helicon

• 1953

rhode island college of education

providence

june 1953

"from *helicon*'s harmonious springs
a thousand rills their mazy progress take"
–thomas gray

helicon 1953
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helicon 1953
a note from the editor

The editor wishes to express his thanks to the staff and to the advisor for their help and advice in the preparation of this year's edition of the magazine. He wishes also to thank the two of his friends who helped in the design of the cover and title page. Finally he wishes to thank all who submitted manuscripts for consideration.

His one regret cannot, however, go unmentioned. He feels that there should have been more manuscripts submitted. Surely there are many at the College who have the ability to write who did not submit manuscripts this year. The editor sincerely hopes that next year the indifference or the pressure of other activities which caused this dearth of material will have passed.

p. b. w.

helicon 1953

a note on the contributors

lucretia atwater, a senior kindergarten major, appeared in *Helicon* 1952 with two poems and served on its staff.

carol warner is a sophomore elementary major who makes her first *Helicon* appearance this year.

joan duval, a junior elementary major, appears in *Helicon* for the third successive year.

joan stoddard, a senior special, appeared in *Helicon* 1952 with two poems and in *Helicon* 1951 with a short story.

palmer wald, a senior English-social studies major and editor of *Helicon* 1953, appeared in *Helicon* 1952 with another *Fragment* and in *Helicon* 1951 with two poems.

gene gardiner and *edward morgan* are two students at the College of whom nothing is known.

* * *

The editor is pleased to announce the award of two cash prizes, one to Lucretia Atwater for her poem, *Psalm: Easter* 1953, and one to Carol Warner for her story, *Warm in Her Heart.*

helicon 1953

table of contents

psalm: easter 1953

by lucretia atwater

Sing a Song of Spring!
A time of damp shadows and soggy dreams
that cannot even crumble
A time of dayless weeks comprised
of only hours.
Sing a song of spring!
A grayish-mauve time of tentative smiles
and shabby grins.

A red pill at breakfast
A pink one at bedtime
Mumble your prayers to a last-resort God

Sing a Song of Spring!
A time when sleep brings only waking
When to demanding dawn sleep is a Bailey bridge between wakings
When inner eyes are seared with guilty introspection.
Sing a song of spring!
A time of moth-proofed woolens stored in chests
A time of the storing and brushing of spirits.

A red pill at breakfast
A pink one at bedtime
Mumble your prayers to a last-resort God
Perhaps he will understand

Sing a song of spring!
Sing, for it really may be spring
(the stench of eggs is strong).
It really may be spring after all.
That may be the sun which slithers
through the cocker spaniel's honeyed hairs.

A red pill at breakfast
A pink one at bedtime
Mumble your prayers to a last-resort God
Perhaps he will understand
Yes, he will understand
Golgotha is a good place for understanding and pity

warm in her heart

by carol warner

. . . Will arrive tomorrow on the 4.20. Please meet me . . .

The wind-blown tree scratched at the window pane and made strange reaching fingers that jumped in and out of the string-like path made by the fading moonlight. Bits of pictures and far away and gone conversation all running together kept creeping into the girl's mind. The boy was coming home. The girl could not sleep.

* * *

The river pushed its way slowly between a wooded bank and a rise of white sand and gray rock. It slipped over mossy stones and fallen trees, stopping to whirl around several times between a triangle of black rocks. And then it continued its long, lazy journey around the bend — then straight, around another curve in the bank, and then — where? The girl sat with her back to the sun and let the yellow-white puffs of river foam curl around and cling to her ankles. A fallen pebble made silver rings on the green surface, and tiny beads of water turned black as soon as they touched her blue jeans. The boy on the bank rolled over and rested his chin on his elbow. The boy smiled and the girl smiled back. Everything was quiet.

* * *

Pink and white and yellow and blue turned and whirled, up and down, around and around, first quickly, then slowly. Dark forms and floating skirts moved with the music, blending into the black corners and out again. Heads bobbed and faces smiled. The girl wore pink, and the sweetness of a kiss was still warm on her lips.

* * *

All the pent-up anger inside her had spilled out, pouring itself all over the girl and boy. And the boy's face was like a child's in its hurt. They had been such cruel words. Why had she said them? Her lips trembled. The boy held the girl close, and all the tears ran together.

