

at Harvard—his alma mater—be burned down!

But that was not the prevailing rhetoric in 1929, that blessed year when Dos (as his friends called him) was maturing as a writer with *42nd Parallel*. It was a year in which Ring Lardner's mastery of the short story was being seriously discussed even among the *literati*; when Hemingway was producing his best shorter works (perhaps indebted to Lardner, although he probably didn't know it); when Dos Passos was gasping his last revolutionary breath with *Airways, Inc.*, a noisy dramatic interlude on Grove Street which Edmund Wilson treated more kindly than it deserved. It was also the year when F. Scott Fitzgerald—his reputation established with *Gatsby*—tried his hand at drayma with *The Vegetable*, produced at the Cherry Lane Theatre in a corner of Greenwich Village. It told the story of a postal clerk who dreams he is President of the United States, only to find himself beset by make-believe problems that would haunt the life of a wide-awake president forty years later. Who says life doesn't imitate art?

But 1929 was not all cakes and ale; there was some sorrow mixed with the joy. It was the year when (on October 24) Wall Street "laid an egg," as *Variety* put it. But I knew *that* street only from a reading of populist literature; it did not touch my life. Sadly, my street—Fourteenth Street—was undergoing a transformation, was a victim to the bitch-goddess Progress. Where had stood the magnificent Academy of Music there was now looming before us the stone face of the future Con Ed building with its post-medieval clocktower hovering over the area.

But Luchow's was (and still is) across the street; Luchow's, where the Wurzberger really flowed; where Mencken and Nathan (and other celebrities from the political and literary life of the city) dined on a Sunday evening; Luchow's an emporium of *Gemut-*

lichkeit, where a string quartet sent forth Viennese melodies which, on a cold clear night, could be heard at the Crusader Cafeteria directly across the street where we held forth late into the early hours arguing the problems of the world, most of them still unsolved, dammit! But we never lost our sense of fun, or our insatiable curiosity for things stored away in books and in other people's minds. For that a post-graduate course was provided by the "lions" of the Public Library on Fifth Avenue (not the stone effigies guarding the entrance) who held forth on almost every subject under the sun with an authority that defied the scholarship of the ivied academies.

Here "Whitehead," a gentle panhandler would teach us the wisdom of the philosophy of his namesake, as well as the epistemology of Vahinger's *As If*. "Whitehead" was at his best on a late Sunday afternoon after he got through putting the bite on the princes of the Church as they left St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, he telling them in Latin (out of Aquinas) the meaning of holy charity which usually netted him a saw-buck which (even in those pre-Depression days) was a lot of bucks. Or we would challenge the Schaeffer Brothers to uphold their defense of Spinoza as the greatest philosopher of all times. But best of all was Leon Samson who could demolish with an epigram the most precious nostrums then circulating among the intelligentsia.

Although he was probably the only genius American Marxism has so far produced (he had nothing but contempt for the contemporary collectivisms that went under the names of Communism, Socialism, Stalinism, Lovestonism, and Trotskyism), he found the prevailing Liberalism in thought even more appalling. No one mocked the philosophy of Pragmatism with more telling effect than did Samson. And when he took after the Behaviorists, he didn't waste time on the pygmies (thus he

surely would have regarded Dr. Skinner), but he took on John B. Watson, the daddy of the movement, whom he polished off with this cutting remark (heard in a Labor Temple lecture in 1929): "Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I am.' Watson says, 'There are white rats, therefore I don't think.'" After allowing a moment for this to sink in, he added with a flourish: "How long will it take the followers of a thoughtless psychology to learn the difference between a man and a rat?"

Another time he took on the great William James whom he quoted from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as having said: "We and God have a business with each other . . . we are saved from wrongness by making proper connections with the higher powers." To which Samson retorted: "Only in a nation of upstarts, where 'proper connections' with the 'higher powers' are daily made between man and man, can its foremost philosopher democratically slap God on the back in the manner of a ward politician."

After a Labor Temple (or Library) session we would often go down to our favorite Village restaurant (The Black Rabbit) for stimulating conversation fueled by a Prohibition libation called a "punchino," a concoction made up of equal parts of black coffee and ether (or so we were told). We did not go there to satisfy a "thirst," that we did on Second Avenue where we imbibed a confection known as an "egg-cream," a delicacy that has gone out of the life of the City much as the joy went out of the booze in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*.

