fully human mind as a matter for happy contemplation."

My criticism of Snow's thesis was his claim that the scientist acts in the interests of society: there is, I suggested, considerable evidence to the contrary. In his criticism of Snow, Leavis makes the point that even when the scientist does act in what might be called the interests of society, he does not act in its best interests. What makes "Snow's 'social hope' unintoxicating to many of us," he explains, is "the vision of our imminent tomorrow in today's America: the energy, the triumphant technology, the productivity, the high standard of living and the life impoverishment —the human emptiness: emptiness and boredom craving alcohol."

Taking issue with Snow on his own ground like this allows the implication that basically at least one agrees with him in his theory of a two-culture culture. "Attempts to divide anything into two," Snow says, before embarking on just such an excercise, "ought to be regarded with much suspicion." Surprising then that he should have failed to appreciate what Michael Yudkin was to point out in an article in the Cambridge Review: his dualistic view of things extended to the quite absurd assumption of "an equivalence between an artistic experience and a scientific finding"; extended further, I might add, to a dualism in other spheres: to a world divided into rich and poor, to a world reassembled and redivided into Communist and Western. It was Yudkin who pointed out that in Snow's use of the term there were in fact "dozens of cultures."

By 1963, Snow was prepared to concede a third, but by that time the dualism of the original thesis had been consolidated. In 1962, Dr. Leavis had entered the field, and Professor Trilling following lightly on his heels had published his comment in *Commentary,* raising the ghosts of Thomas Huxley and Matthew Arnold: Snow and Leavis, he declared, were after all just the latest combatants in the old debate of Science versus Letters.

Trilling, though a literary intellectual, has little sympathy for Leavis. Clearly he thinks of himself as having more in common with a man like Faraday, the physicist, who he says "undertook to be, in the beautiful lost sense of the word, a disinterested man. From his belief in mind, he derived the certitude that he had his true being not as a member of this or that profession or class, but as—in the words of a poet of his time—'a man speaking to men'". Listening to the urbane tones of Professor Trilling, it seems that our agonised division under the bullying leadership of Snow and Leavis can be happily transcended in the sublime union of Faraday with himself. In his view, Snow and Leavis merely "exemplify the use to which the idea of culture can be put... in contriving new social groups on the basis of taste."

Aldous Huxley spoke for many, both scientists and literary intellectuals, when he called Trilling's contribution "admirably judicious." The tone, assured and discreet, gives that impression certainly, but in what he has to say he is even more alarming a portent for the literary man than Snow. In an article published in *Encounter* in 1965, he developes that reference to "taste" which he made in his dismissal of the Two Culture Controversy. The title of that essay is *The Two Environments,* a judicious tempering of the dualistic mode into less sensational channels, and the explanation of that title is that we live—all of us: Leavis and Snow together, so to speak—in two cultural environments: one "philistine and dull", the other showing "concern with... the styles which indicate that one has successfully gained control of the sources of life." This needs

some enlargement, and it is of course provided. "The criterion of style," he tells us, is "the examination of life by aesthetic categories." We do this, it seems, and we find that it "yields judgements of a subtle and profound kind." Moreover, we may appreciate that these kinds of judgements are nothing less than "the stuff of the great classic literature of the modern period." It is "a kind of judgement more searching and exigent than that of the old morality of the deed, a judgement that... promises not only a new kind of truth but a new kind of power."

The tone, you will notice, is markedly different from that of both Snow and Leavis. Snow for all his "bland scientism" was worried, while Leavis was often close to frenzy: the patient, both agreed, was seriously ill; it was only in the diagnosis of the disease that the disagreement between them arose, each afraid that in the hands of the other the sick man would die. Trilling, on the other hand, seems not in the least concerned. Indeed, the very symptoms they regard with such anxiety, he finds "fascinating" and "very exciting". What, then, is this new truth, this new power, which he claims invests the best of our two cultural environments? It is the definition of self through fashion. Trilling philosophises: "In our more depressed moments we might be led to ask whether there is a real difference between being the Person who defines himself by his commitment to one or another idea of morality, politics, literature, or city planning, and being the Person who defines himself by wearing trousers without pleats."

