

The Illiterate American Writer

HAROLD STRAUSS



Harold Strauss

WHEN EVER I am asked what's wrong with American writers, and it is a favorite question to ask editors, several odd things happen. In the first place, I am compelled to talk much more about our culture as a whole than about writing as an abstraction. I tend to think of the republic of letters as a continuous field in which many processes interact: writers, critics, publishers, ideas and ideals, economic and cultural forces, and the psychological factor of role identification. As to this last, it involves the role that writers act out in their imaginations when they consider their ideal selves, the selves they want to be. Here personality and social forces interact, and it is a matter as complex and elusive as it is important. For it is this fantasy of the ideal self that does far more to influence writers than anything editors can say.

I also skip over the routine peeves that editors have against writers, simply because they are so familiar that they are boring. I am concerned with writing as an art, and not writing as a business, on which altogether too much capsuled advice has already been offered. In what follows, when I speak of young writers, I mean writers who are young in their profession, regardless of their chronological age.

I mean writers who are still developing, whose personality, style, and view of life have not yet set into a fixed pattern.

What's wrong with American writers? The bluntest possible answer is this: Our writers lack courage, they lack education, and they lack loyalty.

To begin with the smallest problem, writers lack courage in the way they plan their lives and handle their personal affairs. I know that when they see most of their friends scurrying for security, looking for jobs in large corporations that will guarantee them steady advancement, retirement at sixty-five, and a pension, the personal risk-taking that a career as a creative writer involves becomes much more difficult than it used to be. No more than twenty-five years ago, writers wrote—and then sought to sell their work on the best possible terms. Today young writers, and also young would-be writers, seek the security of pieces of paper certifying that they are writers. They turn to creative writing courses, to the G. I. Bill, to university fellowships, to the foundations, and to publishers' contracts. These may be conveniences, but none of these devices can guarantee that they are writers and what is worse, these devices tend to obscure and damp down the dedication, the ferocious drive, necessary to succeed in any of the arts.

I don't object to artists living well. I have no liking for the garret theory of creativity. But I don't believe that writing should be regarded primarily as a business. It is a very uneconomic activity. The paper security that people seek in the age of anxiety is actually a deterrent to good creative

work. Young writers discover all too soon that the paper charm isn't potent. In disillusionment, they turn from writing altogether. Very few now reach the maturity that American letters so desperately lacks. We are constantly turning up new seven-day wonders, but few of them are around on the fourteenth day. One reason for this is the cotton wool, or I suppose I should say paper, in which we wrap them at an early age. In the arts, the quest for security is nonsense. The artist's only security is constant insecurity. Therefore I think the most urgent question a young writer should ask himself is whether he can afford to be a writer—and not only financially, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

A MUCH greater problem is the lack of moral and artistic courage. We live in an age of conformism. Even opposition now is conformist, that is to say, patterned, organized, stereotyped. We have no one with a gift for mockery, no one with a capacity for Olympian laughter. There are no great rebels, no mavericks, no iconoclasts.

To the contrary, we live in an age of muted voices, of great technical skill lavished on small enterprises. There is a prevailing fear of ambitious projects, of work that demands broad knowledge and insight. One cannot often find what Francis Fergusson calls the novel of public affairs, such as Cozzens, Warren, and Trilling have written.

This is not the fault of writers alone. The critical world nourishes the vain hope that artistic proficiency can be divorced from artistic content, as Alex Comfort has pointed out. It will

Harold Strauss is editor-in-chief of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

always settle for a polished surface surrounding a vacuum if it cannot have both glitter and substance—and that leads in the end to ignorance of content. The critical world believes that it is warring against pretentiousness. But its self-appointed policemen have, to a great extent, driven out imagination and ambition along with pretension.

Today pretentiousness is certainly less threatening than vacuity. Recently I saw a review that began: "X has chosen to tell a small story, and does so superbly well." I didn't read the book; I didn't even read further in the review. The absorption of writers in "small stories" is a retreat from the world, the great world. It is a sickness of the mind; it is the psychological phenomenon known to psychiatrists as rejection. So the difficulty is not only that such "small stories" are trivial in content by any mature standard; they also distort reality. For when a sick mind tries to pretend that life in a tree or in a Moroccan harem or, less luridly, in a London suburb or a Mississippi village is a separate and complete experience, reality is altered qualitatively as well as quantitatively. In schizophrenics, this rejection of the great world is the initial step toward hallucination and delusion. To writers at first it seems otherwise, for the private worlds they prefer to inhabit are small and safe. Living in them, the writer is protected from ridicule. On this, Gide says, "the fear of ridicule causes our worst cowardices." I would require of a young writer that he have the courage to dissent, the courage of irreverence, the courage to thumb his nose at the sacred stereotypes of his elders. I'd be willing to risk my own.