* * *

The heat from the tiny kitchen and the odor of food permeated the whole house. The pressure cooker warned that the vegetables were done, and the clock over the oven clicked that the roast was ready . . . The boy winked and smiled, and the girl knew that the apple pie had been a success.

The boy was on his hands and knees, and the two small girls laughed their childish joy as they clambered over him. It was snowing outside. The dinner was still warm in the bellies of the people inside. Happiness and love were warm in the girl's heart.

* * *

The burning sun of August was outside. The heat of the bodies mingled with the coolness of the stone walls was inside. She was just one of the squirming people. She pushed as they pushed; she moved as they moved. She could see the boy just ahead of her, and followed. The train was getting ready to leave . . . on track four. The sound of it became greater and greater, pounding and smashing in her ears and veins. The roaring was all around them now, and there were only two people in all that crowd . . . on track four. The boy smiled nervously and squeezed the girl's hand . . . on track four.

* * *

August 20, 1951 . . . miss you very much . . .
September 9, 1951 . . . and have a nice time at college . . .
November 20, 1951 . . . Happy Birthday . . .
December 23, 1951 . . . Merry Christmas, and I miss you very much . . .

Always the letters came. And when she read them time and distance did not exist, and for just a brief part of each day life was not a waste of feeling and breath and words and memories.

* * *

The late morning sun made yellow patches on the walls and floor, and the white blossoms of the wind-blown tree snuggled in the corners of the window sill. The girl rolled over and blinked the sleepiness from her eyes.

The girl stood against the building, her eyes closed to shut out the jabbing rays of the late afternoon sun. The wall felt warm against her back. The girl said the boy's name to herself, and her body gave an uncontrollable start. The girl felt the boy's nearness — and now he was very close. She opened her eyes. The boy smiled. "You've got a sun burn."

The boy had come home. The sweetness of a kiss was still warm on her lips, and love and this day were warm in her heart.

spring song

by joan duval

It's spring, they said, why don't you turn over a new leaf?
So I did. Only to find there my old self wrapped in a cocoon.

three poems
by joan stoddard

observation

Green spring lit up by light bulbs
On a lilac city sky:
The small tight fertile buds
In tentative protrusion offer challenge,
Violent in contrast to the tender trees
And one to which
The night-worn walker must reply.

having worn a coat

Having worn a coat One
expects to be warm
And sitting in the sun
a cold draft wetting
    clammily
        the skin
is felt unwelcome
Yet
in autumn When the wind
is icy
Cutting through some thin
and unpremeditated garment
We are unastonished and
the body opens
Springlike
    letting the
Blown scourge bless, the
Fresh cold
Cut
and Cleanse.

two gulls

Two gulls come gliding in across the moon
Alighting for an instant on the paling sky;
Turning, they wing a calm farewell to night
And seaward sweep toward the sun:
        Day has begun
And sounds of man begin to rend the air.

Beyond mute huddled rooftops of the city
Battlements of eloquence rise mistily
Through the fogs of progress, productivity,
And Mrs. Cinner washes dishes in a stopped-up sink.
Take two aspirins upon arising and
You'll feel good all day long.

Oh, gulp those aspirins, swill that beer,
And listen to the music of the song I hear.

The midday heat releases mingled shoppers,
Straining on the leash, and ulcerated
Moles who live in files, to struggle
At the feedbox, eating budgets with
Their colored crusts; battlements of eloquence
Remain with empty aisles.

Oh, gulp those aspirins, swill that beer,
And listen to the music of the song I hear.

The whistle blows relief; productivity
In grateful tension ceases; Mr. Cinner
Races to the haven of a pub. In faint
Remembrance of a lonely midnight peace
He numbly crosses elbows with the faces
That he knows and does not know.

The sun departs; two gulls
Swing over the sad sky
That, fevered by its struggle to retain the light,
At last surrenders to the black and lonely
Rooftops of the night.

two fragments

by palmer wald

one

We had started at midday but now the long transparent darkness kept us waiting. We could feel the many-fingered tensions of the midnight afternoon close about us, bringing to our senses the inevitable despair and hopelessness as we took each step in that long minute of waiting.

