

ers his wife's infidelity, and the novel describes his efforts to come to terms with the discovery. Aiken makes brilliant use of the interior monologue, and there is a particularly fine reminiscence of childhood, which is something Aiken always does well. *Conversation* presents a commonplace kind of quarrel between a husband and wife. The bickering is rendered with all of Aiken's skill in realistic dialogue, and there are some tender scenes between the husband and his small daughter. Since the husband is a painter—almost all of Aiken's heroes are engaged in the creative arts—we are once more led to examine the operations of the poetic imagination.

Although he gave some fifteen pages to Aiken's poetry in the *Oxford Book*, Matthiessen did not discuss his work in the introduction. Obviously there was too much to say about some of his more famous or more controversial contemporaries. That, I am afraid, is typical. Certainly Aiken has not been neglected; he has had many honors. His, however, is not one of the names that come quickly to our minds when we think about modern poetry. Yet for fifty years he has been there, and his presence has been felt and will continue to be felt.

"Morning Song of Senlin" is the first poem of Aiken's I can remember reading, and I am still fond of it:

It is morning, I stand by the mirror
And tie my tie once more.
While waves far off in a pale rose twilight
Crash on a white sand shore.
I stand by a mirror and comb my hair:
How small and white my face!—
The green earth tilts through a sphere
of air
And bathes in a flame of space.

The inextricable intertwining of the commonplace and the mysterious has been Aiken's constant theme in poetry and prose. It may be noted that the three parts of "Senlin" are entitled "His Dark Origins," "His Futile Preoccupations," and "His Cloudy Destiny." On the one hand, Senlin is a kind of Everyman, who combs his hair and smokes his pipe and does "the things my father learned to do." On the other, he is a strange and wonderful creature, as, I think Aiken believes, is every human being.

The best parts of the novels are very much like the poems, but, as I have tried to point out, Aiken has many of the specific attributes of a writer of fiction—skill in dialogue, narrative force, a way of making his people recognizable even when they are mysterious. It is good to have his novels in print.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

THE PUBLISHING SCENE

The High Cost of Reading

1. The Hardbounds: When Volume I of Shelby Foote's history of the Civil War came out in 1958 it sold for \$10, a fat price even for those days, although admittedly the book itself was pretty hefty (840 pp.). By the time Volume II was published late in 1963, however, the price had risen to \$12.50, with the result that it cost 25 per cent more to get from Fredericksburg to Meridian than it did to go from Fort Sumter to Perryville. Not only General Grant but inflation had overtaken the Confederate forces.

To the well-read man, inflation seems to have overtaken most books. An admirer of George Santayana may wonder why two recent volumes, published almost at the same time (by different firms), should bear identical price tags, although one represents almost twice as much book as the other. *Persons and Places*, Santayana's autobiography, is 611 pages long and sells for \$7.50. *Santayana: The Later Years*, by Daniel Cory, runs 330 pages and costs \$7.50. What kind of whimsey is this?

True enough, the longer volume is actually a reprint of two previous books, and presumably was made from existing plates. But \$7.50 for a 330-page biography? The average price of biographies published last year, based on a sampling made by *Publishers Weekly* of eighty-nine books from forty-six publishers, was \$6.43, and most of these were fair-sized tomes. People, of course, don't buy averages; they buy specific books, and more and more the feeling is growing that prices are pushing the upper limits.

Nathalia Ginzburg's *Voices in the Evening* is a novel of 171 pages. It sells for \$4.50. *Decision-Making in the White House*, by Theodore C. Sorenson, is published by Columbia University Press at \$3.50. It is ninety-four pages long—or short. Farrar, Straus is getting \$3.95 for Colette's 161-page memoir *The Blue Lantern*. These prices are about par for the nine-hole course, but there is one thing you have to give the publishers credit for—they don't "bulk" these little books the way they used to. Twenty-five years ago a 120-page novel would be made to resemble *Gone with the Wind* (a thick stock was used, something like blotting paper). Today, they are sent into the world just as they are—small and expensive.

