



Totalitarian Fiction

THE title of this editorial has no reference whatsoever to the creative efforts in story-telling, if any, in the totalitarian states. If their rulers are interested in literature, they have given no sign, and what they are not interested in will, for a while, not exist above ground.

Yet consciousness of the state as a factor in the life of the individual, and of society as a complex which influences his every thought, is not confined to the dictatorships. We are all intensely aware of social forces, and so, of course, are the novelists.

Totalitarian fiction is not new, but it is new in the United States. When John Dos Passos writes a novel, he is no longer writing of the manners of a caste or a culture in the old sense. His characters are like boys studying in the glare of a radio. While they go through the routine of living, the wash and backwash of standardized social feeling runs through and over their minds. They are parts of all they hear, and their private thoughts are suggested by what everyone is thinking.

When Thomas Wolfe clipped off and published another section of that news reel which his death stopped in the middle of a scene, something equivalent was happening. In him the stream of consciousness, which Joyce had made a classic way of telling a story, had become a description of contacts. Here was America, no longer a land, but rather a familiar society which looked homogeneous until a sensitive soul "contacted" it (the word exactly suggests the experience). Then what he saw was a scurry of individuals who did not fit into the pattern trying to escape and failing, and a drift of the vast majority unaware that they were only half alive.

How far is this movement going? Must we be reminded by every novel we read that the price of nails is involved in many love stories, or that the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe sets off re-

actions in America which must be taken into account when telling over again the old story of the small-town boy who made good? Will the novelist of the future have to be a sociologist, an economist, a psychologist, and a historian? Certainly not. And yet it is to be hoped that he will take all cargo of that kind aboard that he can safely stow under the hatches. It is folly to suppose that a society which reads a daily paper, sees a news reel weekly, and hears the radio every other hour, is going to be novelized successfully by the old-time story teller who assumed that a "character" was an independent personality instead of a consciousness, floating in a stream of impressions. The sciences, or part sciences, of human relationships have much still to contribute to fiction. They cannot stir creation, but they can make it more intelligent, especially since what has to be created now are individuals almost totally in contact with every broad influence in the nation—one might safely say in the world. It would be interesting, for example, to rewrite "Vanity Fair" as a totalitarian novel with complete awareness of its proper extensions into the economics of Great Britain in the Napoleonic era. It would be even more interesting to retell "Oliver Twist" or "David Copperfield" in the light of the new science of adolescent psychology.

Would they be better novels? Yes—if done with the same genius as inspired the originals. Of course they would be better. But let no publisher rush to invite rewrite men to get out 1938 models of the classics of English fiction. There is a catch in the argument. Totalitarian fiction is much harder to write than the books in which the author did not have to know that his heroes were products of their social organism; or did not have to imitate a society in which printing, audition, and transportation had blurred the sharp edges of individualism.

A novelist has first of all to tell a story, and next put credible (and interesting) people into it. Obviously every difficulty in his way—and our new knowledge of the complexities of human behavior is a real difficulty—makes it harder for his imagination to work free and create men and women who are wholes. For while they must be wholes if they are to live, we now recognize far better than ever before that they are also parts, tiny parts, of a totalitarian scheme in which with difficulty they keep consciousness of a personality that is their own.

Until this new knowledge is organized, clarified, and authenticated, it will never get into the right perspective in the novelist's mind. He will be asking himself, what is the psychological aspect of this situation? Whereas if he is to work freely, the psychological aspect should be as familiar as the moral aspect was to Trollope or Scott. He will be trying to write, as so many are today, of societies which

are much too abstract or complex to handle in a work of art, instead of describing people he has known at first hand. No wonder so many good fiction writers have recently turned to history. They have seen the appalling result when novelists have tried to be amateur sociologists, and have read the vast dullness of novels where unrealized individuals struggle on the surface of an elaborate case history of the class struggle. So they go back to the Revolution or the Civil War, where the historians have told them what to say about society, and where their characters may move freely against a background that everyone believes in.

But the vogue of the historical novel will soon pass, and then we shall have some interesting experiments. There will be no caste, no milieu, no accepted code of manners in Society with a capital S, in which a great artist like Jane Austen can play variations, which are not the less significant for all human nature because her characters are totally unaware of any important existence except their own. Does this mean that we shall have no studies of manners, but only satire and wisecracks about bad manners, which will make a very different story? One fears so.

There will be no humor in the realization that the humblest member of society has professional entertainers constantly on the air to make jokes for him. Such a society is not likely to develop much humor of its own. Humor is closely related to contrast, and there is little contrast in the totalitarianism of standardization. Will the Mark Twains of the future become ironists outright in default of anything really funny in communities that let the radio do their talking and the movies their acting for them? Perhaps. Is this why the really amusing books of the past few years have all been burlesque, or close to it? By now even hillbillies and Gullah Negroes have become self-conscious.

It is a trend, as critics like to say, and all we can do is to watch it. If there are any great novelists now in short pants or braids, they should find when their time comes the totalitarian conception of society so shaken down and ripened as to be, perhaps, a challenge, rather than a problem. After all the middle class, whose rise was the cause of the invention of novel writing, must have presented painful difficulties, and later great opportunities to writers accustomed to interpret all useable experience in terms of heroic romance. And furthermore, if the world becomes totalitarian in the political sense, there will be no more novels, but only propaganda stories about how to become a good Nazi, or whatever it will be good to become then. In which case, literature will find some other way of helping man to look from the outside in, at himself.