Yet we could not understand or realize that here the reasons for the rains, the snows, the reasons for the terrible accents of the noontime suns and all the rest had at last at midnight been disclosed before our disbelieving eyes. And then we heard and saw the people crowding round the burning gates of cities, crying to possess the remnants of the bodies they had left behind.

We fled, and went a long long way before we found a place to rest. And even then the tea and toast they served us wasn't much: the toast was burnt, the tea lukewarm and bitter. And we could hear still the voices in the distance raised in mockheroic anger.

two

After we had spent a dozen nights and days on the parkbenches at the edge of the cavernous forest of time, we decided to visit finally the purple land across the sea — the land whose prophets shouted hymns to donkeys, whose king drank cocktails. We did not know then how this king became a king.

We left at ten o'clock. Arriving, we unpacked our bags sent over by the messenger who had arranged the journey. His life was worthless; so we killed him, stuffing in his hand a coin.

And then we called the girls, inviting them for coffee. We had not seen them for a hundred years, perhaps a thousand, but still they were the same. When we opened up the door to let them in, the only thing we saw was dust.

We left this land because we were afraid of human dust. We sailed and reached another land whose prophets had been hanged, whose king drank goatsmilk.

We know no one in this land. We knew only ourselves, and finding that our journey was complete we set up all our boxes in the main street and shouted to the people passing by to buy from us the answers to the questions that they asked. We earned perhaps a dollar and a half.

Riding round in circles, we decided that the sea should be our home.

critical concepts in literature

by gene gardiner

one

Before suggesting any critical standards in literature, it is necessary to suggest what we may expect the writer to accomplish, to define the goal of literature. No critic, however, can complacently sit and list the functions of art in society satisfactorily, for art is so complex and has so many varying effects depending upon the individual and the times that a subjective pigeonholing by a single biased critic will never have universal application.

In the times of the Greek classicists, for instance, literary art served as a mental-emotional catharsis, a sort of social laxative. In the Anglo-Saxon period, the literature glorified the social ideals of the time, exalting the semi-mythological hero. The literature of the Middle Ages further departed from the secular and became the vehicle for the teachings of the church. Later romantic literature investigated man far in advance of the scientific psychologists, analyzing his emotions in love, his reactions in social situations. The nineteenth and twentieth century realists utilized literature as propaganda for economic and social amelioration.

These foregoing blatant generalizations prove only one thing: that the uses of literature are many. The question arises, however, is there not a constant identifying artistic function which will differentiate literature from a mere accumulation of words? I think there is; that differentiation lies in the effect of literature upon the individual, which is similar to the effects of the other arts, of painting and music. This effect may be expressed as a "pure identification with the moment."

In order to explain this phrase it is necessary to consider man's development, both racial and individual. For the sake of brevity, I can express here only my conclusions and not the reasoning which produced them. . . . There was, then, in the distant past, a period during which man as we know him developed from his animal ancestors. Certain philosophers maintain that man is distinguished from the animal by his possession of a "soul." This opinion is quite tenable if the soul is defined as the total energies of man: his superior mental and physical coordination together with his resultingly more complex emotions.

When man's soul had developed to the stage at which he no longer reacted immediately and instinctively to a given situation but exploited time for his own profit, he removed himself from immediate identification with the environment, and conceived of himself as a separate entity, an existent, with the capacity to plan to his own advantage. In thinking in terms of past and future, man lost his identification with the moment. Since complete oneness with each single moment is the only path to oneness with the eternal flux of life, man has thus estranged himself from the security and harmony of belonging to the universe. It is the function of art to return man to this oneness and belonging for which he subconsciously longs.

One word in the statement made above (art affects a pure identification with the moment) is as yet unexplained. The word "pure" is vitally important here, and is necessitated by the individual complexity of man. From birth each individual is possessed of two basically conflicting desires: the desire to return to the peace of the womb and the desire to live actively and satisfyingly. Upon this basic conflict are piled countless other conflicts derived from the interaction of the secondary human drives, such as the needs for security and for social acceptance, as apart from the primary physiological drives of hunger, procreation, and physical comfort. Because of these many conflicts, human experience is seldom "pure"; every reaction to any given stimulus is necessarily diluted or adulterated by simultaneous or residual reactions to other stimuli. The artist seeks to distill the emotional and intellectual reactions of the individual so that he may experience the created situation wholly, completely, "purely."

