Saturday Review

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ARTISTS, CONSCIENCE, AND CENSORS

By MALCOLM COWLEY

AUTHORS are quite as moral as anyone else—censors included—if in a different fashion. There is a rather stern code that is supposed to govern literary conduct, or at least the conduct of those who regard themselves as dedicated men of letters. But the code is difficult for laymen to understand, since it leads to moral judgments of a special type.

Often these are strikingly different from the judgments passed, for example, by ladies over a bridge table. I know a distinguished playwright who is often praised by her bridge partners, but condemned by most of her literary colleagues, for taking such good care of her mother. "She should put her in a home," one of the colleagues said, "and get back to work on a play. Another good one from her would be worth any number of aged parents." I have heard more than one poet condemned for being a good citizen, on the ground that by living respectably he was putting blinders on his imagination. The comparative failure of a gifted novelist was explained to me by one of his rivals as the result of his having stayed married to a saintly woman. "Why didn't he leave her," the other novelist asked, "as soon as he found out that she was interfering with his work?" In the author's code of morals, "work" is always a verb in the imperative mood, even when it seems to be a noun. A merely human relationship should be broken off if it keeps one from working.

On the other hand—to choose an example from the past—Hawthorne is thought to have shown moral courage when he refrained from working because he felt that his mind had lost its temper and its fine edge. "I have an instinct," he said in a letter to his publisher, "that I had better keep quiet. Perhaps I shall have a new spirit of vigor if I wait quietly for it; perhaps not." Shortly before writing the letter Hawthorne had lost his little fortune through entrusting it to a friend. He wanted to provide for his family. That shouldn't have been an insoluble problem, since he had already earned his reputation and since any new novel of his, good or bad, would have had a wide sale. Lately he had started three different novels, and the last start had been promising; he had only to continue as best he could and publish the result. But he stopped, feeling instinctively that however profitable the result might be and however much it might help his wife and children, it would not be up to his own standard of excellence. That was an artist's decision, for which he is respected by other artists.

Then what shall we say about the very different example of Anthony Trollope? Week in, week out, in the midst of other exacting duties, he produced forty pages of fiction, even when the week was spent in stage coaches or at sea. "As I journeyed across France to Marseilles," he says in his "Autobiography," "and made thence a terribly rough voyage to Alexandria, I wrote my allotted number of pages every day. On this occasion more than once I left my paper on the cabin table, rushing away to be sick in the privacy of my state-room. It was February, and the weather was terrible, but still I did my work." He does not say whether it was good work or whether it had the taste of bile; quite simply it was work performed on schedule. Yet Trollope as well as Hawthorne is now admired by other writers (after a period of hesitation, it is true) and is felt to have carried out a moral choice.

There is no real conflict in this judgment about the two men. Both Hawthorne and Trollope were devoted to their profession and willing to make sacrifices for it—in one case a financial and family sacrifice, in the other a sacrifice of comfort. Therefore both were observing the artist's code of morality. This code is not a long one; it can, in fact, be reduced to four essential precepts.

First, the artist must have faith in the all-importance of art, and particularly in his own form of art, be it painting, sculpture, poetry, drama, fiction, or music.

Second, the faith must be demonstrated by the production of works. Produce, produce! This is a law among artists, or rather it is their inner compulsion. It may be that the compulsion

is especially strong with those who practice the literary arts. "Write" and "right" are the same word in spoken English, and the two are often confused in a writer's mind. When he finds himself unable to write, he feels guilty of moral wrongdoing, and sometimes he goes to a psychoanalyst for absolution.

A third precept is that the works must honestly reveal a personal vision, different from that of any other artist. The way to become original, most artists feel, is by digging deeper into themselves. Like Quakers they believe in the inner light.

The fourth and last precept is a belief that the works, if produced with infinite care, will long outlive the artist, and hence are worth almost any sacrifice of earthly happiness.

One feature of this essentially simple code is its mixture of extreme self-centeredness with something close to self-abnegation. The ideal artist, according to the code, is completely absorbed in himself, or rather in the task of producing something out of himself; but he forgets himself in the task, often to the extent of deliberately incurring hardship, illness, or public contempt. Marcel Proust is not the only example of an artist who gave up his life for his own creation, as a devoted mother might do for her children.

WHEN the code has been followed strictly—as seldom happens in this country—it has produced, on occasion, some admirable works of art, the pride and summit of Western culture, and it has produced a few extraordinary characters who were truly saintlike in their dedication. It has also produced artists who, from the standpoint of ordinary human relations, were monsters. For the fact remains that the artist's code is dangerously incomplete as a guide to conduct. It says nothing about the duties of the artist as parent, neighbor, or citizen. It provides no restraint against the usual vices, and there are even some vices that it encourages; pride, for example, but others as well. In their search for a truly personal vision, some artists are tempted to make experiments in drunkenness or taking drugs as a means of releasing the imagination. Often this is deadened instead of being released, and the artist himself may be destroyed, especially if he is rendered vulnerable by fears about his loss of talent.

