

absolute humanity, which is but another way of saying a nothingness. In her alliance with Paul she constitutes a striking symbol of that powerful part of modern culture that exists by means of its claim to political innocence and by its false seriousness—the political awareness that is not aware, the social consciousness which hates full consciousness, the moral earnestness which is moral luxury.

The fatal ambiguity of the Princess and Paul is a prime condition of Hyacinth Robinson's tragedy. If we comprehend the complex totality that James has thus conceived, we understand that the novel is an incomparable representation of the spiritual circumstances of our civilization. I venture to call it incomparable because, although other writers have provided abundant substantiation of James's insight, no one has, like him, told us the truth in a single luminous act of creation. If we ask by what magic James was able to do what he did, the answer is to be found in what I have identified as the source of James's moral realism. For the novelist can tell the truth about Paul and the Princess only if, while he represents them in their ambiguity and error, he also allows them to exist in their pride and beauty: the moral realism that shows the ambiguity and error cannot refrain from showing the pride and beauty. Its power to tell the truth arises from its power of love. James had the imagination of disaster and that is why he is immediately relevant to us; but together with the imagination of disaster he had what the imagination of disaster often destroys and in our time is daily destroying, the imagination of love.

## *The Function of the Little Magazine*

*The Partisan Reader* may be thought of as an ambiguous monument. It commemorates a victory—*Partisan Review* has survived for a decade, and has survived with a vitality of which the evidence may be found in the book which marks the anniversary. Yet to celebrate the victory is to be at once aware of the larger circumstance of defeat in which it was gained. For what we speak of as if it were a notable achievement is no more than this: that a magazine which has devoted itself to the publication of good writing of various kinds has been able to continue in existence for ten years and has so far established itself that its audience now numbers some six thousand readers.<sup>1</sup>

Here is an epitome of our cultural situation. Briefly put, it is that there exists a great gulf between our educated class and the best of our literature.

I use the word *educated* in its commonest sense to indicate those people who value their ability to live some part of their lives with serious ideas. I limit the case to these people and do not refer to the great mass of people because that would involve us in an ultimate social question and I have in mind only the present cultural question. And I do not mean to assert that *Partisan Review* in itself contains the best of our literature, but only that it is representative of some of the tendencies that are producing the best.

*Note:* This essay was first published as the introduction to *The Partisan Reader: Ten Years of Partisan Review, 1933-1944: An Anthology*, edited by William Phillips and Philip Rahv (New York: The Dial Press, 1946).

<sup>1</sup> Four years later the number has risen to ten thousand.

The great gulf to which I refer did not open suddenly. Some fifty years ago, William Dean Howells observed that the readers of the "cultivated" American magazines were markedly losing interest in literary contributions. Howells is here a useful witness, not only because he had his finger in so many important literary pies and was admirably aware of the economics and sociology of literature, but also because he himself was an interesting example of the literary culture whose decline he was noting. The Ohio of Howells' boyhood had only recently emerged from its frontier phase and in its manner of life it was still what we would call primitive. Yet in this Ohio, while still a boy, Howells had devoted himself to the literary life. He was unusual but he was not unique or lonely; he had friends who also felt called to literature or scholarship. His elders did not think the young man strange. Literature had its large accepted place in this culture. The respectable lawyers of the locality subscribed to the great British quarterlies. The printing office of Howells' father was the resort of the village wits, who, as the son tells us, "dropped in, and liked to stand with their backs to the stove and challenge opinion concerning Holmes and Poe, Irving and Macaulay, Pope and Byron, Dickens and Shakespeare." Problems of morality and religious faith were freely and boldly discussed. There was no intellectual isolationism, and the village felt, at least eventually, the reverberations of the European movement of mind. Howells learned an adequate German from the German settlers and became a disciple of Heine. The past was alive, and the boy, rooting in a barrel of books in his father's log cabin, found much to read about old Spain—at the age of fifteen, having conceived a passion for *Don Quixote*, he vowed to write the life of Cervantes. At the outbreak of the Civil War, when Howells was twenty-three, Abraham Lincoln, wishing to reward the young author for a campaign biography, offered him, at the instance of John Hay and the urging of the Ohio politicians, the consulship at Venice. It was then the common

practice to place literary men in foreign diplomatic posts.