Thus we may say that art affects a "pure identification with the moment." The next section of this paper will deal much more practically with the means by which the artist achieves this goal. Before continuing, however, I shall list several quotations which may lend further insight into this matter of literature.

What happens [to the artist] is a continual surrender of himself to something which is more valuable. The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality (T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*).

When man puts his head out of the stream of time he becomes self-conscious. And with self-consciousness comes arrest, fixation, symbolized so vividly by the myth of Narcissus. The worm in the apple of human existence is self-consciousness. It steals over the face of life like an intruder. Seen through the mirror everything becomes the background of the ego. The seers, the mystics, the visionaries, [the creative artists], smash the mirror again and again. They restore man to the primordial flux, they put him back in the stream like a fisherman emptying his net. (Paul Claudel, *Paean of Death*).

[We need] to revert to simple animal sense . . . We need the feeling, in our bones, of the animal excellence of here-and-now; and it can lead us, by a psychic sensuous insight, to feel serenely the sense of the ever-continuum of life. (Alan Devoe, *Speaking of Animals*).

For what is God, but beauty? And what is beauty, but the harmonious mingling of the individual with the stream of time and place that we call "universe" in the spatial sense and "eternity" in the temporal sense and "perfection" in the total sense? And what is art, but the pursuit of beauty through love? (the author).

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away? (Luke 9:24-25).

two

The type of literature which accomplishes this "psychic sensuous insight" and affords the reader a "pure identification with the moment" can be justly termed pure literature. Literature of this nature must penetrate the unconscious, and, by means of word associations and symbolic meanings, reach that sense of the infinite which is buried deep within the individual. In doing so, it will brighten for the reader that which Saint Augustine said "plays before my Soul and is as a light dancing in front of it; were this brought to steadiness and perfection in me it would surely be eternal life." (Perhaps it would be death?) At any rate, pure literature reaches the most hidden depths and means something different to every individual.

It is well enough to say what literature does, but the problem is to discover how literature does it: what makes a piece of writing into a work of art? My suggestions are first, a love for life; then, four standards of competency. It must be stressed that this "love for life" does not necessarily imply an affirmation or an outlook of optimism. J. Donald Adams, in his critical work, *The Shape of Books to Come,* insists that literature must have affirmative social value and virtually discards writers like Joyce, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald because of their negative attitudes toward contemporary society and the accepted social mores. A statement made by John Aldridge in his book of criticism, *After the Lost Generation,* is an excellent rebuttal:

It is true today that people everywhere are asking to be reassured and comforted. It is also true that in the last several years no work of fiction of genuine quality has been able to do either. That fact may indicate not only that a successful affirmative writing cannot be produced without affirmative experience but that the values which most people wish to see affirmed are really false and unworthy. It seems to be that the best literature in America will continue to be negative so long as the country's values are such that no writer of honesty or insight can possibly take them seriously.

No, in requiring "love" in the creation of literature I do not mean approval or affirmation, for we can be disgusted with that which we love. Nietzsche has expressed what I mean: "Of all writings I love only those which the writer writeth with his blood. Write in blood, and thou shalt learn that blood is spirit."

Four standards of competency carry this love, or more accurately, life-force, through to artistic fruition. They are competencies in content, presentation, diction, and suggestivity. The first, *content,* is the most obvious. The writer must distill experience so that, through selection of detail, the impact of a novel, short story, or poem expresses the essence of his intention to the reader. The vehicle must satisfy the idea, and the characterization and situation carry out the theme. Take, for example, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist;* Joyce wishes to describe the process of a young man's maturing and his development as an artist; for this almost classic theme he found a parallel and background in the classical Icarus myth. In contrast, Shirley Jackson's expression of contemporary man's inhumanity to man required a more original plot: the casual cruelty of "The Lottery" testifies to its effectiveness. Finally, T. S. Eliot, in his "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," wishes to express the futility of existence in lives like Mr. Prufrock's; in his tale of half-deserted streets, one-night cheap hotels, women talking of Michelangelo, toast and tea, and coffee spoons — in this tale of indecisions, Eliot has done just that.

