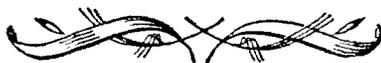


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ON COUNTING YOUR CHICKENS
BEFORE THEY HATCH

The Avery Hopwood Address—1941

By EDWARD WEEKS

YOU remember the story of the chicken farmer? One night he heard a fearful rumpus in his chicken yard. Seizing his shotgun, he ran out to the wire, where he thought he saw a figure lurking in the corner. "Who's there?" he shouted, "Come out! Come out, or I'll shoot!" Dead silence. Then a soft voice said, "Ain't nobody here, boss, 'ceptin' us chickens." On this occasion I knew that I should have the opportunity of speaking face to face to a group of people who were just as interested in writing as I am. There would be nobody here but us chickens.

I have noticed that writers and editors have this much in common with people who raise chickens—they love to count their chickens before they hatch. I believe it is second nature for writers to do so. When I was in college I wrote a fairly good story in which my parents were the central characters. My teacher in composition said it should be published, and after the manuscript had been returned to me by *The Saturday Evening Post*, I contributed it to *The Harvard Advocate*. But even before it appeared in print I was receiving congratulations—at least in my mind—not on that particular short story but on the volume of them which at that moment I was con-

fidant I should write in the next six months. If I had written such a book, I am sure you would have heard of it, but it still remains one of those chickens I haven't had time to hatch.

All writers, small and great, are nourished by such illusions. I don't think they could live without them. When John Keats realized that he was in love with Fanny Brawne and could not afford matrimony, he decided to get away by himself and write for money. We know from his letters that "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" was almost the least of the arrows he thought he had in his quiver. He was going to write plays, great smashing tragedies which would make his reputation, and he thought he already heard the applause before he had finished the first act of *Otho the Great*. The notebook of any honest writer will tell you the same thing. Think how often Samuel Taylor Coleridge got set for some great, ambitious project—and how seldom he laid the egg. Xanadu stands for that superb but fleeting vision which entrances every one of us who try to write. While the spell is on us we see our short story instantaneous, vivid and complete; we see our poem an epic to stir the country; we see our novel so thick—and over 100,000 copies! We all

share in this experience to the extent of our ability and when we have the vision and feel the power that goes with it our only wonder is whether we shall have life enough to accomplish the limitless and magnificent work we see ahead.

Were it not for this recurring illusion, writing would be a drudgery too disappointing for most to endure. Let me tell you a parable, based on my father who, incidentally, is not a writer. When my father was a small boy he was given a little bantam rooster named Peter. Peter was a valiant bird but as time passed he became a lonely one. So to keep Peter company my grandparents invested in a bantam hen. My father, meantime, had saved up his allowance until he had enough to buy twenty eggs on which the hen was firmly planted. The little hen did her best, but the odds were against her. At the end of three weeks only one measly chick had strength enough to peck his way into the open. The other eggs were mum. After waiting two more days, in exasperation my father flung the remaining nineteen against the barn. The barn had to be repainted, but that is not the point of the parable. The point is simply this: one good egg is worth an awful lot of trouble—even if you take a beating to get it.

2.

You who have been competing for the Hopwood Awards this year must have had moments when you asked yourselves whether it was worth the doing. What chance is there for a beginning writer in a world so full of tension and belligerency? Or, to put it specifically, what chance will *you* have to practice what you have learned when a year from now you may be in a training camp or up to your ears in defense work? It seems to me that perhaps the friendliest service I can perform this afternoon is to describe the climatic conditions under which I see writers working today and to foretell as accurately as possible the

demands which any young American author will be expected to meet in the near future. I am not speaking as a prophet but simply as the pilot of a magazine who has been trained to observe the changing currents in literature.

In the first place, what effect has the emergency upon those who are going to read your work? To what extent have the tastes and needs of the American reader been altered since the summer of 1939? Let me give you a close-up of the American reader in action. Fresh from his shave and with all the vigor of the early day, he comes down to breakfast to be greeted by the morning newspaper. After some quick sparring with the headlines, he reads the baseball scores, follows along with the local murder case, and then, since he can't escape it, he stands up to the war news as delivered by the A.P., the Berlin dispatch, Walter Lippmann, Alsop and Kintner, Boake Carter, Pearson and Allen, Dorothy Thompson, and Westbrook Pegler. Round One. The challenger is still fresh, but a little off-balance. On the way to the office he is asked what he thinks of Roosevelt's speech. He puts up the best defense he can by quoting what he can remember from Walter Lippmann, Alsop and Kintner, Dorothy Thompson, and Westbrook Pegler. Round Two. On his desk at the office is the Whaley-Eaton Foreign Letter, and the Kiplinger Letter from Washington—full of portentous details about the defense program. The challenger is still boring in. Round Three. On the way to lunch he sees a scare-head and buys the extra. At lunch he is asked what he thinks of the British chances in the Mediterranean. He leads with his chin. Round Four. On the way home from the office he reads the afternoon edition, and before dinner his wife turns on the broadcasts from the foreign capitals. Round Five. Challenger still upright but wobbly. After dinner he looks through the illustrations in *Life*—which dent him a little. And as he is trying to get up courage