There is one other feature of the code that fills me with amazement and sometimes with dismay. It is a code for individuals who follow what Hemingway called "the loneliest trade in the world," and all its sanctions are self-imposed. Nobody except himself will punish the artist for selling out his integrity; having violated his own law, he must be the accuser as well as the culprit and the judge. If he does not sell out but strictly observes the code, he cannot be certain of receiving any award from others. Always working alone, he will cultivate his private sensibility and try to give an enduring form to his personal vision of life. The works that embody his vision will, however, be presented to the public, with the hope of their being accepted, and often they will affect the conduct of the public in an unpredictable way. The private vision of artists, drawn from their inner selves, in obedience more to instinct than to logic, may thus become an undirected force in society.

Nobody has succeeded in explaining the connection between the private sources and the public functions of art. But art does have its public functions, though we often lose sight of them. In primitive agricultural societies, and even in Western Europe until the Renaissance, the functions were more clearly defined. It was the duty of the artist to celebrate the community in its present oneness, in its divine past, and in its glorious future. Thus he invented dances and rituals for the group, he retold the stories of its gods and heroes, he fashioned their images, and he persuaded the "people"—his own tribe that is, the only genuine persons—that they were reenacting the lives of the gods, who would some day return and reinstitute the golden age. Thus the artist played a recognized part in the daily life of the people.

Even now, a time of social fragmentation, when the artist's stock in trade is not a communal tradition, but chiefly his own separate and sometimes abnormal personality, art still has its public functions to perform. One of these is to furnish us with models for emulation, with objects of pity or sympathy, and with horrible examples to be avoided. Concerning this topic, Walt Whitman, in "Democratic Vistas," wrote: "The literature, songs, esthetics . . . of a country are of importance principally because they furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways." We can see how this process operates in daily life. From little boys in cowboy suits, or not so long ago in Davy Crockett coonskin caps, to young women who try to look and talk like their favorite movie actress in her latest role, and to the great general—it was Robert E. Lee—who often asked himself what Washington would have done in the same situation, we are always trying to emulate models in fiction or drama or history, that is, from the sphere of art.

WHETHER literature helps to make us better Christians, citizens, husbands, wives, or parents is a subject for debate. I suppose the realistic answer is that some books do and others don't. Some very great authors have been dangerous models to emulate in daily life. But if they were truly great, they performed one service for every reader by broadening his range of sympathies and his consciousness of what goes on around him—by making him see and hear and appreciate what he might otherwise have missed—while at the same time deepening his emotions. The great authors have made life seem richer, more interesting, and more worth the living than it would have seemed without their work. In a single phrase, they have helped to create the myths by which we live.

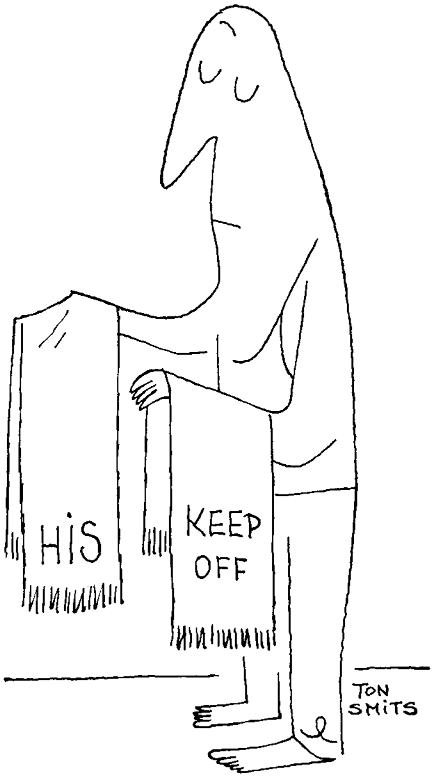
No nation or tribe or voluntary association of persons could exist without such myths and archetypes of conduct, but it had better be admitted that the myths may be good, less good, or even in many cases actively evil, as witness Hitler's myth of the conquering Pure

Aryan. That too was an artistic creation of a sort, and it was accepted by a defeated country trying to explain away its defeat and find reasons, even delusive ones, for hope in the future. Art, in other words, can be good or bad in its public effects, and a question for social philosophers has always been how those effects could be controlled and directed toward socially desirable purposes.

