A Stimulating Survey of the Impact of Modern Life upon Creative Literature

THE WRITER'S RESPONSIBILITY*

By J. Donald Adams

Perhaps there never was a time in which the writer, and particularly the young writer, faced so many challenges as he does today. Merely to live in this disordered world of ours, to carry on a day-to-day existence that makes sense and seems geared to some worth-while purpose, is in itself a challenge to our sense of proportion, to our sense of perspective. How much more, then, is it so in the case of those who undertake to reflect and interpret this world we live in, those who feel they have something to say to us, and who would like, if possible, to bring some illumination to the life we are living.

These challenges are of two kinds. There are the basic ones, which concern the writer as an individual, just as they concern us all at this moment in the world's history, but which necessarily have their effect upon his work. And in addition to these, there are the problems which are his specific concern as an artist—the problems that are peculiar to his craft at this particular moment.

In what may be called the basic group, he is confronted first of all by the predominant character of the time in which we live. Contemporary writers have defined it in phrases which, although varied, rest upon a common base. They have called it the age of perplexity, the century of fear, the age of anxiety. That these are apt designations we are all aware. Men today are apprehensive to a degree which they have never been in all our history. And the

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fears by which they are surrounded are not imaginary; they are very real. There is no need to specify them; we are all made painfully conscious of them as we turn to our newspapers every morning. We know that surrender to them would be fatal, as surrender to fear always is, and that what we have most to fear is fear itself. And so the first challenge to the writer is to his courage, to his capacity for hope and determination.

There is another aspect of our age which, while it affects us all, has a particular significance for the writer. It is the submergence of the individual life. Never before has the race been so acutely conscious of mankind in the mass; never has our belief in the importance of the individual life been so sorely tried. And that is a condition which strikes at the core of the novelist's art and which threatens the very stuff of which poetry is made. As the English writer Storm Jameson remarked several years ago, the novelist today sees that there are moments in the history of the human race when what is personal in a man is less important than the fears and hopes, the impulses he shares with a great many of his fellows. He suspects that this is such a moment. And perhaps he despairs. He thinks: If I am to write about this movement, this change, it will dwarf any men and women I can conceive. It will depersonalize them.

It is true, of course, that there are times when what is personal in a man should or must be subordinated to a welfare that is larger than his own; it is true not only for masses of men in certain crises, it is true for every individual life, in whatever time it is lived. Yet the novelist cannot lose sight of personal values, of individual desires and problems. He cannot, if he is to be effective, write abstractly. Our understanding of how men live, of what life means to them, can be deepened only by studying the individual relationships of one man, one woman, to another, or that individual's relationship to his family, his social group, his country, or whatever aggregate you may choose to name. Out of these relationships issue conflicts and adjustments of various kinds, and it is in these that the novelist finds his richest material. But to present these conflicts and adjustments effectively, he must individualize them. Thus, we have another challenge to the writer imposed upon him by the character of his time: in this case a challenge to his ability to keep in balance his awareness of the tremendous currents which affect us all and his sense of the individual's importance.

There is a third condition of our period with which the writer must deal both as an individual and as an artist. It is what the Swiss writer Picard has referred to as the disjointedness of our time. His thesis is that modern man, whose inner world is chaotic, is constantly facing an equally chaotic outer world, where momentary impressions are rained upon him in quick succession, without connection or order of any kind. As typical manifestations of this condition he instances the radio, with its interminable abrupt transitions, and the increasingly scattered character of our magazines, especially those on the lower intelligence level, which seem to devote less and less space to more and more topics. The newsreel, which shuttles us back and forth between tragedy and comedy and heaven knows what else in a matter of seconds, is perhaps an even more striking instance. Our modern interest in man's unconscious has served to intensify the disjointedness by which we are surrounded, for chaos reigns in the unconscious. Because so much of our world presents itself to us in this fragmentary fashion, like the unrelated objects in a surrealist painting, it becomes increasingly hard for us to see life steadily and see it whole.

These, then, are some of the conditions of our time which not only have a direct bearing on our daily lives as human beings, but create as well the atmosphere
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in which the writer must conceive and carry on his work. But he is subject also, as I have already remarked, to various conditions which are peculiar to him in his role as artist. He has, for one thing, been living through a period in which intense experimentation has been characteristic of all the arts. This ferment has been most active in painting and sculpture, in music and poetry, but it has been at work in the novel and in other literary forms as well.