to read the *Atlantic*, the family says to come along with them to the movies. When he gets there, the first thing he sees is the newsreel. Round Six—and the challenger is on the ropes. Joe Louis would be child's play for a mind that goes through such daily battering—and that is the kind of mind you've got to cope with for the duration!

Most Americans I talk with today are groggy from the effects of journalism. But that's not the only reaction I observe. In their self-defense they have become much more determined about what they want to read in their free time. What I mean by determination is this: the American reader is impatient with big words—those India rubber words which have been stretched too far and too often by propagandists, orators and politicians. It is my custom to make at least two long trips from East to West each year, and always I return from them with an amazement that a nation so widespread and composite can manage to settle its local problems and at the same time pull together. I think that is the kind of thing our American reader wants to know. The word "democracy" is not enough: he wants to be told how it works.

Second, he knows he is living in a world of violent change and that, like a gambler, he must take his chances with the rest of the country. He has learned to be much more resilient since That Man in the White House showed us the need. Third, he is eager for leadership. He is hopeful of finding a way out of this mess. He is waiting for a democrat to provide a better solution than Hitler's. But he is not prejudiced—it might be a Republican.

And finally, the American reader has more respect for his way of living. What do I mean by that? Well, let me show you. My office is a five-minute walk from my home on Beacon Hill. To get to it I skirt the Boston Common and cut a diagonal across our Public Gardens. On these late spring afternoons I find myself looking up into the sky and thinking, "My lord, what

an easy target this open city would be for a bomber." The contrast between the pond with its Swan Boats, the blazing beds of tulips for which our Gardens are famous, and the fine old trees which were planted here on the clam shells by Charles Sargent—the contrast between this serene picture and what the place might look like when a squadron of heavy bombers had done their work has this effect upon me: it makes me realize how much I love life and how much I want to remain the kind of individual I am. I have been bombed before, and this new approach of danger sharpens my respect for individuality. I know that in my own case I am reading novels with avidity these days because I find they refresh my mind and restore my confidence in what the individual can do. In our novels it is the individual, not the system, which carries our hopes of the future. That is certainly true of Ma and Tom Joad as they are revealed to us by John Steinbeck. It is equally true of old Pilar in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. No civil war, no cruelty, will ever shake her faith in life. And you will see the same thing in a novel which I have read in advance and which you will be reading this summer—*The Keys of the Kingdom* by A. J. Cronin. In this story of Father Chisholm, a Catholic priest at odds with his church, it is the individual who re-affirms your faith in what one man can do.

3.

If these changes are apparent in the American reader, what can be said of our writers? The first thing an editor notices is that our chickens have all come home to roost. Novelists from Wisconsin and Ohio no longer need the sunlight of the Riviera in which to do their work. The expatriates who were once so busy finding—or losing—themselves in Paris have come home. With them have come many talented exiles who, as they struggle to adjust themselves to American life, may help us to a better

appreciation of what American life should be. One result of all this is that the condescension toward things American has disappeared, I suspect for good.

With the disappearance of the expatriate there has also disappeared that by-product of the cosmopolitan, the book which was fashionable because it was odd. I am sure that there would be no incentive today which would prompt Gertrude Stein to write that first freak of hers entitled *Tender Buttons*. The impulse which led James Joyce away from *Dubliners* and into his maze, *Finnegan's Wake*, is dead and buried with the past. So is the fashion which produced *Gadsby*, a novel of over 50,000 words, written without the letter 'e.' The author, E. V. Wright, tied down the 'e' key on his typewriter before he began to compose. For your own fun sometime just try to write an engaging sentence of twenty-five words without once using the letter 'e.' Oddities like these shrink to the size of very small buttons indeed when writers are faced with the magnitude of what is now going on. There will always be need for experiments. There will always be a proving ground in literature for those young writers who must seek new directions. But for the time being the cult of unintelligibility finds no takers. That cult has gone with the silly sophistication which once made it popular.