I am not trying to paint an idyllic picture of the literary life of our nineteenth century. It was a life full of social anomaly and economic hardship. I am only trying to suggest that in the culture of the time literature was assumed. What was true of Howells in Ohio was also true of Mark Twain in Missouri. Nothing could be falsier than the view that Mark Twain was a folk writer. Like his own Tom Sawyer, he was literate and literary to the core, even snobbishly so. The local literary culture that he loved to mock, the graveyard poetry, the foolish Byronism, the adoration of Scott, was the literature of the London drawing rooms naturalized as a folk fact in Missouri. We were once a nation that took its cultural stand on the intense literariness of McGuffey's *Eclectic Readers*. When Oscar Wilde and Matthew Arnold came here on tour, they may have figured chiefly as curiosities, but at least these literary men were nothing less than that.

In the nineteenth century, in this country as in Europe, literature underlay every activity of mind. The scientist, the philosopher, the historian, the theologian, the economist, the social theorist, and even the politician, were required to command literary abilities which would now be thought irrelevant to their respective callings. The man of original ideas spoke directly to "the intelligent public," to the lawyer, the doctor, the merchant, and even—and much more than now, as is suggested by the old practice of bringing out very cheap editions of important books—to the working masses. The role of the "popularizer" was relatively little known; the originator of an idea was expected to make his own full meaning clear.

Of two utterances of equal quality, one of the nineteenth and one of the twentieth century, we can say that the one of the nineteenth century had the greater *power*. If the mechanical means of communication were then less efficient than now, the intellectual means were far more efficient. There may even be a significant ratio between the two. Perhaps, as John Dos

Passos has suggested, where books and ideas are relatively rare, true literacy may be higher than where they are superabundant.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, it was the natural expectation that a serious idea would be heard and considered. Baudelaire is the poet from whom our modern disowned poets have taken their characteristic attitudes, yet Baudelaire himself was still able to think of "success," to believe in the possibility of being seriously listened to by the very society he flouted, and he even carried his belief to the point of standing for election to the Academy.

This power of the word, this power of the idea, we no longer count on in the same degree. It is now more than twenty years since a literary movement in this country has had what I have called power. The literary movement of social criticism of the 1920's is not finally satisfying, but it had more energy to advance our civilization than anything we can now see, and its effects were large and good. No tendency since has had an equal strength. The falling off from this energy may not be permanent. It could, of course, become permanent. There are circumstances that suggest it might become so. After all, the emotional space of the human mind is large but not infinite, and perhaps it will be pre-empted by the substitutes for literature—the radio, the movies, and certain magazines—which are antagonistic to literature not merely because they are competing genres but also because of the political and cultural assumptions that control them. Further, the politics with which we are now being confronted may be of such kind as to crush the possibility of that interplay between free will and

<sup>2</sup> This seems to be borne out not only by the great example of Lincoln's prose, but also by the assumptions of the humorous writers, by the style of the newspapers of the day, by the letters of people who read very few books—see, for instance, the letter which Mark Twain's father wrote his son to give him the gist of a course he had taken with a traveling professor of grammar and rhetoric. The command of language was believed to be one of the means by which one could become a person of standing and effectiveness. The tradition of American oratory is now only comic, yet perhaps the verbal ritual of the Fourth of July was the tribute paid by simplicity to intellect.

circumstance upon which all literature depends. These conditions can scarcely encourage us. On the other hand, they must not be allowed to obsess us so that we cannot work. They involve ultimate considerations, and, apart from the fact that it is always futile to make predictions about culture, the practical activity of literature requires that a sense of the present moment be kept paramount.

To the general lowering of the status of literature and of the interest in it, the innumerable "little magazines" have been a natural and heroic response. Since the beginning of the century, meeting difficulties of which only their editors can truly conceive, they have tried to keep the roads open. From the elegant and brilliant *Dial* to the latest little scrub from the provinces, they have done their work, they have kept our culture from being cautious and settled, or merely sociological, or merely pious. They are snickered at and snubbed, sometimes deservedly, and no one would venture to say in a precise way just what effect they have—except that they keep the new talents warm until the commercial publisher with his customary air of noble resolution is ready to take his chance, except that they make the official representatives of literature a little uneasy, except that they keep a countercurrent moving which perhaps no one will be fully aware of until it ceases to move.

Among these magazines, these private and precarious ventures, *Partisan Review* does a work that sets it apart. Although it is a magazine of literary experiment, it differs from the other little magazines in the emphasis it puts upon ideas and intellectual attitudes. And to understand its special role in our culture, we must further particularize the cultural situation I have described; we must become aware of the discrepancy that exists between the political beliefs of our educated class and the literature that, by its merit, should properly belong to that class.