These periods are of course necessary to the continuous flow of vitality in art. But during them there occurs both a widening and a narrowing of horizons—a widening in the sense of new techniques and new approaches being opened up, and a narrowing due to a contraction in the size of the audience addressed. For it seems inevitable when this process of change is at work that the writer or other artist should address himself more and more to his fellow craftsmen, to that small group whose ideas he shares and whose objectives are common to his own. There is a stoppage of that “fluid” which Victor Hugo described as running between the writer and his reader, in a stream from which they both draw strength. There comes a point at which that stoppage must be removed, so that the relationship between writer and reader may be once more vitalized.

In literary, as in political revolutions, there are inevitably excesses in the direction of change and an indiscriminate discarding of the traditional in our literature. It would be unreasonable to insist that nothing constructive had been accomplished by the revolution which T. S. Eliot and others wrought in poetry, as it would be blindness to deny that some of the forces which they set in motion have been harmful to poetry in that they have produced too great obstructions to that vital stream between writer and reader to which I have referred. The same may be said of the influence which James Joyce and Virginia Woolf exerted upon the craft of fiction. They deepened our conception of the subjective method in fiction, but they deflected us from concern with the narrative function of the novel.

I T SEEMS to me that the time has now come, in all the arts, for the work of consolidation. The artist today is faced by
the need to take whatever of positive value has been gained by the work of the experimenters and to fuse it with whatever in the traditional has been too often neglected or discarded. It is essential to all living things that there be an interplay between the old and the new, for it is in that fashion that all true progress is made.

In that interesting book about the tribal life of the Kiowa Indians, The Ten Grandmothers, there is a passage which delighted me by its homely but vivid statement of this ancient truth. Two Kiowa young men are talking. Eagle Plume's father has just died, and by tribal tradition his horse should be killed where he was buried. It happened that the Kiowas were going through a difficult time, and Eagle Plume's friend, Wood Fire, remonstrates. "This is a good horse," he says. "People will need good horses." But Eagle Plume replies, "This is what my father would want," and cuts the horse's throat. Afterward, as they sit by the fire, Wood Fire remarks, "That is the end of one kind of living. I think all the old things will be dead soon." They begin to argue about the unwillingness of some people to give the old things up, and the right of others to get new things started. Eagle Plume felt very old as he said to his friend, "You have to have new things. You have to have new springs to make the grass grow. But grass grows out of the old earth. You have to have old things for new things to have roots in. That's why some people have to keep old things going and some people have to push new things along. It's right for both of them. It's what they have to do." "And," he might have added, "some of us can do both."

There, reduced to the simplest terms, you have the age-old conflict between tradition and innovation. Eagle Plume, taking his analogy from the earth, direct from Nature as an Indian would, is saying precisely the same thing that André Gide reports himself as once thinking:

It suddenly seemed clear to me that if there were no names in the history of art except those belonging to the creators of new forms there would be no culture; the very word implied a continuity, and therefore it called for disciples, imitators and followers to make a living chain: in other words, a tradition.

Or, as John Buchan once put it:

[If a man regards the past] as the matrix of present and future, whose potency takes many forms but is not diminished, then he will cherish it scrupulously and labour to read its lessons, and shun the heady short-cuts which end only in blank walls. He will realise that in the cycle to which we belong we can see only a fraction of the curve, and that properly to appraise the curve and therefore to look ahead, we may have to look back a few centuries to its beginning.

In all departments of human activity there must be this shuttling, this backward and forward motion, this interplay of forces. So far as literature and the other arts are concerned, it is when we have absolute intolerance of the representatives of one force for the other that we get the dry rot of sterile repetition or the gross exaggerations, the absurd extremes by which the intolerant innovator proclaims his absolute freedom from tradition. There is no more absolute freedom in art than there is in human liberty. Our own time, being a period of violent experimentation in all fields of activity, has seen a great deal of condescension toward those who have worked with one eye on the curve of which John Buchan reminds us. It might make a profitable half hour to sit down and compile a list of those whom we think of as the acknowledged great in literature, in painting and music, and to find how many of them could not properly be classed as belonging among the innovators—at least, not in the sense of those whose aim was to break completely from the curve of tradition.

It is to be hoped, however, that these statements do not leave the impression that what is asked for is a cessation of experimental writing. Nothing could be further
from my intention, for some amount of it is an essential to the healthy condition of any art. But it is suggested that the need for it is not now as great as it was, and that what is more urgent is the more necessary work of consolidation. Already, particularly in poetry, there are signs of a growing awareness of this need among young writers. There is evident in the work of some of them a recognition of the fact that the lines of communication between writer and reader, especially in poetry, require strengthening. They are writing more directly, more simply, with less dependence upon private imagery.