And going, going, gone is that much more serious influence, the cult of the negative, a philosophy with which our novelists lived for twenty years, a philosophy which urged them to point out what's wrong without the glimmer of hope for what's right. "A mood of desperate unhappiness reigns in the world," says Van Wyck Brooks in his recent address *On Literature Today*, "and this is marked especially in most of the writers. The temperamental cards of our time are all stacked in favour of despair. It seems as if our writers passively wallowed in misery, calling it fate; as if the most powerful writers, from James

Joyce to Hemingway, from Eliot of *The Wasteland* to Eugene O'Neill and Theodore Dreiser, were bent on proving that life is a dark little pocket. Even where, as in many cases, these writers are fighting for social justice, they still picture life as hardly worth the trouble of fighting for it. You know the picture of life you find in the novels of William Faulkner, Dos Passos, James T. Farrell and so many others, who carry the day with their readers because they are writers of great power. They seem to delight in kicking their world to pieces, as if civilization were all a pretence and everything noble a humbug." I agree emphatically with Mr. Brooks. This attitude began as a direct reaction to the First World War, it settled into a habit and it ended by becoming a pose. I do not mean for a moment that our writers will cease to be realists. But I do mean that writers and readers both have had a bellyful of despair and that as a daily diet it is simply not good enough.

4.

You won't remember the books on which this country was feeding as it made ready to take part in the First World War. But I do. I remember them vividly, because they were the books which eventually inflamed my mind and propelled me into the French Army. When I volunteered at the end of 1916, I stood five feet five and weighed exactly ninety-eight pounds. The French Army was the only army then willing to take a soldier of that size. Let me give you a bird's eye view of what our literature was like at that time.

Begin in the spring of 1914—we were perfectly oblivious to the thunderstorm that was coming. We were like cows in a happy pasture munching on lush novels which, I suspect, would turn your stomach if you tried them today. Remember that 1914 was the end of an epoch, the climax of peace and prosperity. In 1914 a struggling young American poet named Robert Frost

published his collection of poems, *North of Boston*, but he did not publish it in Massachusetts. He published it in England, where he had gone in search of the recognition and encouragement denied him in America. In 1914 a young man who was having a hard time trying to write plays, a young man by the name of Eugene O'Neill, brought out his first book, *Thirst and Other Plays*. In 1914 Theodore Dreiser published his novel, *The Titan*, and I doubt if two thousand people in this country took the pains to read it. The reason we did not have time to discover the talent of Robert Frost and Eugene O'Neill and Theodore Dreiser was that we were absorbed in the best sellers. We were reading *Pollyanna* by Eleanor H. Porter, which sold more than a million copies; *Laddie* by Gene Stratton Porter, which sold a million and a half copies; *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs, *The Eyes of the World* by Harold Bell Wright, and *Penrod* by Booth Tarkington—all in half million lots. I don't hold these up to you as models for imitation, but if you will compare those titles with our 1940 best sellers you will see how our taste has improved.

The outbreak of the war stunned our writers. But not for long. The same prevailing optimism, the same belief that right would triumph, and that life would always have a happy ending rose again to the surface in the first crop of war books, and it was re-enforced by the passionate belief that the Hun was all black and that we were all white and that no personal sacrifice was too great for Democracy. I read every one of those war books I could get my hands on. I read Guy Empey's *Over the Top*. I read *The First Hundred Thousand* by Ian Hay, in which you saw the eager spirit and good humor with which English civilians were converted into fighting men. I read *Kitchener's Mob* by James Norman Hall—who was one of that Mob—and that second book of his, *High Adventure*, in which he describes the almost

idyllic chivalry of a war pilot. There were no dive bombers in those days.

It would be impossible to make you feel the electricity which passed from books like those into the minds of us who were still under twenty. If you write those books off as English propaganda, you miss the point. They were written by men who were actually in the fighting, not by bureaucrats in the Home Office. They were written by men who volunteered to fight because they believed it was the only way to save what they valued. Later as the novelists swung into action I read *Sonia* by Stephen McKenna, one of the great best sellers in England in which the hero comes back blinded—but he does come back! And I read *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, the novel by H. G. Wells which typified what the head of any household should be willing to sacrifice. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of that word sacrifice. The men in the army never used it. But it meant something to them, and even more to the people back home. And if any one word was ever a seed, you can say that this word "sacrifice" was the seed from which grew the novels and poems which were written during the war. It is the idea which lies behind Edith Wharton's *A Son at the Front*; it is the idea which Edward Streeter kidded and made laughable in his *Dere Mable*; it is the idea which runs through that exceptionally good novel of Willa Cather's, *My Antonia*.