In its political feeling our educated class is predominantly liberal. Attempts to define liberalism are not likely to meet

with success—I mean only that our educated class has a ready if mild suspiciousness of the profit motive, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning, and international cooperation, perhaps especially where Russia is in question. These beliefs do great credit to those who hold them. Yet it is a comment, if not on our beliefs then on our way of holding them, that not a single first-rate writer has emerged to deal with these ideas, and the emotions that are consonant with them, in a great literary way.

Our liberal ideology has produced a large literature of social and political protest, but not, for several decades, a single writer who commands our real literary admiration; we all respond to the flattery of agreement, but perhaps even the simplest reader among us knows in his heart the difference between that emotion and the real emotions of literature. It is a striking fact about this literature of contemporary liberalism that it is commercially very successful—at the behest of the liberal middle class, that old vice of “commercialism,” which we all used to scold, is now at a disadvantage before the “integrity” which it once used to corrupt. Our dominant literature is profitable in the degree that it is earnest, sincere, solemn. At its best it has the charm of a literature of piety. It has neither imagination nor mind.

And if on the other hand we name those writers who, by the general consent of the most serious criticism, by consent too of the very class of educated people of which we speak, are to be thought of as the monumental figures of our time, we see that to these writers the liberal ideology has been at best a matter of indifference. Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Yeats, Mann (in his creative work), Kafka, Rilke, Gide—all have their own love of justice and the good life, but in not one of them does it take the form of a love of the ideas and emotions which liberal democracy, as known by our educated class, has declared respectable. So that we can say that no connection exists between our liberal educated class and the best of the literary

mind of our time. And this is to say that there is no connection between the political ideas of our educated class and the deep places of the imagination. The same fatal separation is to be seen in the tendency of our educated liberal class to reject the tough, complex psychology of Freud for the easy rationalistic optimism of Horney and Fromm.

The alienation of the educated class from the most impressive literature of our time has of course been noted before. And certain critics have been eager to attribute the lack of connection to the literal difficulty of the writers themselves and to blame this difficulty on the writers' intellectual snobishness and irresponsibility; as the war approached they even went so far as to regard as subversive to democracy all writers who did not, as one of them put it, “turn away from the preferences of the self-appointed few, and toward the needs and desires of the many.” One might be the more willing to accept this diagnosis if the critics who made it were more adept in their understanding of what, after all, a good many people can understand, or if they were not so very quick to give all their sympathy and all their tolerance to works of an obviously inferior sort merely because they are easy to read, and “affirmative,” and “life-giving,” and written for the needs and desires of the many. If tolerance is in question, I am inclined rather to suppose that it should go to those writers from whom, whatever their difficulty, we hear the unmistakable note of seriousness—a note which, when we hear it, should suggest to us that those who sound it are not devoting their lives to committing literary suicide.

It would be futile to offer a diagnosis which would go counter to the one of literary snobbery and irresponsibility, a diagnosis which would undertake, perhaps, to throw the blame for the cultural situation upon the quality of the education of our educated class, or upon the political intelligence of this class. The situation is too complex and too important for so merely contentious a procedure. Neither blame nor flattery

can do anything to close the breach that I have described.

But to organize a new union between our political ideas and our imagination—in all our cultural purview there is no work more necessary. It is to this work that *Partisan Review* has devoted itself for more than a decade.

It is of some importance that *Partisan Review* began its career as an organ which, in the cultural field, was devoted to the interests of the Communist Party. Considering it for the moment quite apart from politics, the cultural program of the Communist Party in this country has, more than any other single intellectual factor, given the license to that divorce between politics and the imagination of which I have spoken. Basing itself on a great act of mind and on a great faith in mind, it has succeeded in rationalizing intellectual limitation and has, in twenty years, produced not a single work of distinction or even of high respectability. After *Partisan Review* had broken with the Communist Party, some large part of its own intellectual vitality came from its years of conflict with Communist culture at a time when our educated class, in its guilt and confusion, was inclined to accept in serious good faith the cultural leadership of the Party. In recent years the political intensity of *Partisan Review* has somewhat diminished, yet its political character remains.

As it should remain, because our fate, for better or worse, is political. It is therefore not a happy fate, even if it has an heroic sound, but there is no escape from it, and the only possibility of enduring it is to force into our definition of politics every human activity and every subtlety of every human activity. There are manifest dangers in doing this, but greater dangers in not doing it. Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind that we will not like. *Partisan Review* has conceived its particular function to be the making of this necessary insistence, and within its matrix of politics it has wished to accommodate the old and the new, the traditional

and the experimental, the religious and the positivistic, the hopeful and the despairing. In its implicit effort to bring about the union of the political idea with the imagination, it has drawn on a wider range of human interests and personality than any other cultural periodical of our time. And yet it has its own clear unity: it is the unity conferred on diversity by intelligence and imagination.