Powerless as we are to stop the crazy merry-go-round of Western culture, the movement and noise of its shiny barbarians, we might well be brought to such a state of mind; where Trilling is momentarily depressed however, better men are driven to despair. Such men Trilling has no time for, as if he found their alienation lacking in what he thinks constitutes the proper graces, and so concludes that it must be lacking in thought altogether. The novel of today, he tells us, "undertakes con-

sciously to perform acts of criticism. Its doctrine of alienation *is* an act of criticism", but this doctrine—the choice of term of course is his—"is one of the traditions on which literature has lived uncritically... is accepted uncritically even by our critics." One would expect a literary intellectual with such a view of present literature to be an unhappy man, but Trilling's optimism is unshakable. He finds his solace in the fact there is today a new art which "joins forces with literature in agitating the question of who one is, of what kind of person one should want to be", a "wonderful and terrible art which teaches us that we define ourselves and realise our true being by choosing the right style." To anyone with any knowledge of modern sales-technology it should come as a surprise to hear that the new art Professor Trilling is enthusing over is none other than the maleficent art of advertising.

If there was any doubt before Snow's lecture in 1959 that Western culture was in a critical condition, there could scarcely be any after. However, though this particular debate might demonstrate the crisis, it does little to explain it. Another approach is needed, and the one offered by Raymond Williams in his book *Culture and Society,* published the year before Snow's lecture, though ignored in the two-culture culture controversy, has a good deal more to recommend it. Where Snow found hope in the eventual completion of the Industrial Revolution, Williams trusts to the final fulfilment of that other 19th century revolution, the Democratic Revolution.

In his view our problems are those of a culture in transition, with all the comforting reassurances which that implies: of a state in the past when things were comparatively stable, of a state in the future when things will be stable again; of this present chaos as the temporary disintegration of an old order leading inevitably and in the fullness of time to a new order. "The traditional popular culture of England" was the stable condition in the past, and this was "fragmented and weakened by

the dislocations of the Industrial Revolution." Since then the "crucial distinguishing element in English life" has been "between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationship", between bourgeois individualism on the one hand and working-class solidarity on the other. The individualistic ethic is now dominant, but "the idea of solidarity is potentially the real basis of a society" and will prove to be the "element of stabilization" in the future. Such is Williams's thesis.

When we put this thesis alongside Snow's thesis, it is the differences between the two that are most striking. However, on consideration it is the similarities between them which seem most important. Both see the crisis as that of a culture divided against itself: new against old, good against bad. Both need to find the best hope for the future in the unfinished business of the present, and both need to feel that they are not alone in their point of view. Like Snow, Williams makes use of the Zeitgeist to add weight to his own conviction: "I did not forsee, when I was working on *Culture and Society*," he says, "that by the time it was published, an important part of our general social thinking would have developed along lines which included my own themes." Unlike Snow, however, Williams attempts more than a statement of his own position. His book is intended to be an account as well as an interpretation: "an account... of our responses in thought and feeling to changes in English society since the late 18th century". In this respect the book does excellent service. "Culture", "class", "industry", "art", and "democracy", the key words in this debate, are there examined, their several meanings identified and their usage in the works of all the key debaters since 1780 amply represented. Williams reviews the situation by means of copious quotations through the views of Burke and Cobbett; Southey and Owen; the Romantic poets; Bentham and Mill; Carlisle, Arnold and Newman; the Victorian novelists; Pugin, Ruskin and Morris; Pater and the

Aesthetes; Shaw and the Fabians; Lawrence and Tawney; Eliot and Leavis; the Marxists and Orwell. Thus the mainstream of intellectual reaction to the cultural upheaval caused by the economic and political reorientations needed in the last two hundred years is telescoped into one argument.

In the development of this argument Williams finds a pattern. "In each of the three major issues, those of Industry, of Democracy, and of Art," he concludes, "there have been three main phases of opinion", corresponding roughly to the periods 1790 to 1870, 1870 to 1914, and 1914 to the present day. In Industry, there was at the beginning of the 19th century a "rejection, alike of machine production and of the social relations embodied in the factory system". As the century developed, this hostility manifested itself in a "growing sentiment against the machine as such", but in our own time machine-production has come to be accepted, and concern now centres upon "the problem of social relations." So far as it goes the assessment may be fair, but the intention behind such a generalization seems to argue some movement towards a fourth phase of thinking, starting now or in the future, to which Raymond Williams's own analysis of "the nature of social relationship" will be peculiarly relevant. Whereas the most noticeable feature of the whole debate on the Industrial Revolution, even as Williams presents it, is that the chief criticism made against industrial society today, has been made repeatedly for the last one hundred and fifty years, and the only major change in all that time has been the gradual increase in the number of voices making it. "Nine Englishmen out of ten at the present day believe that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being so very rich." That is as true today, when the major crisis in Britain is generally thought to be economic, as it was when Arnold said it a hundred years ago. When men like Arnold rejected industrial society, it was not industrialisation that they were objecting to, but what R. H. Tawney was later to call