But by 1918 a change was discernible. The poets were the first to reveal it, being, as I suspect, thinner-skinned than most novelists. At the outbreak of the war the poets had marched off singing. They could not wait for commissions—the war would be over too soon. They were like Rupert Brooke. And his war sonnets stand for the ardor of that time as no others we have.

If I should die, think only this of me;

That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's breathing English air,
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
 A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
 Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England
 given;
 Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her
 day;
 And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
 In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Siegfried Sassoon wrote in the same vein. But Sassoon survived the first two years of the war, as Brooke did not. And it was he who first marked the change. It was Sassoon who came out flatly with the statement that the sacrifice was too great; it was wanton; it was more than civilization could endure. Sassoon was an infantry officer who had been awarded the Military Cross and who, so rumor has it, had been recommended for the Victoria Cross. But at that moment he did what every hard-driven Englishman is prompted to do under stress—he wrote to the *London Times*. His letter was an eye-opener, and after its publication he threw his medals away and withdrew from the British Army. His friends kept him as quiet as they could. But Sassoon was aching to say then—and did say later in his poetry—what another infantry officer was already writing in his notebook. I mean Captain Wilfred Owen, who died of wounds just before the Armistice and whose poems in their bitter beauty mark the despair which had risen in men's minds since Rupert Brooke.

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
 How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of
 blood;
 Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
 And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-
 heads
 Which long to nuzzle in the heart of lads,

Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
 Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple,
 There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
 And God will grow no talons at his heels,
 Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Coming back to this country for our demobilization, what did we veterans read? We read *Through the Wheat* by Thomas Boyd, *Toward the Flame* by Hervey Allen. We enjoyed *What Price Glory?*—the play which was so shattering to our parents—and eventually we read the greatest novel of the war, the story brewed from defeat, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. By that time the transformation was complete. Germans and Americans alike, we had been through the mill: the ardor had gone, we had seen what the sacrifice was worth—and despair was creeping in.

5.

Today the habits of twenty years are still with us. It is still the method of our writers to shock the reader into awareness. The ingrained skepticism still makes our Zolas report what they see and question what they know. It also makes them slow, perhaps it makes them incapable of being sure that a better way is available. In short, we face this new war with the despair left over from the last. If we are to have any feeling of ardor, any self-confidence, any exhilaration about what we are to do, that feeling is still to come. Can despair sink any lower in literature? Can the attitude of our writers be any more discouraging than it has been in the past two years? Why, of course it can. You have only to look at France today to realize how far the tide has ebbed in that silent country. But even in France there must be people who take consolation in the thought that men have been through this despair in times past and have risen from it. At the end of the French Revolution, a Frenchman said something like this: "Now we must begin to build again on the

bedrock of despair; we must entertain no illusions, we must recognize the worst—and then build.”

On this side of the Atlantic writers are beginning to seek for a new grip on life. They are trying to shake off their gloomy habits. They are trying to write constructively about what is to come. But, you will ask, what is there that we can positively believe in at this moment? There is a new feeling of responsibility in the air and this will inevitably affect your writing. First, I am positive that as a nation we can do the things we set our minds to. We are a dynamic people and we hate to mark time. We have set ourselves an enormous job and I am confident that we can do it. If some of you go into defense work, you will have a chance to see the job at first hand—and there may be books in it. Secondly, don't forget the millions of middle-aged and elderly people—your parents and mine—people who run out of breath, who find it hard to keep up with what's happening. Someone has got to bridge the understanding between your generation and theirs—and that bridge will be built of books. Thirdly, we have got to decide for ourselves whether we really are a united people. I am positive that we are. But according to Goebbels we are divided. Where does the truth lie? Have we been able to absorb thirty-eight million newcomers in a hundred years? Are they Americans? No one man knows enough to say. The truth can only be testified by hundreds of writers in their short stories and novels about our American communities.

“Sure, sure,” you say to yourself. “I have heard something like that before. What I really want to know is how I am to get any writing done if I am packed off to a training camp.” Well, that is up to you. T. E. Lawrence—Lawrence of Arabia, only he then called himself T. E. Shaw—managed to translate the *Odyssey*, write his forbidden novel, *The Mint*, and carry on the most voluminous correspondence—

all this as a private in the English Tank Corps. James Norman Hall, who graduated from Grinnell College, Iowa, wrote his first two books in intervals between being a machine-gunner and a pursuit pilot. They had no more time than you will have. Nor should you dismiss the possibility of what can be done in a letter. I remember reading last winter a famous letter in which W. T. Donald, the Australian adviser to Chiang Kai Shek, describes the enormous tenacity and infinite patience with which the Chinese transported their factories, their schools, their hospitals and their homes, brick by brick, object by object, all the way up to Chungking, knowing even while they rebuilt their capital that it would be a target for the Japanese bombers. Letters with a tenacity like that will live. So may yours, if you are part of a great movement.