I ALSO feel that writers lack education. I can almost say that they don't know anything about anything except growing up in a small town. The smaller it is, the more they know about it. Some of them have been to war. Some of them know a good deal about homosexuality. But how many more novels on these few themes shall we publish?

There is something worse than their ignorance of the great world. *They don't read.* They are out of touch with the principal instrument of human communication—books. They are ignorant of the great traditions of Western culture. In the manuscripts I see, and I am talking only about those which show some talent and which must be taken seriously, I can almost invariably spot whether their authors are readers or non-readers. Many are shocked when I suggest to



Ford Madox Ford, Willa Cather, John Galsworthy, Henry James, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald—"more an attitude of mind than a measure of genius."

them that they should take time from their writing for reading. I heard James Jones in his National Book Award acceptance speech struggle bravely, and in a sense admirably, with his Elizabethan references. His intentions were good, but his awkwardness suggested what his book also suggests: that he is not a well-read man.

One can be parochial in time as well as in space. In this temporal sense, young writers have only a parochial, that is to say, a narrow, momentary view of human values. For instance, they really, except in headline terms, know nothing about treason. They know nothing about loyalty. They know nothing about justice, or about injustice. They know as little about love as they know about hatred. Even in this materialistic age, they know little about the great power drives—the quest for money; the quest for prestige, the quest for pure power.

To give only a small hint of what I mean—I mean much more than this—they are totally incapable of dealing with the lives of the mighty as Shakespeare did in his historical plays. I am not asking the sophomoric question of why we have no Shakespeares. I am simply demanding that young writers know the direction of his gaze.

Another human value they ignore is decorum. Most of them think it has something to do with good manners. These miss entirely the significance of Peter Viereck's title, "Terror and Decorum." I will even assert that in this age in which freedom is said to be the greatest value, most writers,

young and old, know virtually nothing about its true nature.

I can concede that our writers know a little about fear. But at heart they are know-nothings who expect their readers to know nothing. So it is that they live as if in a wilderness, building the hut of each new novel out of the locally available adobe mud. Not a beam, not a pane, will they import from the warehouses of civilization. For each book, they build a private and particular world. Being uneducated, they mistrust the rapid references of educated men. They become plodding documentarians. And there is a corresponding naivete in literary circles that mistakes their use of local adobe mud for a true understanding of the world. In this the exponents of the naturalistic or reportorial novel, and of the so-called pure novel, are alike: they are able to build only little inferences about human life because they have no time for big ones.

Our writers are out of touch not only with the past but with the significant ideas of the present. As casual examples, what do they know about the application of the theory of relativity to matters other than physics? About the displacement of Aristotelian logic by field theory? About the new answers of physicists and biologists to the novelist's own question, what is life? About the enormous advances in psychiatry and sociology since Freud? I believe that a novelist who undertakes to deal with the great world around him can no more afford to be indifferent to these questions than could Joyce or Dostoevsky—men who

(Continued on page 39)

The World. *When we some day look back to this spring of 1952, it is likely that we shall think first of an ever-tightening fear of the imperialism of Soviet Communism. For Russia and her aims today dominate our newspaper headlines, our radio alarms—and our most widely discussed books. Last week we reviewed three important new books on this almost all-consuming problem: Sidney Lens's "The Counterfeit Revolution," Robert Vogeler's "I Was Stalin's Prisoner," and Adam B. Ulam's "Titoism and the Cominform." This week we review Leland Stowe's study of Kremlin over-all strategy, "Conquest by Terror" (below), Raymond J. deJaegher's eyewitness account of the Communist conquest of China, "The Enemy Within" (page 11), James P. Warburg's search to discover "How to Co-Exist with Russia" (page 12), Joseph Mackiewicz's story of a notorious incident in Poland, "The Katyn Wood Murders" (page 36), and Ray Brock's slapdash account of the tangled situation in eastern Europe and the Near East, "Blood, Oil and Sand" (page 35).*

Fringe of a Frenzy

CONQUEST BY TERROR. By Leland Stowe. New York: Random House. 300 pp. \$3.50.

By EDGAR ANSEL MOWRER

THIS is a book for all civilized human beings. But particularly it is for three sorts of Americans: (1) those who, unconsciously parroting the Communist line, insisted that the USSR "had a right to friendly neighbors"; (2) those who are still losing no sleep over the Soviet Communist menace; (3) those sweet souls who believe that if President Truman would only "understand" Russia he could easily reach a working agreement with Generalissimo Stalin over the conference table.