"industrialism... a particular estimate of the importance of industry, which results in it being... elevated from the subordinate place which it should occupy among human interests and activities, into being the standard by which all other interests and activities are judged." There has been from the very outset a confusion of the means with the ends, and yet though material prosperity continues to be passed off as an end in itself, there was never nor can there ever be any doubt about what the true end ought to be. "What matters to a society," Tawney says, "is less what it owns than what it is and how it uses its possessions. It is civilized... in so far as it uses its material resources to promote the dignity and refinement of the individual human beings who compose it". It is in the second of the three main subjects of debate, the issue of Democracy, that we can see to what extent this precept has been, and continues to be, abused.

In dealing with the intellectual reaction to the Democratic Revolution, Williams is covering the ground upon which his own thesis is to be based. At the beginning of the 19th century, he says, there was a deeply felt "concern at the threat to minority values posed by the growing power of the new masses." As the century progressed, this was succeeded by a tendency to emphasize "the idea of community... as against the dominant individualistic ethic", but with the development of "mass democracy in the new world of mass communications" this tendency stopped and "the fears of the first phase were strongly renewed". The reaction, as Williams interprets it, has swung like a pendulum from a fear of massification in the first phase to a sense of solidarity in the second phase and back to a fear of massification in the third phase. In some future fourth phase, we are left to assume, it will swing back again to a sense of solidarity, will swing in fact towards Williams's own vision of a common culture, based upon what he sees to be the working-class idea of social relationship. Not only has he covered the ground for his own theory, he has prepared it.

He is right of course that the general mood today is one of alarm, but in the context of the whole reaction to the Democratic Revolution, this does not provide a straight comparison with any other phase. The alarm caused by democracy today is different in kind from the alarm it caused a century ago. When a government, elected by 4% of its people, can allow millions of the rest of its people to die of hunger and neglect, can allow millions more to be bred into deformity and worked to death, can—to preserve its powers—use spies and troops against these people, can have hundreds of them hanged, thousands transported and tens of thousands imprisoned, as the British government did in the first half of the 19th century, then the man who feels concern at the threat to *minority* values posed by the growing power of the new masses is not likely to be himself a member of those masses. Today the man who fears the power of the masses has learnt that fear from the inside. Mass-production has brought him health and material comfort; mass-communication has brought him education and understanding. As a member of the mass-democracy he shares a wealth in common fabulous in its proportions; but he recognizes that living as a member of this majority, he is in danger of losing that part of himself which can be fostered only by a minority. For the smooth operation of modern society, the significant fact about the people who compose it must be their sameness one with another, but it is in our difference one from another that we have human significance. In mass-democracy true individuality is put at jeopardy, and the ever-present danger is that if the forces of massification go unchecked, the sense of community will be degraded to the lowest of lowest common denominators. How to avoid such a prospect would seem to be the proper concern of any responsible society, but in Western democracy today not only have those massifying forces been allowed to go unchecked, they have for reasons of government expediency and business profiteering been encouraged and exploited. Solidarity is a left-wing slogan: its meaning

carries into the middle of the 20th century much of the feeling that the word "Fraternity" carried out of the 18th century, but like the words "Liberty" and Equality", it has been debased to a fatuous nonsense in the mouths of politicians and pressmen. These ideas were once the rallying cry for the democratic revolution in Western Europe; but that is a *far* cry from their apparent realization today.