There is another challenge to the contemporary writer as a craftsman about which so much has recently been written that I shall touch upon it only briefly. It is composed of the various threats to his integrity which have been created by the growing commercializing influences to which the literary career has been subjected. I am not referring to the siren song of Hollywood alone. It is a time when opportunism is in the literary air. There are publishers who are the best friends that a writer could have in relation to his work; there are others who can be his worst enemies, those who urge him into production, after a first success, before he is ready. There are agents who are helpful in many ways besides the matter of marketing, and there are those with whom their commission is the prime consideration. Nor is it an easy matter these days for the young writer of a first success to keep his head; that requires an unusual sense of balance and proportion.

One evening, during a discussion of what writers are thinking about today, I heard the publicity director of one of our large publishing houses, in a confessional mood, say that she regarded the job she performs as one of the heaviest handicaps against which the young writer has to contend. She had watched too many egos disastrously inflate as a result of the promotion that had been considered necessary. The writer today lives in a world of increasing ballyhoo, and heaven help him if he lacks a sense of humor about himself.

The scarcity of a sound and responsible criticism is of course another factor. But if these conditions constitute a challenge to the writer—the temptation to trim his sails for financial advantage, to go on repeating the pattern of a first success, the impact of absurd claims regarding his importance—it is good to remember that there are writers who meet that challenge and surmount it. No better example can be suggested than Thornton Wilder, who has never allowed himself to be deflected from his course. At every step in his career he has written the book that it interested him at that time to write, and for no other reason.

Perhaps a little more should be said about the part that reviewing and criticism play in our writing at this time. There is good reason to believe that it could be much more effective than it is. Too much of our reviewing is insufficiently based on standards which have more permanence than those crude substitutes supplied by the prevailing mode of the moment. Too much of what is dignified by the name of criticism is written in an intellectual vacuum, divorced from life, and phrased in a scientific or pseudoscientific jargon which is an exasperation to read.

Reviewing and criticism have two functions. The first, and the one that is more satisfactorily performed than the other, is to supply information and, in varying degrees, guidance, to the reading public. The other, which is very imperfectly performed, is indeed, a potential rather than an actual service. It is to give values and direction to contemporary writing. This is a function commonly regarded as reserved for criticism, but reviewing on its best level can also contribute something to that end. At this point someone may mutter and say,
"Bosh! Every writer worth his salt must
find his own values and his own direction;
let the critics and reviewers mind their own
business." There is a measure of truth in
that protest, but it is not the whole truth
by any means. Reviewing and criticism can
be creative, as Mary Colum has ably dem­
onstrated in her book From These Roots:
The Ideas That Have Made Modern
Literature.

Of course every writer of consequence
must find and hold to values by which to
do his work, and that work is likely to
benefit by the fact that he knows where he
is going and why. But, important as self­
expression of the individual is, he is neces­
sarily not only a writer of particular gifts
and abilities, but, like any other man, in
John Donne's phrase, "a piece of the Con­
tinent, a part of the maine." And as coral
islands are made by the deposits left by
innumerable small creatures, and as con­
tinents are molded by various natural
forces, so is the writer subject to many
in­
fluences, and he is a solemn ass if he thinks
that his contribution to literature is entirely
one of his own making.

Intelligent, creative criticism can con­
tribute much to molding the character of a
period's writing. Would the course of Eng­
lish poetry have been the same had Words­
worth never written the Preface to the
Lyrical Ballads? Who is there to say that
if as gifted but rudderless a writer as the
young Scott Fitzgerald had encountered
sound and constructive criticism of his
talents at the time it was most needed, he
would not have greatly profited thereby?
For he had sufficient humility of spirit and
enough consecration to his craft to have
recognized its value. That is not true, of
course, of all writers, even able ones; some
of them must find their way by their own
efforts alone.

ENOUGH has been said about the condi­
tions under which the contemporary
writer carries on his work—both those which
arise from the general character of the time
in which he lives and those which have their
origin in the atmosphere peculiar to his
craft. The writer's responsibility stems in
part from some of the conditions which
have been discussed, and its nature must to
some degree be already apparent. It is a
responsibility that has more than one
aspect: there is the writer's responsibility
to himself, to his craft, and to the reading
public. And it is the third of these which
should be emphasized, because while the
others have always had the same impor­
tance, it would seem that the writer's
responsibility to the public is today greater
than it has ever been.