But if we grant the importance of the work, we are bound to ask how effectively it can be carried out by a magazine of this kind and of similar circulation. We are dealing again with power. The question of power has not always preoccupied literature. And ideally it is not the question which should first come to mind in thinking about literature. Quality is the first, and perhaps should be the only, consideration. But in our situation today, when we think of quality, we must ask what chance a particular quality has to survive, and how it can be a force to act in its own defense and in the defense of those social circumstances which will permit it to establish and propagate itself in the world. This is not a desirable state of affairs. "Art is a weapon" and "Ideas are weapons" were phrases that a few years ago had a wide and happy currency; and sometimes, as we look at the necessities of our life, we have the sense that the weapon metaphor all too ruthlessly advances—food is now a weapon, sleep and love will soon be weapons, and our final slogan perhaps will be, "Life is a weapon." And yet the question of power is forced upon us.

At least let us not fall into the temptations it always offers, of grossness and crudeness. The critics to whom I have referred yield to these temptations when they denounce the coterie and the writer who does not write for "the many." The matter is not so simple as these earnest minds would have it. From the democratic point of view, we must say that in a true democracy nothing should be done for the people. The writer who defines his audience by its limitations is indulging in the unforgivable arrogance. The writer must define his audience by its abilities,

by its perfections, so far as he is gifted to conceive them. He does well, if he cannot see his right audience within immediate reach of his voice, to direct his words to his spiritual ancestors, or to posterity, or even, if need be, to a coterie. The writer serves his daemon and his subject. And the democracy that does not know that the daemon and the subject must be served is not, in any ideal sense of the word, a democracy at all.

The word coterie should not frighten us too much. Neither should it charm us too much; writing for a small group does not insure integrity any more than writing for the many; the coterie can corrupt as surely, and sometimes as quickly, as the big advertising appropriation. But the smallness of the coterie does not limit the "human" quality of the work. Some coterie authors will no doubt always be difficult and special, like Donne and Hopkins; but this says nothing of their humanity. The populist critics seem to deny the possibility of broad humanity to those who do not have a large audience in mind, yet the writers they would cite as exemplifying breadth of humanity did not themselves feel that the effect of their imagination depended on the size of their audience. "Very bookish, this housebred man. His work smells of the literary coterie"—this is T. E. Shaw's opinion of the author of the *Odyssey*. Chaucer wrote for a small court group; Shakespeare, as his sonnets show, had something of the aspect of the coterie poet; Milton was content that his audience be few, although he insisted that it be fit. The Romanticists wrote for a handful while the nation sneered. Dostoevski wrote for a journal that considered that it was doing well when its subscribers numbered four thousand. And our Whitman, now the often unread symbol of the democratic life, was through most of his career the poet of what was even less than a coterie.

This stale argument should not have to be offered at all, and it is a grim portent of our cultural situation that, in the name of democracy, critics should dare attempt to make it the sign of a poet's shame that he is not widely read.

When we try to estimate the power of literature, we must not be misled by the fancy pictures of history. Now and then periods do occur when the best literature overflows its usual narrow bounds and reaches a large mass of the people. Athens had such a period and we honor it for that. The nineteenth century also had this kind of overflowing. It is what we must always hope for and work for. But in actual fact the occasions are rare when the best literature becomes, as it were, the folk literature, and generally speaking literature has always been carried on within small limits and under great difficulties. Most people do not like the loneliness and the physical quiescence of the activity of contemplation, and many do not have the time or the spirit left for it. But whenever it becomes a question of measuring the power of literature, Shelley's old comment recurs, and "it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world" if literature did not continue in existence with its appeal to limited groups, keeping the road open.

This does not answer the question of a period like ours when a kind of mechanical literacy is spreading more and more, when more and more people insist, as they should, on an equality of cultural status and are in danger of being drawn to what was called by Tocqueville, who saw the situation in detail a century ago, the "hypocrisy of luxury," the satisfaction with the thing that looks like the real thing but is not the real thing. A magazine with six thousand readers cannot seem very powerful here, and yet to rest with this judgment would be to yield far too easily to the temptations of grossness and crudeness which appear whenever the question of power is raised. We must take into account what would be our moral and political condition if the impulse which such a magazine represents did not exist, the impulse to make sure that the daemon and the subject are served, the impulse to insist that the activity of politics be united with the imagination under the aspect of mind.