In 1957, the year before Williams published his book, Richard Hoggart published *The Uses of Literacy,* an account of the "changes in working-class culture during the last thirty or forty years". Some of his conclusions seem relevant here, "In some respects," he says, "the three closely related ideas of freedom, equality and progress still nourish the assumptions of a majority of people... Each of the three ideas... contributed largely, in its legitimate aspects, to the bringing about of those improvements in the lot of working-people which were so badly needed. The improvements were desired... for more than material reasons. It is the irony of the present situation that those ideas, misused, are now tempting a physically and materially emancipated working-class to have a largely material outlook. The temptations, especially as they appear in mass-publications, are towards a gratification of the self and towards what may be called a "hedonistic group-individualism."

Just as the Industrial Revolution, misguided into materialism, has been transformed into industrialism, so the Democratic Revolution, misdirected by commercialism, has been reduced to massification. With material wealth as the chief aim, and cash payment "the sole nexus", the social solidarity Williams sees fit to praise can be nothing more beneficial than group bargaining power, can be everything as vicious as brute nationalism and racial war. Freedom, Hoggart concludes, has been reduced to "freedom as a good in itself... a freedom not to 'be' anything at all... a deep refusal to be committed outside the small known area of life"; and tolerance, the compliment of freedom, has become "not

so much a charitable allowance for human frailty and the difficulties of ordinary lives, as a weakness, a ceaseless leaking-away of the will-to-decide on matters outside the immediate touchable orbit". Meanwhile: "The popular papers, always identifying themselves with 'the people', conduct polls on this matter and questionaires on that matter among their readers and so elevate the counting of heads into a substitute for judgement." Borne along by "the hubris of the ordinary chap", the powers of massification reduce the concept of equality to "a callow democratic egalitarianism" where "the little man is made to seem big because everything is scaled down to his measure." Like Snow, the citizens of this democracy have no fears for the future; they live for the present, but only so long as it is the present, because "the future automatically supersedes and is preferable to all in the past". Like Trilling, the citizens of this democracy triumph in the new morality: "'It's old fashioned' and 'It's not in fashion' are used equally to condemn dress, behaviour, styles of dancing, moral attitudes.... Surrounded ... by more available things than any previous generation, people are almost inevitably inclined to take up these things just as they appear and use them in the manner of the child in the fairy-tale, who found toys hanging from the trees and lollipops by the roadside." Like Williams too, the citizens of this democracy find strength in solidarity, in "the bandwaggon mentality" which "cocks a snook at whoever is not on the waggon, but has itself abrogated personal responsibility for choice." And so, Hoggart concludes: "the waggon loaded with its barbarians in wonderland, moves irresistibly forward: not forward to anywhere, but simply forward, for forwardness's sake."

The word "democracy", as it is used today, defies definition: it is not a political term so much as a piece of emotive politics. It is used to describe whatever political ideology is thought good, just as the word "fascism" is used to describe whatever is thought to be bad. "It is almost universally felt," George Orwell says, "that when we call a country

democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning." It is a title claimed by Capitalist economies against the counter claims of Communist economies on the strength of a freedom they possess which totalitarian states do not. However, in Hoggart's view at least, "the freedom from official interference enjoyed in this kind of society, coupled with the tolerance we ourselves are so happy to show, seems to be allowing cultural developments as dangerous in their own way as those we are shocked at in totalitarian societies." And it was D. H. Lawrence's belief that the ideologies which claim to be democratic, whether it be "socialism, conservatism, bolshevism, liberalism, republicanism, communism," or whatever, are in their first principle "all alike", are all suffering from the same "illness of the spirit": "Man has his highest fulfillment as a possessor of property: so they all say."

Fears of industry and democracy, fears first voiced over a hundred years ago, fears of materialism in the absence of a living religion, and fears for art, fears that the industrial and democratic revolutions might cause a devolution in literature! Williams makes the subject of Art the third, of the three main streams of debate which he finds running through the general reaction to cultural changes since 1780. In his view there was, in the first half of the 19th century, a belief both in "the independant value of art" and in "the importance to the common life of the qualities which it embodied." However, as the century advanced, this balanced attitude gave way to a one-sided belief in "art as a value in itself", and from this he thinks has come a reaction in our own day: the general mood seems now to be "towards the reintegration of art with the common life".