So much for content in general, but the selection of details from the general scene to achieve a purity of mood and to convey the theme is another important matter. "A Rose for Emily," by William Falkner, is a masterpiece of selection. Notice, for instance, these phrases building a picture of genteel respectability: "a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument," "those august names" (whom Miss Emily had gone to join), "a tradition." Then, gradually, Falkner allows hints of decay, of something not quite right, to creep into the narrative: "a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs," "so they were not surprised when the smell developed," "even with insanity in the family," "she told them that her father was not dead" (he was), "like when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic." Next Falkner reveals casually that it was during the few months after Miss Emily's lover had disappeared that lime was sprinkled to eliminate the smell emanating from her house. He tells us that her hair turned pepper-and-salt iron-gray *during the next few years.* In the last sentence we are told graphically: "leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of

iron-gray hair." All this is what I mean by selection of detail. In "A Rose for Emily," by perfect timing and revelation of detail, Falkner prepares us for his forceful and quite horrible climax.

Thus we have content (in which category I have arbitrarily included intent or theme). The second consideration is the *presentation* of this material: the type of writing and techniques to be used. The author decides whether he will present the material as fact or as fiction, in prose or in verse. Philip Wylie's *Opus* 21, for instance, would probably have been much more effective as a philosophical discussion, since the plot of the novel was reduced to little more than a framework upon which he draped his opinions; in the form of a discourse, however, it would not have reached the audience for whom Wylie intended it.

Once the type of literature has been determined, the author develops a technique which will present his content with the most force and immediacy. Whether he will limit his scope to surface reality, whether he will resort to symbolism or allegory, depends entirely upon the subject matter and the effect desired. William Saroyan, writing *Tracy's Tiger,* chose the best possible technique to exploit his particular theme: he chose allegory. As a sort of horizontally extended symbolism, the use of allegory enabled Saroyan to personify human qualities like love and fear and understanding in the characters who played their parts in his child-like tale — a tale which becomes meaningful when the reader looks below the surface of personalities to find the secret that is hidden there.

Conrad Aiken uses symbolism, the vertical counterpart of allegory, most effectively in "Silent Snow, Secret Snow." Simple objects become vitally meaningful in this short story: the snow, symbolizing the boy's introverted dream world; the postman, symbolizing external reality; the boy's mother, symbolizing the necessity to meet reality. Aiken also uses the stream of consciousness to express changes in the boy's personality. His first experience with the snow becomes a precious and secret possession like "a few tiny gold links found trodden out of shape on the path in the park"; and the boy's careful observation of externalities as he comes home from school indicates that he has not yet given up reality: "the little hard green winter-buds of lilac, on gray stems, sheathed and fat; other branches very thin and fine and black and desiccated."

Merging into the divisions of content and presentation is the third necessary competency — *diction.* First and most obviously, the language must be appropriate for the subject. James Jones, in spite of the great

criticism he received on *From Here to Eternity,* nevertheless adapted language skillfully to the life he portrayed. English was mutilated when a character would normally mutilate it; in sections of prose which approach poetry, Jones shows beautiful virtuosity in the use of words. Another master of effective word usage is E. B. White. In "The Door," the confusion of his single character is reflected in the long and confused sentence patterns, repeated loose sentences hooked hopelessly together with "and's," piling confusion upon confusion, going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. The repetition of word fragments like "flex" and "oid" and "sani" and "duro" express the synthetic age in which we live, while constant reference to the rat experiment (with the disappointing door) intensifies the blocked, frustrated feeling for which Mr. White aimed.

There is an even greater possibility for making words count in poetry. As MacLeish said, a poem can *be* and not just mean. The poem must capture the reader's mind and emotions completely so that he lives the situation which it creates in the moment of reading. The poem "Rain" by William Carlos Williams is an excellent example. In "Rain" Mr. Williams returns the reader gently to the rare sensation of a flowing irrational love that comes only when we sit and wait. In long, unbroken, but discontinuous sentences, without the use of logic and reaching intensity by loose associations, Williams makes us feel the aimlessness of this love — falling endlessly, repetitiously, unchoosingly . . .

so spreads
the words
far apart to let in
her love

By the actual spacing Williams intensifies and materializes his meaning. Apart from typographical twists, Williams achieves his results through word associations:

priceless dry rooms . . . There . . . fine/ metalware/ woven stuffs—/ all the whorishness/ of our/ delight/ sees/ from its window/ the spring wash/ of your love/ the falling/ rain . . . So my life is spent/ to keep out love . . . the helpless waves—/ unworldly love that has no hope/ of the world/ and that/ cannot change the world/ to its delight . . . and nothing/ comes of it but love/ following/ and falling endlessly/ from/ her thoughts.