If writing is really in you, you will not lose the habit of counting your chickens before they hatch. Your real problem, it seems to me, is not whether you will be able to write, but rather what form of writing is best suited to the nature of your work and the time you have available. For example, if you are going to camp or if you are going to be tied up for nine hours a day in some heavy industry, then obviously the kind of writing which you can most readily putter along with is that which grows out of the first person singular. Read your own experience, see what it is good for, and then see how vivid you can make that experience to the stay-at-home. That's what Jim Hall did. That's what John Dos Passos did. That's what Hervey Allen did.

If you are a poet, you are in luck, because poetry hits quickly and a whole poem can often be captured in an afternoon off. If you are a poet, remember what I said about the cult of unintelligibility. If you have got something worth saying, make it count. And if you are a poet, don't spend all your substance on the lyric or the didactic. Remember that not since *John Brown's*

Body has anyone really taken the trouble to exercise the narrative poem. People are hungry for narration today—just as hungry as they are for poetry they can understand.

If you are a novelist, I suggest that you do not burn up your free time trying to write a long novel. If you have got to make every minute count, and if you are weary—as I am—of that novel which begins with the hero in his cradle, carries him through his school days, through his college years, through his unhappy marriage and finally pushes him into the grave, take a day off and refresh your knowledge of what can be done within the compass of the short novel. See what Conrad Richter did in that intense and lovely story of his, *The Sea of Grass*. All told it measures less than 36,000 words. See what Willa Cather did with her *Lost Lady*. See what Wilder did in his *Bridge of San Luis Rey*—that story is less than fifty thousand words. See what Steinbeck did in *Of Mice and Men*. See what Robert Nathan does, year after year. These are brilliant performances, these short novels, and the form is a very exciting one with which to work. You haven't room to build year upon year; you haven't room for any elaborate descriptions. You have got to begin in the middle of things and then, shuttling your story back and forth, by balancing your passages of introspection against the forward movement, you shape a story which, if it be really good, will carry the reader's thoughts far beyond the last period.

6.

I know no more than you do whether we shall go all the way down the road to intervention until we are at last openly and irrevocably at war. Or whether by some surprising turn we may be able to tip the scales in favor of a negotiated peace. If peace comes now, I wonder if it can be any more than an armistice until our job is done. For whether we like it or not, we

have been challenged to stand up and tell the world what we mean by American democracy. We can't do that overnight. It will take time. And as we work out the proof in our own way, there will come with it, I firmly believe, an upsurge in American writing. I look for good historical novels; I hope for a revival of the Mark Twain-Will Rogers humor we need so badly; I expect contemporary novels with courage and zest for the present. Where is the man who will write the novel that ought to be written about skilled labor? Will Steinbeck do it, or will someone we have never heard of? I have often speculated as to how it might be done. Suppose the father of the family was a railroad engineer and a member of the brotherhood. Suppose his son has thrown in his lot with motors, and is just as rabidly C.I.O. Here are men drawn together by their love of machines and their love of doing things with their hands, and yet set in opposition by systems over which they have little control. Were such a story told in human terms, it would stir us as no novel about our mechanical genius has yet done.

Or looking still further ahead into the future, who will tell the story of the resettlement of this country as it is now going on, as the new factories spring up and the boom towns grow? We are doing more than simply forge new weapons. We are forging new communities, many of which will become permanent when at last the time comes to live in peace.

I have often wished that I might have seen this country as Audubon saw it, when the trees were in the forests and the birds were in the trees. And kindred to that desire is a hankering to have lived at the time of the American Revolution and to have seen our first great leaders in action, to have seen Washington's farewell to his officers at Fraunces's Tavern, to have heard what Thomas Jefferson thought of the French Revolution, to have known men like John Adams and Hamilton. These

men pulled the country together; to have lived in their time, we think, would have made bigger men of us. Time is kind as we look back. We remember the clear thinking, the manliness, and the grandeur of the old days; we forget the uncertainty, the persecution, and the despair which made them dark. Again as we approach the perspective of a full century we begin to appreciate the size and the depth of the men

who came, most of them from nowhere, to wrestle, in the 1860's, with the problem of whether this country could be united: Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, Jackson, and Lee.

Now for a third time the country is being put to the test. Seventy-five years from now will people say to themselves, "By God, that was the time to have lived! How I'd like to have had a hand in it!" It could be.