It is not necessary to point out that a
deep hunger of the spirit stirs in every
thinking man and woman today. It was not
accident that made a book called Peace of
Mind the first choice for so long a time
of readers the country over. We live in a
world that is in desperate need of reassur­
ance, which desires above all else to recap­
ture its belief in the dignity of man, and in
his capacity to deal justly and generously
with his fellows. The last thing we need at
this moment, it seems to me, is the emer­
gence of a twentieth-century Dean Swift;
we know the worst there is to know about
ourselves, and the events of the past few
years have made us painfully conscious of
the degradations of man's spirit to which
we can descend. Keep them in mind we
must, and I am not suggesting that the
writer omit from his picture of the world
in which he lives the contemptible depths
of which man is capable; merely that he
remind us also that aspiration still dwells
with him.

One is reminded here of some words of
Van Wyck Brooks, written during the days
when he was formulating some of the most
penetrating criticism that we have had in
America. He said:

The writer, whose office it was in more primit­
tive times to glorify the deeds of the man of
action, finds himself now in a world that is
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eager for nothing so much as the record of his own spiritual processes. And that is perhaps natural. Thanks to the universal blocking and checking of instinct that modern industrialism implies for the run of men and even women, the type of life that still, at whatever cost, affords scope for the creative impulses is haloed with an immense desirability. In our age in which everything tends towards a regimentation of character, the average man, presented with no ideal but that of success, finds himself almost obliged to yield up one by one the attributes of a generous humanity. No wonder the artist has come to be the lodestone of so many wishes. He alone seems able to keep open the human right of way, to test and explore the possibilities of life.

I T HAS been interesting to observe the recent revival of Victorian reputations. Most of us are aware how marked a phenomenon this has been. Something like a note of envy, of rather unwilling admiration, has crept into contemporary references to that period. Partly this change of attitude stems from acute awareness of our own bewilderment, our consciousness of the lack of firm ground beneath our feet. We cannot escape a somewhat grudging recognition of their sturdy stance in life, even though we may question the solidity of the foundations which supplied it. But this explanation does not, I think, account for the popularity which Victorian novelists are enjoying. There is something else back of the renewed interest in Henry James, in the fact that Dickens is recapturing an audience, and that the public libraries cannot keep sufficiently stocked with the novels of Anthony Trollope.

The answer, perhaps, lies in the Victorian's consuming interest in character. It was Mr. Brooks also who has suggested that our age of psychology is not an age of interest in human nature. That statement would seem at first thought to be almost paradoxical, but the distinction rests on the idea that psychology turns our attention to the causes of things, to the reasons for our behavior in a certain set of circumstances, whereas what really matters is the significance of our actions. The modern, he contended, has lost the feeling for character, and he quoted in support of that belief T. S. Eliot's remark that "Nothing seems more odd about the Victorian age than the respect which its eminent people felt for one another." What is odd, Mr. Brooks asked, about respect for character?

There is no doubt that the Victorians had an excited wonder over human nature, and this excitement, this sympathetic interest, found its way into their fiction. The Victorian novelist cared, deeply and vividly, about his characters, and was consequently able to make his readers care. He allowed himself to live their emotions instead of striving, in the modern manner, to keep himself as detached from his characters as possible. Too often the contemporary novelist approaches his desk as if he were a scientist entering his laboratory. He doesn't put himself inside his characters; he examines them.

To recover some of this human warmth, to free ourselves more often from the clinical atmosphere in which too much of contemporary fiction is written, seems to me an objective worth striving for. It was in part its effort in this direction which distinguished John Hersey's A Bell for Adano and which was notably present in Gerald Brace's The Garretson Chronicle.

Do not misunderstand. A retreat from a realistic attitude is not suggested, rather the adoption of a broader and deeper realism, one that takes into account the positive as well as the negative aspects of human character. What rests in one's mind is an honest effort toward balance in regarding the complexities of the human being—the kind of balance that was too often lacking in the facile cynicism that fattened in our books during the period between the wars. Facile, that is, though some of it was honest and deeply induced, because too much of it was merely the product of a fashionable attitude. It was a period, as Charles
Morgan has pointed out, when too many writers made a deliberate refusal to choose, maintain, and accept responsibility for a point of view. Today it would seem we are all more keenly aware of our individual responsibility, writers will be less easily herded into coteries than during recent years.

We are all as much the creators of our time as we are the products of it. Our writers can play a tremendous part in fixing the mood and temper of the period in which they live. We had, after the last war, a generation which surrendered to its fears. Let us not have another.