From a discussion of Williams' poetry, we can easily progress into a consideration of the fourth artistic requirement — that of *suggestivity,* for Williams' effect depends largley upon what he leaves the reader to create for himself. Suggestivity depends upon the skill of the artist in using words and symbols which can create, because of their connotations, emotional and intellectual responses in the reader; words which are

more vivid than ordinary words; and symbols which enable the reader to recreate for himself an experience similar in essence to that created by the artist. There is a limit to what the reader can be expected to understand of the writer's personal symbolism, however, and this limit depends upon the experience of the reader. I am not one of the school of thinkers who throw James Joyce into the literary waste-basket because his *Ulysses* does not communicate with the mass of readers. I believe that a work of art is valid so long as it communicates the artist's intention to *one* other person. It becomes obvious, however, that the poet who wishes to communicate with a certain number of readers must be at least practically understandable in his symbolism . . . Compare this section of a personal associational poem, "Counter," by Henri Michaux, with the one which follows it:

I will build you a city out of rags, I say!
I will build you, without blueprint or cement,
A building which you will not destroy,
And which a kind of foaming evidence
Will support and swell, which will come to
bray in your nose,
And in the frozen nose of all your Parthenons,
your Arabian arts, and your Mings.

* * *

what if a much of a which of a wind
gives the truth to summer's lie;
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
and yanks immortal stars awry?
Blow king to beggar and queen to seem
(blow friend to fiend: blow space to time)
— when skies are hanged and the oceans drowned,
the single secret will still be man.
(from "What if a Much of a Which of a Wind" by
e e cummings)

My point in this comparison is merely that at first contact, the second selection is effective for a greater group of readers, because the word-pictures used are of a more universal nature and therefore express more immediately the writer's intention.

Just as important as the suggestivity of words is the suggestivity of ideas. Because the latter was lacking in *Reflections in a Golden Eye,* Carson McCullers failed to produce a work of art. Everything Miss McCullers had to say was printed on the page — in literature that cannot be. The reader must be able to take from the artist the seed of what will become his own creation, fulfilling something within himself by creating

beauty within himself to the exclusion of all other conflicting thoughts and emotions. Robert Frost is a master of this type of writing:

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain — and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat.
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

And so we have gone the circle; we have split the unity into its elements. It is the genius of the artist which combines the elements into a work of art, giving us a "psychic sensuous insight" with his woven words, plunging us into "a pure identification with the moment." The meaning, the value of it all? . . . In the words of Walter Mehring:

If there is anything at all worth while in our existence, it is falling in love; and if there is any goal left, that goal is falling in love with beauty. If there is any purpose at all to our fever and fretting, it is to be fruitful, that is, creative — to increase and multiply, not the majorities or the industries, but ourselves alone. And if all our toil and travail is still rewarding, the reward is to go to bed with one's love, with one's dream, with one's indefinite yearning (l'Indecis), in order to mate it to the exact expression (le Precis); to touch and be touched, to enjoy and ejaculate, to perpetuate the orgasm, for art is . . . the sign of infinity in the mathematics of sensuality.