To what extent this is true and to what extent, true or not, this state of affairs is good or bad, is too wide and complex a subject for me to deal with properly here; so much depends upon our definition of such terms

as "art," "reintegration" and "the common life." Advances made in the field of design in the last ten years have transformed mass-production. Pop-art has made the common life more colourful and exciting, in some ways more imaginative and intelligent, but the changes it has brought about have been superficial. When D. H. Lawrence said "The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread," he was calling for a change of heart and mind not a change of voice and dress, for a change in men obsessed with material wealth not a change in the material wealth they were obsessed with. In literature at least, it seems to me, art cannot today be integrated into the common life. The writer's proper subject is, as it has always been, humanity (the nature and condition of being human, the quality and character of being humane), and his proper concern is to humanize his fellow men, to make them more conscious of the human, more conscious of the humane. Literature cannot do that today and stay compatible with the common life, cannot change enough to be compatible and remain art. If good literature is to be an integral part of the common life then in some very drastic way the common life must change. And that, sad to say, is not the least bit likely. Like a man who in the past might have rejected Christianity in a Christian world divided between Catholic and Protestant, so the best of our writers today reject Materialism in a Materialistic world divided between Communist and Capitalist. And as the man in the past would have been ignored as mad or imprisoned as a blasphemer, the best of our writers today are ignored or imprisoned: shouted down in the free-for-all of commercialism, or suppressed by totalitarian censorship.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, government-censorship in Britain was so strict that it was virtually impossible to publish a book or pamphlet which was not officially approved. From the beginning of the 18th century, however, a man was free to publish anything he wanted to, being subject only to the ordinary laws of the land. These laws included severe

restrictions on libel, on defamatory, seditious, blasphemous or obscene libel, but could be invoked only after publication and were in the event only as restrictive as the magistrate or judge who interpreted them. It was on the strength of such a change in the law, and on a growing change of mood in the interpretation of the law, that our freedom of the press was based. However, the fact that in the late 1950's such reputable publishers as Secker and Warburg, Hutchinson and Heineman were all prosecuted under the law, seemed to many to demonstrate that this freedom was to some extent at least only apparent. The charge against these publishing houses was that they had printed and sold books which were obscene, in the sense that they offended against and tended to deprave and corrupt their readers from standards of sexual morality thought to be proper. The Obscene Publications Act of 1959 and the test-case trial of Penguin Books in 1960 for the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* though thought by many to be a sign of liberalization, was thought by others to be clear proof of the spirit of repression at work. We have come a long way in the last 150 years from the bowdlerized Shakespeare to the unexpurgated Lawrence, but as Walter Allen says: "a sane attitude towards sex, such as is implicit in *The Canterbury Tales,* where sex is seen as... one human activity and interest among many, seems as remote from us as it was from Thackeray and the Victorians."

It could be argued that since what is obscene to one man is not necessarily obscene to another, the law of obscene libel is too arbitrary an imposition to be defensible on any grounds; but more relevant in this context, it seems to me, is the observation that for reasons which have their origins in 19th century prudery, obscenity today is synonymous with pornography. This has at least two unhappy consequences. First, as John Chandos says, if we take 'obscenity' to mean what is an affront to one's own standards, "then I see obscenity all around me every day, in newspapers, on advertisements, on the television," but since this is not

an affront to some intolerant notion of *sexual* morality, the law of obscene libel is never likely to be invoked to stop it. Second, when society has got things so badly out of perspective, the writer is in danger of losing his focus too. "What matters," Tolstoy said, "is not what the censor does to what I have written, but to what I might have written". With things as they are today, the writer, it seems to me, is likely to err in two ways: either to make the serious mistake of avoiding trouble, or to become obsessed with the ridiculous notion that sex is, as Norman Mailer for instance would have it, "the last remaining frontier of the novel which has not been exhausted by the 19th and early 20th century novelists."

In the totalitarian state, censorship is a serious obstacle to good writing, but in what is called the "free" world, it is not; there the great obstacle is commercialism: the evaluation of worth in terms of marketability. Under this extremely subtle and sophisticated form of supression, the threat of censorship is on Mailer's side. A book that runs the risk of prosecution for obscene libel will, like as not, be a best seller. Invariably sex sells; almost invariably, good writing does not. In explanation of the title of his book, *The Uses of Literacy,* Hoggart says: "there might reasonably have been an improvement in the general standard of reading... over the last fifty years... But when we look at the increase, proportionately, in the hold which the simplified and fragmentary publications have come to exercise during the same period, it... seems rather as though a very large number of people are being held down at an apallingly low level." It is an age of "confetti literature", he says, of "puff-pastry literature", and concludes that "good writing cannot be popular today, and popular writing cannot genuinely explore experience."