One could get into a bootless discussion on the advantage of pricing books

on the basis of quality rather than net weight, and I, at least, am willing to pay more for 161 pages of Colette than 480 pages of Harold Robbins. But the fact remains that the publishers themselves structure their prices, in theory, according to a "formula" that includes production costs, sales and advertising, royalties, and general overhead, in about that order. Yet as an explanation for current price trends even this is unsatisfactory. For example, although the average production cost of all trade books published last year was 35.8 per cent of the wholesale price of the book, the range, as it varied from one publisher to another, extended from a low of 17 per cent to a high of 59. This variation not only indicates considerable flexibility in manufacturing methods and quality of product, but also suggests that the cost of making some books does not really have much to do with the price.

The buyer for a large New York bookstore believes that "formula pricing" is only a floor for the retail price. "The formula tells a publisher what he must charge to break even, not what he *can* charge," this man states. "It sets the lower but not the upper limits of what a book should sell for." These upper limits, I take it, are controlled by such intangibles as competition, the general inhibitions of the market at any given time, and Sex. (Don't laugh. One reason for the high price of such books as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, \$7.50 hardbound, and *Fanny Hill*, \$6.95, is the legal expense involved in defending them in court. Another reason is psychological: if a book is banned, it must be dirty. If it is dirty, it ought to be expensive. That way, my kids can't afford to buy it.)

The buyer quoted above also cites what he calls the "need" or "tool" book, which as a group tends to cost more per page than most. These are frequently hobby or business titles which students or practitioners of the subject cannot afford to be without, and oftentimes cannot afford to buy, either. Since there is usually an assured if limited market, price may bear little relationship to the cost of production. "People *expect* to pay more for this kind of book," is one retailer's explanation.

For whatever reason, it would seem that the cost of learning is outpacing the cost of living. Figures compiled by *Publishers Weekly* show that fiction averaged out at \$3.29 in the fall of 1953,

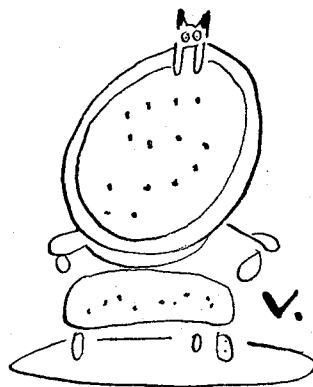
whereas a comparable sampling ten years later came to \$4.52—a jump of 37 per cent. Biographies also went up 37 per cent, and history about 18. A more meaningful comparison is to take the Consumer Price Index (100 for the base period 1957-59) and see what has happened to book prices as measured against the Index trend. Here we find that whereas the Index has gone up 7 per cent to the fall of 1963, the price of novels rose a minimum of 16 per cent, history went up almost 10 per cent, and biography jumped 30 per cent.

Publishers admit that the trend is spiraling, but they insist, too, that the figures are deceptive in at least one respect: for a good many years, they contend, book prices lagged behind the general rise in the cost of living and only now are they catching up. (To “catch up” over the long haul, they must “run ahead” on the short.) You can accept this explanation or not, but there is considerable evidence that something like this has been taking place. In any case, people are buying, even though they complain. In fact, twice as many books are sold today, even on a per capita basis and at today’s prices, than were sold ten years ago.

Publishing being the crazy business it is, who wants to begrudge a publisher his excess profits anyway? “Probably the great majority of new ‘trade’ books are published at a loss—which is not usually a great one,” Dan Lacy, managing director of the American Book Publishers Council, has written. He continues: “Most of what a customer pays for a book in a bookstore goes not to get it written, or printed or published, but rather to get it distributed to him.” The retail mark-up today is around 44 per cent; and by the time shipping and billing costs are added, the figure is almost half the cover price of the book.