That is how we come to the great problem of censorship, which has been with us almost since the beginning of human society. Apparently it is no nearer to being solved today than it was in the time of Plato, who wanted to banish artists and flute players from his ideal republic. Arguments about censorship usually involve a great deal of sentiment and obfuscation on both sides of every phase of the question. The word itself becomes charged with emotion, especially when it is used by writers who have suffered through having their works suppressed. Yet why not admit to ourselves that there always has been and always will be censorship of some variety? Why not concede that it would exist even in the most nearly perfect society that could be imagined, so long as the society was composed of men and not of completely housebroken angels?

CENSORSHIP is one of the means by which society defends itself against enemies, external or internal, and by which it tries, not always without success, to prevent social changes in what the ruling stratum conceives to be an undesirable direction. Usually we think of censorship as being connected with sex, and we think of books and pictures that run the danger of being suppressed or mutilated by the censors as those which portray some form of sexual activity. But in times of war and threatened revolution, censorship is more likely to be military or political; and at all times—usually without the least protest from artists and writers—there is an active censorship by the Post Office, the Department of Agriculture, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Securities and Exchange Commission of certain types of verbal expression, notably those calculated to defraud consumers and investors. Laws against libel constitute another form of censorship, and one that seems to be needed for the protection of individuals.

In the domain of sex, the question of what is permissible to portray or to advocate has been complicated for a century or more by changes in ethical standards and social practices. Things can be said today that could not have been said as late as 1950. Since that



time there has also been a change in the written language, as a result of which many words formerly regarded as being, in the strict sense, *tabu* are losing their charismatic power. The change was revealed in the court case about the mailability of "Lady Chatterley's Lover," a book which contains most of the once forbidden words. It was written to defy the censors and convert its readers to a new sexual morality by shocking them, but—as I tried to say when testifying for the publishers of "Lady Chatterley" at the Post Office hearing—it has lost so much of its shocking quality that it now seems tame and even tiresome.

Later there was some question of my volunteering to testify in defense of Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer," but this time I had an instinct, like Hawthorne, that I had better keep quiet. What I had discovered in myself was an unexpected residue of moral conservatism. I admire the work for its literary virtues of naturalness, vigor, and perfect honesty. I was glad to see it sold by bookstores, where presumably it would be bought by adults who thought twice about spending $7.50, but I didn't know that I was eager to have it displayed on newsstands for 95 cents, since it wasn't, so it seemed to me, the best sort of work for the immature. I realized that a difference of $6.55 in the cost of one book was a very rough test of maturity—but mightn't it be better than no test at all?

That suggests another problem about censorship: should it be the same at all levels? At present many situations can be presented on the stage that cannot be presented in a moving picture, and many others are permissible in moving pictures but not on television, which is chiefly, at certain hours, an expensive device for keeping children out of trouble. Should the same sort of distinction be made between what is permissible in hard-cover books and what is permissible in those distributed at low prices to a mass audience that may or may not know what it is buying? Judges don't think so, and probably the judges are right, but still there is that residue of conservatism that keeps me uncertain.

Another problem about censorship is whether serious artists should be granted more latitude than professional entertainers and purveyors of sex, sadism, and gunsmoke. Most judges have held that it is right for the artists to have more liberty, and some famous decisions have been based on the literary standing of the author. It is often difficult, however, for a judge or a government official—let alone a zealous committee of laymen—to recognize serious art. Even artists are troubled by this problem. I have heard some of them, driven by the need for consistency, bursting forth with the declaration that they were prepared to do battle against all forms of censorship, no matter how tawdry or debased or misleading were the works against which it was exercised.

The trouble with such a declaration is that it might put those artists in the position of defending a person who, for example, had written a do-it-yourself handbook of abortion, or had furnished directions for robbing banks together with case histories of successful robbers, or had argued for the assassination of the President, or had offered what he falsely claimed was a remedy for cancer, or had misled the public about the value of oil wells or radium mines, or had engaged in the large-scale production of pornography for high school students, now a flourishing business. Usually the censors are wrong, but they can be justified in scores of instances—and exactly where shall we draw the line?

IN THE course of the never-ending debate, a few principles have, I think, been firmly established. One is the principle for which Milton argued in his "Areopagitica": that books should not be censored in advance; that their publication should not require the imprimatur of a government official. Such licensing or precensorship of books is an intolerable burden on creative minds, and it is likely to deprive society of

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THE PERSISTENCE OF THE CAVEMAN

By ALBERT SZENT-GYORGYI, *distinguished biochemist and winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine (1937). He is presently Director of Research at the Institute of Muscle Research, Marine Biological Laboratories, Woods Hole, Massachusetts.*

WHATEVER man does he must do first in his mind. The machinery of the mind is the brain, and any machine can do only what it is made to do. Consequently, if we want to understand ourselves, we must understand what sort of machine our brain is.