It is a salutory thought that the best analysis of this deplorable situation was made 37 years ago, even before the full impact of modern mass media had been felt. It was made by Q. D. Leavis in her book *Fiction and the Reading Public,* published in 1932. Her thesis was the decline of

popular taste since Shakespeare's time and the consequences of that for life and literature today. What she has to say will, I think, help to clarify the plight of the serious writer in the context of the cultural crisis as I have presented it so far.

In the Elizabethan age, she tells us, "no distinction existed between journalism and literature", nor between the art-forms enjoyed by the educated and the uneducated. The latter "had to take the same amusements as their betters, and if *Hamlet* was only a glorious melodrama to the groundlings, they were nonetheless living for the time being in terms of Shakespeare's blank verse." The public for Elizabethan drama was probably no more than a quarter of a million out of a population of five million, but in the mid 17th century *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Paradise Lost* along with the *Bible* were to be found in the homes of poor as well as rich throughout the country, and as Mrs. Leavis declares "to read Bunyan and Milton for religious instruction, as to attend Elizabethan drama for the 'action', is to receive an education unconsciously."

In the early 18th century, Addison endeavouring "to Cultivate and Polish Human Life", "to establish among us a Taste of polite Writing", created what Mrs. Leavis calls "the lucid, easy, uncoloured prose of the novels, belles-lettres, journals, and correspondence for nearly a century afterwards." The *Spectator* and the *Tatler* had a marked effect upon the well-to-do, but their influence was not restricted to the upper classes: volumes were cheap and reached the homes of "the respectable poor." The reading-public grew rapidly in the second half of the 18th century: average daily sales of newspapers practically doubled between 1753 and 1775 in a nearly stationary population; and a taste for fiction, stimulated by the *Spectator,* took firm hold. But what was read by the cultivated minority was also read by the uninstructed majority. To demonstrate this, Mrs. Leavis quotes from the autobiography of an 18th century bookseller called James Lackington, in which he says: "According to the best

estimate I have been able to make, I suppose that more than four times the number of books are sold now than were sold twenty years since. The poorest sort of farmer, and even the poor country people in general, who before that period spent their winter evenings in relating stories of witches, ghosts, hobgoblins, etc., now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances, etc., and on entering their houses you may see *Tom Jones, Roderick Random,* and other entertaining books stuck up on their bacon-racks."

It was after the death of Smollet in 1771 that the first signs of disintegration appeared. Since "there was no writer of any considerable ability to succeed him", Mrs. Leavis tells us, "the insatiable demand for fiction —now the publishers' mainstay—had to be satisfied by the second rate. Hacks were employed to provide the circulating library... with constant supplies of fresh novels." She goes on: "The number of novels published began to go up in the middle of the 1780s; in 1796 the *Monthly* noticed twice as many as in the previous year, and by 1800, novels had become so numerous and in such bad repute that the *Scots* and *Gentleman's* magazine had practically ceased to notice them at all." The publisher wanted to sell and in the absence of good novelists was prepared to publish bad ones. The reader wanted to buy and in the absence of good novels could be persuaded to read bad ones. The weakness exploited became an infirmity, and by the end of the 18th century novel-reading had established itself as the chief pastime, or—as Coleridge called it—killtime of the leisured classes.

The price of a novel was at that time so prohibitive that only a minority of the reading-public could afford the 'dissipation', but the development of periodical publishing in the 1820s which made it possible to buy a novel chapter by chapter, and the invention of various new printing processes in the 1840s which made it possible to publish complete novels at a quarter of the old price, spread the dangers of addiction and of

subsequent exploitation wider and wider. There were, according to Mrs. Leavis, at least two immediate consequences to this. First, a general lowering of tone: "Just as the poetry of the Victorian Romantics appealed to adolescent and childhood sensibility and worked in a soporific medium so," she says, "the Victorian popular novelist accustomed the reading-public to habits of diminished vigilance, provoked an uncritical response and discovered the appeals which have since made the fortunes... and the success of most later 19th and 20th century bestsellers." Second, a stratification of the reading-public. In the mid 18th century, any reader "would be equally likely to read any novel, or every novel, published", but in the mid 19th century this was no longer the case. Dickens and Collins were preferred by the lower middle classes: Elliot and Trollope by the upper middle classes. In language and technique neither class would have found difficulty with the books preferred by the other, but the division had begun, and by the end of the century the reading-public had been split. "Dickens and George Elliot were near neighbours," Mrs. Leavis says, "but there is an unbridged and impassable gulf between Marie Corelli and Henry James."