The next time you spend \$7 for a book, it is well to bear in mind that one firm has calculated its profit on the initial printing at a modest 35¢ per copy, which will not be earned at all if the book flops. This may not ease the pain, but it helps explain a statement made to me by a publisher some time ago. “If we’re going to go broke,” he said, “we’d rather do it by charging too much for our books than by charging too little.” I must report that at this writing the company is still very much in business.

2. The Paperbacks: If there is a fairly consistent pattern in the pricing of hardbound books—namely, up—the paperback picture can only be described as confusing. “Sometimes I suspect the whole publishing industry went crazy when Anchor came out with its first books,” writes a correspondent, T. E. Blackburn, editor of the *Marquette Uni-*



versity Magazine. “For example, how come Mentor has what purports to be the complete *Federalist Papers* for 75¢ while Anchor has a selection for \$1.45? There is, I take it, a difference in paper quality, but one suspects that other considerations are playing a major role. What are they?”

One consideration is simply that the paperback book industry, during the past ten years, has become two industries: the segment that sells to the mass market, and the so-called “quality” imprints whose distribution, generally speaking, is organized around the bookstores. Both types of publishers used to be called reprinters, but the term no longer applies since a fair proportion of all paperbacks these days are original books. Moreover, the mass-market people have gone in heavily for “quality” titles, while the “quality” firms are now invading the fringes of the mass market.

Matters are further complicated when one considers that there are 335 different paperback imprints on the market today; that many companies publish the same books at different prices; that some of the largest paperback houses are owned by several trade publishers jointly, who individually bring out their own softcover lines; that paperback editions often appear *before* the hardbound edition of the same book, making the latter, in effect, the reprint; and that no one in the industry seems to know just where all this is going to end, let alone how it got started.

Normally, the competition generated under these conditions tends to hold prices down, but in publishing you can make out a strong case that it has actually pushed them higher. With an increasing number of firms bidding for the same books, advance royalties guaranteed by the reprinter have skyrocketed, and this money must be written into the price of the book. Trade publishers in many cases are also finding it more profitable to hold their best books off the open market in order to bring them out as house reprints.

To cite a recent example, Heinrich

Boll’s novel *Billiards at Half Past Nine* was reprinted in soft covers by McGraw-Hill at \$2.95. A book of comparable size and public acceptance is Brian Moore’s *An Answer from Limbo*. In its Dell edition it sells for 50¢. An equally puzzling business is *Salinger: A Compendium of Critical Opinion*, which is available as a Pocket Book at 50¢ at the same time that it is being sold as a Harper Colophon paperback for \$1.75. Interestingly from a cost viewpoint, the Colophon edition was printed from existing plates while the Pocket Book had to be reset.

Again: If you buy Little, Brown’s paperback reprint of *Wickford Point* you pay \$1.95. The Bantam reprint is 75¢. Dell’s *Kidnapped* is 35¢, Signet’s is 75¢. But the classic example is *Hamlet*. It can be purchased for 35¢, 45¢, 50¢, 65¢, 95¢, \$1.40, \$1.50, \$1.65, and \$1.95, all in softcover.

When the reprint business was run by relatively few companies publishing a limited number of titles, it had (without realizing it) reached the apex of its efficiency. The automatic distribution system that formerly made low prices possible no longer applies across the board, for with the proliferation of companies—and books—the distribution problem is becoming essentially the same as it has been for the hardbounds, which is to say inefficient. A wider choice of titles, more outlets, more “originals,” and more customers has had the effect of forcing prices up; and the consumer, paradoxically, is paying more for books today not because the industry has failed but because it has succeeded—too well.

“Maybe the whole subject of book prices ought to be suppressed lest the publishers find out what’s going on,” Mr. Blackburn notes in his letter; and I, for one, am inclined to agree.

—DAVID DEMPSEY.

FRAZER YOUNG’S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1066

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1066 will be found in the next issue.

LFNQ CZ MHAFK LZ ESZTFK

OPQLMF N OFGPETHCZ HK N

LFNQ CZ.

CSPEFNQ

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1065
Skilled verse is the art of a profound skeptic.

—VALERY.