For the first sort are partly responsible for one of the most hideous crimes ever committed—Moscow's rape of Eastern Europe. The second are living (or rather sleeping) in a fool's Paradise, having failed to set the alarm. The third are too unworldly to survive.

"Conquest by Terror" is bound to deepen the American reader's understanding of what a dreadful thing has happened—and what it means to the West. This lesson is the more effective coming from Leland Stowe. Mr. Stowe ranks with the best reporters

of our time. But, like other optimists, he was ready, just after the war, to "give the USSR the benefit of the doubt." Today, even the last shred of a doubt has gone. What the USSR has done to the once free peoples of Eastern Europe fills him with loathing.

He minces no words. "How to Enslave Everybody" is a contemporary tragedy written in Moscow, produced and directed by Soviet Russians, and now being played throughout eastern and captive Europe—with a cast of ninety million persons. . . . Russia's Red totalitarianism [is] at its peak."

Back in September 1950, Mr. Stowe decided to report on what was going on behind the Iron Curtain in the belief that it would prove to be full of cracks and crannies that the West

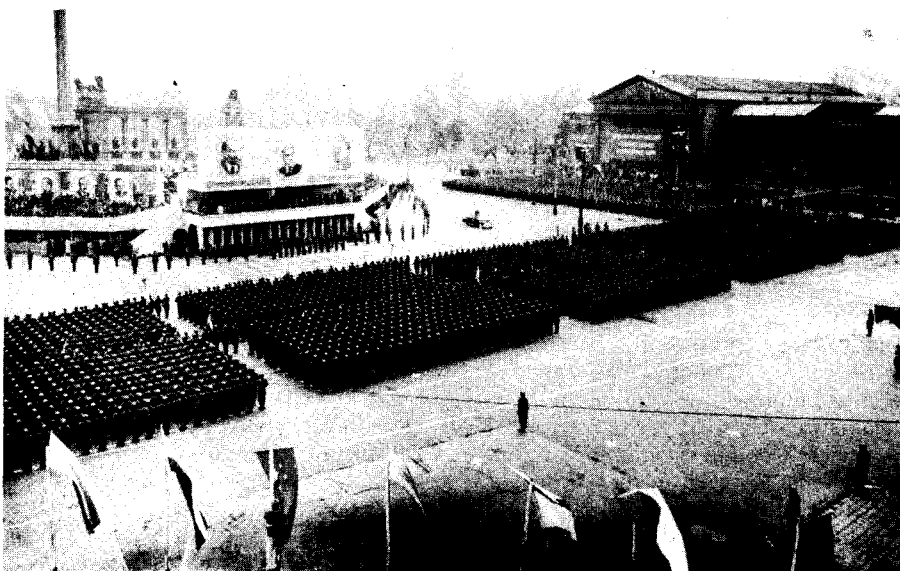
might enlarge and utilize. For almost eighteen months he worked gathering material and writing it up. He found the chinks all right—and seeping through them from within an immense amount of information. This information gradually shaped a picture "a thousand times worse than the average American conceives—or is prepared to believe." In consequence, Mr. Stowe has written of "Terror, Torture, and Murder, Incorporated, reaching one-third around the world."

Why be surprised? the well-informed and the cynical may ask. The pattern of Soviet society has been described in countless first-hand accounts and in a book like "1984." It never varies. Now the Kremlin has simply imposed this pattern upon the European countries it managed to seize and enslave (with our connivance). Here is nothing new.

Perhaps not. Yet it was supposed by some outsiders that the ugliness of Soviet tyranny had to do with the nature of the material it worked upon—the "backward" Russian peoples. Elsewhere Communism would be different. Only it isn't. The example of Eastern Europe shows that the Russian pattern can be imposed on any people, Chinese, North Korean—or American. Here is an important new fact.

The details are fearful. Over one million of the 90 million inhabitants of captive Europe are imprisoned—and the slave masters are building camps for more! (Between 42 and 70 such camps exist in Czechoslovakia alone.) One out of every nine human beings is some sort of police agent.

During 1951, over 100,000 Hungarians were forcibly deported from Budapest and border regions—sent away to toil and die. For as Mr. Stowe



—Eastfoto.

The Hungarian People's Army—"the USSR is feverishly organizing satellite armies."

Edgar Ansel Mowrer has been covering the foreign scene for American newspapers since World War I and won a Pulitzer Prize for his correspondence. His most recent book is "Challenge and Decision: A Program for America."