This refreshment, however, we took most often after a visit to Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre where among its more glorious moments, I once saw the only production in this country of a play by Lope de Vega (*The Gardner's Dog*)—and what a magnificent spectacle it was. But that part of my memory must be reserved for another—more reverential—occasion. □

Henry Regnery

The Freedom to Read

In the long fight against censorship which culminated in the Supreme Court decisions that virtually eliminated any effective control over what may be printed or distributed, the book publishers, through their association, played a leading part. If a dealer in obscene books or magazines in New York or a small town in Ohio was brought into court, the Association of American Publishers, along with the Civil Liberties Union, could be counted on to help in his defense. The Association, it might be noted, maintains a group called the Right to Read Committee which acts as a special guardian, so to speak, of the rights of publishers and distributors to handle any sort of book they feel they can sell. Having attained complete permissiveness, a state of affairs in which the works of the Marquis de Sade have become as readily available as those of Shakespeare, and the Playboy Press feels justified in

publishing a book that triumphantly announces the death of the Puritan ethic, perhaps the time has come to ask how much has really been gained. Who has profited? Has all this permissiveness brought us better books, more inspired writers, a more just, a nobler society? In spite of their protestations about freedom, it is probably fair to assume that the publishers' participation in all this was not entirely free of self-interest, but do they, as a whole, stand to profit from it either?

A writer was once regarded as a person with a special gift and a member of a noble calling; he was a custodian of the word. The Republic of Letters was a concept which had meaning not only for writers, but for publishers as well. In their fight for an end to all restrictions on obscenity, isn't it possible that the publishers have succeeded in vulgarizing the book, with the consequent undermining of the respect which the book

and their profession have traditionally enjoyed? When Hitler ordered his spectacular book burnings, educated people in all countries reacted with horror, for the reason that the book was regarded almost instinctively as the repository of truth, as the means by which the highest achievements of civilization are recorded and preserved. With a few more years of *The Love Machine*, *Sex and the Single Girl*, *The Playboy Book of Sex*, may we not soon be reaching the point where a gigantic book burning will be welcomed as a much-needed cleansing operation?

Mass education, mass democracy, mass communications, the commercialization of so much of life have had their effect, needless to say, on book publishing as well as everything else. From having been, in a sense, a profession with its own standards and values, publishing has largely become dominated by purely business consider-

ations. The typical publishing firm of the nineteenth century, as continued to be the case into the 1930s, was a small business, and was often run by its owner, whose personality and point of view it reflected. He had to operate at a profit, which took skill and business judgment, but a book was still something unique, the work of the mind, written and produced, for the most part, for a small and literate audience. When Ezra Pound as a young man in London offered one of his earlier collections of poetry to Elkin Matthews, who was very much a publisher in the old style. Matthews, after reading the manuscript, asked Pound if he had any money to help with its publication. Pound answered that he had a shilling or two in his pocket if that would help, to which Matthews replied, and no answer could have been more characteristic of the sort of publisher he was, "Well, I wanted to publish it anyway."

Alfred Knopf was another publisher in the old style. When he agreed in the early twenties to publish H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, it was surely not in the expectation of great profits, although he no doubt hoped at least to cover his costs; the principal consideration in all likelihood was the prospect of association with Mencken and what the publishing of a distinguished magazine would do for the standing of his firm, and it was his decision. Now his old house is a subsidiary of Random House, which, in turn, is owned by RCA. Such a decision as Knopf made when he became the publisher of the *American Mercury* would now be a matter of high-level corporate policy.

The book has been vulgarized, degraded, and nothing better illustrates the degree of its degradation than the flood of obscenity that has all but engulfed us. There have always, of course, been obscene books, but in the past they were the exception, and were regarded as exceptions, as something done consciously and shamefacedly in defiance of standards and good taste. It should be emphasized, however, that it is not primarily a moral issue that is involved; what is at stake are the standards and values of civilization. The book is the chief means

by which ideas are communicated and given standing and influence; when the book, therefore, is degraded, by using it as a means to appeal to the lowest, most perverted tastes, by treating it as a commodity and nothing else, society is degraded also.