The process of devolution, begun by hacks at the end of the 18th century, was completed by Newnes and Northcliffe, in their application of business-methods to journalism, at the end of the 19th century. Thereafter, it was only a matter of time before the newspaper had become a by-product of advertising, and before the new standards of consumer-culture applied to the reading-habit had made the popular novel a by-product of journalism. Marie Corelli "was invited to lecture to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society and... to be the first lady to read a paper to the Royal Society of Literature." She was popular but she was taken seriously. Queen Victoria and Gladstone, we are told, read her for improvement. Her true successors are not the best sellers of today, but what Mrs. Leavis calls "the middlebrow novelists", men like J. B. Priestly

who "bring nothing to the novel but commonplace sentiments and an outworn technique". The lowbrow bestseller marks an even greater deterioration in popular taste to a "fiction that may be read with the minimum of mental effort", to "daydream" and "wish-fulfilment in various forms". Who the leaders of the English-speaking world read for improvement today, I do not know, but it is not likely to be the work of men like Priestly; it is not likely to be the work of any novelist. According to Walter Allen, however, the favourite light reading of President Nixon is Mickey Spillane, and the late President Kennedy, generally thought to have been a cultivated man, was particularly fond of Ian Flemming's books.

The effects of this for the serious novelist are grievous and far-reaching. Not least in importance is the fact that the work he does as a writer has no place in the economic system he finds himself in. There are exceptions of course, but it is generally the case that he is only able to live on his writing when he has made some damaging compromise to his art. Usually he will make his living elsewhere, and though again there are exceptions, he is only likely to make a good living if he is prepared to allow some damaging compromise to himself as a writer. As an economic disadvantage this state of affairs, it could be argued, is merely inconvenient; but in a writative society, the consequences, as they appear to others, seem merely the self-inflicted discomforts of a wilful misfit, the romantic deprivations of pretended exile. If the serious novelist is to continue to write serious novels, to explore value and perspective in experience, to add in an original and responsible way to the appreciation and understanding of man among men, then he cannot contribute on any terms but his own. And since his terms are of their very nature hostile to the dehumanizing arts practiced upon and enjoyed by the society around him, he will find himself in fact or in effect shut out of that society. His work, for all its intention, will bring no reaction from the inside, no genuine response. The best he can hope for is that it will widen and deepen the field of his own

relationships in that no-man's-land outside the established culture. He is perforce obliged to work in isolation and to look for help not to the society he is writing for but to the works of other writers like himself, to the ideas of men he does not know and can never meet.

When Western culture lost the sense of purpose provided by religion, the concept of and concern for man's individual destiny in the next world, it took to itself a new faith, man's communal destiny in this. How it is that man has lost faith in man, and to what extent this is caused by man breaking faith with man, can be looked for in the agony it took to produce the Industrial and Democratic Revolutions in the 19th century, can be found in the work of serious novelists in the 20th century, men like Lawrence and Orwell, Lowry and Golding. But the culture of most people is not literary, is not and never was formed through the media of the artist's work. The serious novelist was once more important to the common culture than he is now, but he was never a major moral force. Perhaps now more than ever he needs to be, and the literary intellectual who thinks like Carlyle that "this anomaly of a disorganic Literary Class" is "the heart of all other anomalies, at once product and parent", will also believe like Mrs. Leavis that "possibilities of education" in literature "specifically directed against such appeals as those made by the journalists, the middle men, the best seller, the cinema, and advertising... are inexhaustible." But true or not, possible or not, the serious novelist's concern must be to create literature not the readers of literature, to combine in his work what Bertrand Russell said George Orwell managed to combine: "a love of humanity and an incapacity for comfortable illusion." A conscience ignored but not silenced—such it might be said is, or should be, the predicament of the novelist today, and no matter how strongly he might feel the reality of his vision, as in 1949 George Orwell felt the reality of *1984*, the achievement of anything more practical will be less than he is capable of.