Primarily, the brain is an organ of survival. It was built by nature to search for food, shelter, and the like, to gain advantage—before addressing itself to the pursuit of truth. Hence most human brains are unable to distinguish between truth and advantage, and accept as truth that which is only advantage. We use our brain mainly for finding ways to reach what we want. Simultaneously, we produce the thoughts and arguments which justify our feelings and dealings. I suspect that if I were in the business of selling shelters, my brain would tend to dwell rather steadily on the probability of nuclear war. If I were in politics, I might find my brain devoting itself less to the next generation than to the next election.

There is only one general rule regarding how an animal should be built to survive: it must be adapted to its surroundings. Our species was not built yesterday, but hundreds of thousands of years ago and probably has not changed during the last 20,000 years. We are adapted, then, to the conditions of life which prevailed twenty millenniums ago. To learn about these conditions and to better understand ourselves, let us pay a brief imaginary visit to our nth great-great-grandfather.

At night we would probably find him in a cave, huddling with his small clan around a primitive fire, the greatest natural force he knew and handled. We would have to be a bit careful in approaching him: his dominant instinct being fear, he might strike us down. If we came upon him during the day, we would probably find him hunting close to the cave, because even a distance of ten miles seemed an infinity to him, and the greatest speed he knew was that of some animal or of a stone he hurled. If we could talk to him, we would probably find he had not the least doubt that what he saw and thought was the ultimate reality.

This world, the world of our ancestor, was changed by science almost in one stroke, leaving us no time for readaptation. What science did was to peep behind the scenes of creation and put the hidden, superhuman forces of nature at the service of man. It replaced the speed of animals with the speed of jets, missiles, and radio waves, thus abolishing distance. The fire it replaced with atomic energy, one of those terrific cosmic forces which shape the universe. It introduced death control without birth control, making the human masses swell enormously. With distance abolished, these masses now rub directly against one another, with weapons in their hands which enable them to destroy one another without even leaving their backyard.

Here we stand in the middle of this new world with our primitive brain, attuned to the simple cave life, with terrific forces at our disposal, which we are clever enough to release, but whose consequences we cannot comprehend. Their dimensions are too far beyond our human dimensions. When my wife tells me, "the water is hot," I am careful. But if I hear that an atomic explosion has fifteen million degrees of heat, it means nothing to me. I am deeply moved if I see a man suffering and would even risk my life for him. But then I talk impersonally about the possible pulverization of our big cities, with a hundred million dead. I am unable to multiply one man's suffering by a hundred million.

For our ancestor in his cave, the world meant the people he knew. Nations comprising hundreds of millions of people no longer represent people in our minds—they are abstractions. So their leaders begin to talk about abstractions, National Glory or National Survival, for which they are ready to put up with hundreds of millions killed.

We are not actually bad. We are just humans, carried into dimensions where we do not belong, with a primitive brain that cannot grasp how hell on earth could look. To stay alive we must create an entirely new world with new human relations, and the question is: who can help us?

Science? It may seem a logical idea that the forces created by science can be governed without mortal danger only by that which created them. Can the scientist help us then?

There is no such thing as the "scientist." There are thousands and thousands working in science, and, as everywhere, there are a few dangerous

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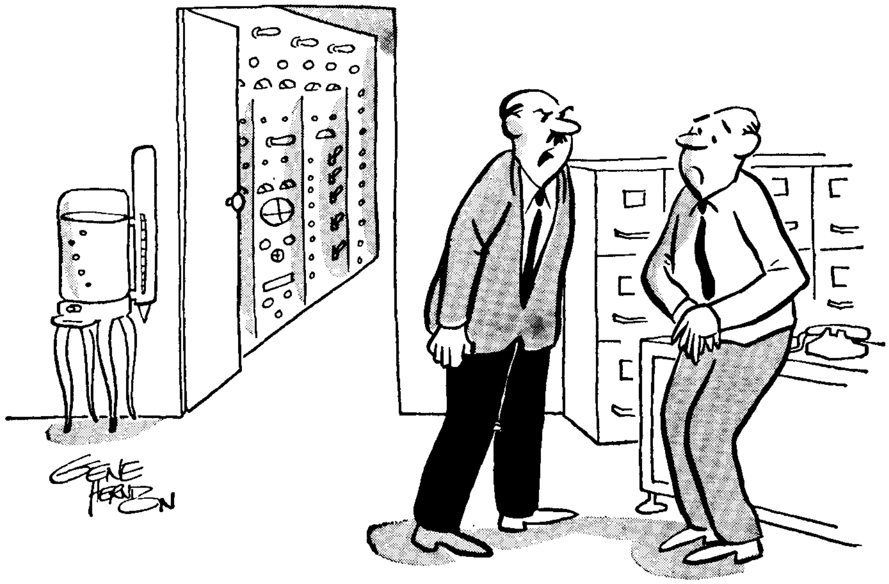

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