The flood of pornography and obscenity that followed the Supreme Court decisions which held, substantially, that just about anything was permissible, and made local prosecution difficult or impossible, has resulted, not surprisingly, in a strong counterreaction, one consequence of which is the recent *Miller v. California* decision, which goes back to the old test of "community standards." While this has not yet stemmed the tide, it has aroused the fear on the part of the Publishers and Magazine Distributors Associations, among others, that it will. They, therefore, are setting up special groups to oppose state and local action. A recent statement of the Authors League, which is probably representative of all these groups, puts their position in the form of "rights": the "right" of adults "to acquire the books they choose to read, and see the films and plays they choose to view" and of "librarians, booksellers, theatre owners, authors, publishers and producers. . . to distribute such works to willing adults." What is forgotten in all this is that "no man is an island," as the liberals were fond of telling us when their current enthusiasm was the United Nations: the "right" of the publishers, producers, writers, *et al.* to bring out any sort of garbage the most depraved element of society might wish is also the right to assault, and perhaps to destroy, the standards and taste of society as a whole. Does anyone really have such a right, and doesn't society have the right to protect itself?

But what, before going any further, constitutes obscenity? What is the difference between one of Renoir's "Bathers" and the photograph of a naked girl in *Playboy* magazine? Both are erotic, but the eroticism of Renoir is the eroticism of life; it is not an end in itself, but a natural and perfectly normal part of a healthy life. The picture in *Playboy*, on the other hand, represents an eroticism which is an end in

itself, is not a part of life, but its object; an element of life is made the whole thing. Writing in a different connection, Miguel de Unamuno put the issue with great clarity: "The love of money, said the Apostle, is the root of all evil, and that is because it takes riches for an end, when they are only a means. And the essence of sin is precisely that it takes means for end, that it does not recognize or that it despises the end purpose." If one compares the serenity, the serenity of having accepted and come to terms with the demands of life and the reality of the human condition, the beauty and completeness of the conception of such a picture as Renoir's "Young Woman Sewing" with the vulgarity, cheapness, and destructiveness of the founder of *Playboy* and what he calls the "Playboy philosophy," the distinction I am trying to make becomes sharper. All of which illustrates why, as I have said, obscenity is not primarily a moral problem; it is that, and much more, what is at stake is its destructiveness of the wholeness of life, of the proper relationship of things and values.

Stephen Spender, in an interview reprinted in *Time* a year or two ago, remarked that he now questioned his active participation in politics in the thirties, when it was fashionable for young intellectuals to take up left-wing causes with passionate fervor. "Who benefited from all that," he said, "what good did it do?" The true calling of the poet, he went on to say, is not political activism, but the protection of the purity of the language; when language deteriorates all else deteriorates with it. We of the twentieth century, of all people, should know how destructive language can be—Hitler was a master of language, as were, in their own way, Wilson, Churchill, and Roosevelt. But, as Max Picard put it, language "was given to man in advance," it is one of those primordial elements "which belongs to man's basic structure." When language is misused, therefore, one of the basic elements of man's nature is misused, or, again in the words of Max Picard, "When language is destroyed, man loses his relationship with the original Word from which his own words and their measure are derived."

It follows from what has gone before that the degradation of the book is not merely a symptom of the malaise from which our society is obviously suffering, it may well be one of its principal causes. It would be more exact, I should hasten to add, to speak of the malaise of our intellectuals, of those, that is, who presume to speak for us, rather than of society as a whole, but when a substantial part of the writers, professors, critics, journalists, and political pundits are confused, lacking in confidence and direction, unwilling to face the painful fact that two plus two always, inexorably, equals four, it is probably fair to say that society as a whole is at least being infected. The intellectuals, for example, speak of Watergate as a great moral crisis. To break into Democratic headquarters was, admittedly, ill-advised, foolish, and illegal, but to make a great political and constitutional crisis out of anything as essentially petty is indicative of the complete lack of proportion and common sense of our reigning intellectuals.

Far more serious is our unwillingness to

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