H. S. C.

Letters to the Editor: *Unpublished Papers of Mark Twain;* *Frances Winwar Replies to Critic*

De Voto to Edit Mark Twain Papers

SIR:—By arrangement with the Mark Twain Estate, I have been put in charge of the unpublished Mark Twain papers. I am to complete the work left unfinished by the death of Albert Bigelow Paine, that of arranging and cataloguing the material, and to edit several volumes for publication. Announcement of those volumes will be made at the proper time. Meanwhile, since one of the projects is the preparation of a more complete edition of Mark Twain's letters, I shall be grateful if collectors and others who own any unpublished letters will communicate with me. In order to make the catalogue as complete as possible, I should like also to hear from all those who may have unpublished manuscripts of Mark Twain's.

During the next two years it will be impossible for me to answer questions concerning the unpublished material. It is likely that, at the end of that period, arrangements will be made to open the Mark Twain papers to the examination of qualified scholars.

BERNARD DeVOTO.

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"Farewell the Banner"

SIR:—It is the prerogative of the critic to point out errors of fact in the book he reviews. Happily that prerogative is also allowed the author when confronted with obvious misrepresentation in the criticism of his work.

In his review of my "Farewell the Banner" (*The Saturday Review of Literature*, October 1, 1938), Professor Harper writes of the illustration on the front end-sheet: "It purports to be a view of 'Derwent-water and Skiddaw Mount from Dove Cottage'! To see Skiddaw and Derwent-water from Dove Cottage, one would have to possess telescopic eyes . . ." The photograph, from which the illustration is made, was taken by Dr. M. Edmund Speare, himself a noted lecturer and author. He labeled the negative "Derwent-water and Skiddaw Mount as seen from Castle Head. (This is a view from Dove Cottage.)" It was the parenthetical note that created the confusion in the caption. While the view could not be visible from Dove Cottage itself, it is one that the Wordsworths must have had often before their eyes, as Castle Head is near enough to Grasmere to satisfy any Wordsworth lover.

Again Professor Harper says: ". . . Though an honest and candid biographer must not exclude important facts unfavorable to the person about whom he writes, on the other hand it is unnecessary and harmful to emphasize, and still more to invent, degrading qualities or incidents." I make bold to charge that when the eminent professor accuses me of inventing degrading qualities or incidents, he is himself *inventing*, unless he is ready to bring those accusations to the proof from the body of my book.

Further, Professor Harper writes, as if in contradiction of what I have taken the pains to stress, "Poor Coleridge," because



"I wouldn't dare tell you what *he* calls a spade."

his woes were real—a malformed body, an almost lifelong illness, the tyrannical opium habit, a will too weak to guide his towering intellect, an unhappy marriage." Poor Coleridge indeed! If Professor Harper had read "Farewell the Banner" with less prejudice, he would have seen on page 301 that the *poor* was prefixed by the Wordsworths and that, because of my admiration for Coleridge's towering intellect, I resented the adjective with the same violence as Lamb, who could not bear to have the word associated with such a man. I know nothing of *malformed* body, however, and I should be grateful to Professor Harper for proof that Coleridge was malformed, unless the difficulty that the poet had in breathing through his nose constitute malformation. As for the reality of Coleridge's woes—I have taken the trouble to write a book in order to do justice to them.

"One might suppose, from Mrs. Winwar's account," continues my critic, "that he spent his college years in debauchery. For this there is no proof, and we know he read copiously at Cambridge and frequented the society of serious men." There is an overabundance of proof in Coleridge's self-accusing letters to his brother George that his life at Cambridge was not all that it should have been—or, to put it more realistically, that it was no exception to the general low level of the times. As for the serious men whose society he frequented, Coleridge saw fit to write of them in a letter to his brother in which he promised to turn over a new leaf: "Everyone of my acquaintance I have dropped solemnly and forever." This Professor Harper could have found, with the necessary exegesis, on page 58 of my book.

Most significantly Professor Harper charges further: "She makes much of the undeniable fact that Wordsworth wished to exclude 'The Ancient Mariner' from the second edition of their joint publication, 'Lyrical Ballads,' his reason no doubt being not jealousy but a sense of its incon-

gruity with his own plain-style poems." As a matter of fact, I have little to say of a notorious literary case. If Professor Harper had read my book with ordinary interest he would not have falsified the truth, consciously or unconsciously. What I make much of, and what constitutes the crux of my charge that Wordsworth killed Coleridge as a poet, is the less known fact that Wordsworth not only wished to exclude, but succeeded in excluding, from the second edition of "Lyrical Ballads" "Christabel," that miraculous and sudden flowering of Coleridge's awakened creativeness. From page 287 to page 293 I labor to explain what the creation of the second part of "Christabel" meant to Coleridge, from the moment he burst in upon the Wordsworths, "very wet," that he might read it to them, to that sealing of his fate as a poet when Wordsworth wrote to the printer: "It is my wish and determination that (whatever the expense may be, which I hereby take upon myself) such pages of the poem of Christabel as have been printed (if such there be), be cancelled." What Wordsworth's reasons may have been I have, *no doubt*, as much of a right to infer as has Professor Harper. Do I create a picture of his predilected poet Wordsworth as a hard-hearted, unappreciative egoist? Let any impartial reader judge for himself from the bald facts.

As for "cheap rhetoric" and "incorrect grammar" Professor Harper is, by his own standards, guilty on both counts in the "Poor Coleridge" passage of his brief review. He is moreover guilty on an ethical score in his failure to produce evidence for his charges.

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Mr. Harper Replies

SIR:—Miss Winwar challenges me to defend my criticism of her book, "Farewell the Banner." Considering her protest in detail, we must let nature and geography settle the point about the
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