Why a marriage of two sounds — a rhyme, an assonance, a counterpoint — is artistically perfect, can no more be explained in general terms than the fact that one loves God, the king, the fatherland or the people above all else. One wants to have for oneself what all crave: beauty, which is an image derived as much from one's own eternal wish-dream as from contemporary fashion.

the new fiction: the search for self

by edward morgan

If contemporary novelists have in their novels chosen to withdraw from the activity and hubbub of the so-called civilized world to a smaller physical environment, there is, it seems to me, a logical reason. We have had in American fiction novels whose subject has been the greed of capitalism, or the consequence of war, or the race problem, or the divorce problem, or, indeed, social problems of every kind. These novels, realistic and naturalistic for the most part, such works as *An American Tragedy, Studs Lonigan, U.S.A., Babbitt, The Naked and the Dead,* and so forth, have a definite place in American literature. They mirror, discuss, approve, or condemn some part of the overall social structure of contemporary America. Their writers — Dreiser, Farrell, Dos Passos, Lewis, Mailer — have searched for the cause of the general social *malaise* and have found no cure. They have toyed with socialism and with communism. They have condemned "the system," they have blamed "capital." In short, they have treated the problem as primarily a social one with social causes and with a potential social cure. Reform society itself, they seem to tell us, and all will be well.

The newer novelists, such young men as Paul Bowles, Truman Capote, Frederick Buechner, Robie Macauley, face, it seems to me, the same problem: a general social *malaise,* which has manifested itself in two world wars, one grand economic depression, and countless lesser eruptions. But rather than treat it as an exclusively social problem as their predecessors did, they search for the cause and the cure in what I believe to be the proper place: the human spirit.

Modern man has lost himself. He knows neither where he is going nor where he has been. He is aware of deficiencies in the social structure; he is aware of inadequacies in what I might call the overall or universal spirit. He does not — as we have been told over and over again — espouse causes, sign petitions, or march on the White House. He is, generally speaking, silent.

All that is only partly so. Actually the four novelists I mentioned earlier — Bowles, Capote, Buechner, Macauley — have spoken — and eloquently, I believe — for an awakening of the one facet of human existence which is immortal. "I decline," said William Falkner in 1950,

"to accept the end of man . . . I believe that man will not only endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write of these things." Now that is unquestionably true. Had man no soul, there would be no need for the writer to spend weary hours writing. Had man no soul, the poet's efforts would be in vain. Had man no soul, the artist would do better to find a well-paying job and cease worrying about the future of man. But man does have a soul and thus the artist's obligation exists and is clear.

Before the writer can write about the soul, however, he must find it. That may sound vague and ludicrous. But the four novelists I mentioned have gone along together on a search which is the same as that advised by Socrates: *Know thyself.* The search of the modern novelist, of the so-called "new" novelist, is *the search for self.* It is no wonder, then, that, as Malcolm Cowley observes "the setting [of the new fiction] is seldom one of the centres where policy decisions are made; it is never Capitol Hill or the Pentagon or the board room of any corporation." It is no wonder that "instead of political or social subjects the new fiction has themes that are taken from individual lives."

The subject of the new fiction is the fate of man; its setting is the spirit of man; its theme is the search for self. The real centre where decisions are made is the human spirit; the true theme of self discovery can come only from individual lives.

The new novelists do not write panoramic novels attempting to portray the entire life of an individual. They choose instead, and rightly I believe, to take the human being at a point of crisis, at a point of decision — the adolescent period (in Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* or *The Grass Harp,* for example, or in Bowles' story "Pages from Cold Point") or at a time of marital difficulty (in Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* or in Macauley's *The Disguises of Love*) or at the time of some other personal crisis (in Buechner's *A Long Day's Dying,* for example) — and thereby to dramatize the essential search for self. The protagonist progresses; he makes a decision; he grows in stature. But his journey is not ended there: it has only begun. Having discovered the self, the protagonist must continue, but with a new awareness and with a new purpose. It is at the point of self discovery, at the point of self awareness, that the novelist usually leaves us.

If we are to search for more external meanings in the often subconscious action of the new fiction than those I have already mentioned, we might compare the point of crisis of the protagonist with the point of crisis of the world today. For the world is certainly at a point of crisis in some ways comparable to that of the adolescent.

All in the new fiction cannot, of course, be condoned. In some cases, for example, notably in Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and in Buechner's *A Long Day's Dying,* there is an overemphasis on style. The symbolism of some of the novels is sometimes too vague, the characters sometimes lifeless, symbols merely and not true human beings.

But my point, I trust, is clear. Generally speaking, the new fiction is successful. Its writers are valuable commentators on that one phase of human life which is important beyond all others, more important than the wars, the economics, the murders, and the lusts, for it is the place where war and lust as well as art and peace have their origins: the human soul.

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