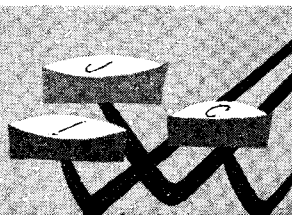


Manner of Speaking



An Editorial April: Thomas Bailey Aldrich was a poet whose profession of the arts outran his own talents. Perhaps that is the imbalance from which all editors are born. Or perhaps it must be said of every poet that his devotion to the art outruns what his talent can make of it. Aldrich, in any case, made little enough of his, and rare is the man who can summon from memory a line from Aldrich's pen. Yet, in his time, Aldrich had an easy gift for literary success, moving in the esteem of most of his literary contemporaries, including even Mark Twain and—more pertinently to Aldrich's career—William Dean Howells, whom Aldrich succeeded as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Aldrich occupied that literary eminence from 1881 to 1890, but unfortunately forgot to take a vacation in April of 1887, for it was then, alas, that he wrote a letter, a copy of which I have before me through the kindness of Peter D. Witt of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and the proof of which you may find for yourself in Ferris Greenslet's *Thomas Bailey Aldrich*, published by Houghton Mifflin back in 1906.

April 26, 1887

DEAR MADAM,—

Though I think this is a good sonnet, I do not retain it, for the reason that I have on hand more poems in that unpopular form than I can conveniently use. The sonnet is essentially a poet's poem; I don't believe that the general reader cares for it.

Your sonnet is very carefully built, and the construction afforded me pleasure; but while reading the lines I wondered if we writers of verse did not give the public credit for more interest in our purely personal emotions than really exists. Why should we print in a magazine those intimate revelations which we wouldn't dream of confiding to the bosom of an utter stranger at an evening party? In what respect does the stranger differ from the public which we are so ready to take into our inmost confidence? The reflection was not new to me, however; it has saved me from writing many a verse that could by no chance have been of the slightest interest to the general public. I trust, dear madam, that you will not think that I write at this length whenever I decline to print a sonnet!

Yours very respectfully,
T. B. Aldrich

From this literary broomcloset above Madison Avenue to that genteel lounge

on Arlington Street, my first thought on reading this letter was that April 26, 1887, was an easy day at the *Atlantic*, and that Aldrich was moved to indulge himself in a languidly pompous way. April has ways of betraying us all.

But only see what wheels begin to turn when an editor answers his mail as if it mattered, and especially as if he mattered. Not only does the office correspondence file begin to bulge beyond reason, but sooner or later a biographer comes to sift through it, a publisher edits it, a compositor sets it, a printer spoils paper with it, a sharp-eyed reader exhumes it and sends it to another editor, and that first foolish impulse is once more processed into print and onto more spoiled paper.

WHOLE provinces of Canada could be deforested for pulp in the circling of one such impulse. Had two editors been so moved once a day since 1887, the advancing dunes of the Canadian desert might already be sifting across the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Let April, I say, be a silence between us, preferably the year round. And yes, of course, I am being as selfish as a sparrow when I chuck your letters into the wastebasket, averted by such an enlightened selfishness!

And what on earth was that April editor saying in the first place? That ladies should be told not to write sonnets certainly makes sense, though I am sure Aldrich got small thanks for his pains. I have myself urged many a lady sonneteer of both sexes to learn how to cook and knit, and I cannot recall that any of them were grateful to me.

But I only objected to the fact that they wrote bad sonnets. Can Aldrich really have been objecting to the fact that his lady wrote a good one? He meant, of course—he *had* to mean—that what she wrote was good enough, but only good enough, and therefore worthless.

But how does an editor manage to object to a poem on the grounds that only poets will like it? Was Aldrich assuming that poets are a bad audience for poetry? They are, I submit, just about all the first audience a good poem is likely to find. Let a poem be written to satisfy today's poets and it will probably satisfy some of tomorrow's general public, but let it be written to satisfy today's general public and tomorrow it will not exist.

April, of course, is a sweet and lazy month in Boston. It tempts a man to open windows, and the windows then let in breezes that get in his hair in a distracting way. Come to think of it, I don't know whether or not Aldrich had enough hair for a breeze to play through. But bare scalps, too, can tingle in the right breeze. I am left to suspect Aldrich, bald or hairy, of suffering from as much spring fever as editorial pomposity can contract.

April or no, I am sure Aldrich was right in rejecting the lady's outpouring. Nor does it matter that the poem he was writing about is unknown. I have at least a dozen of the same sonnet in today's mail. Or should any day miss its quota, I could make it up on the spot: Take any surge of impassioned yearning, add an abyss or two of bereft time, fly in a pair of mating bluebirds, and night cannot fail to turn into a fire of anguish for what the fierce, implacable heart lets go, forswearing kisses that still burn the soul.

But reticence is to be recommended only to the untalented. Should Shakespeare have been more reticent about Lady Macbeth or Othello? Should he have kept their expression within the bland proprieties of "an evening party"? It would be pleasant to send messages of fraternal solidarity from this office to the old *Atlantic's* and from this April day to that one eighty years ago, but not all the imaginable bluebirds (of which there are none here) nor all the breezes of April (these being noticeably polluted) can persuade an agreement. The editor, I am afraid, was doodling at the feet of his own image.

I'll insist for April that poetry is the deepest plunge a man of talent can take into himself. Poetry fails (or—and much the same thing—it succeeds in a pointless way) only when it does not go deep enough. The true plunge outdives the privacy of any one man and becomes everyman's privacy. "What I am," art says, "you are."

No man can come to that saying easily. Yet how easily any man can scribble himself to one side of it. I have it from April, even in this polluted air that still wafts almost like a first again, that most letters are foolish letters. I think I may even burn the rejection slips and come to the office with a basket of new leaves, pressing one into each batch of poems on their way to the Out Basket. Who could complain at sending away a bad poem and getting it back with a green leaf pressed to the page? Or if I am wrong and send back a good poem, who will dare say he sent me as good a thing as I sent back? And right or wrong, where is the editor who can send a better letter from April to April?

—JOHN CIARDI.



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

The Media Crisis in the Classroom

NOT LONG ago SR received the following letter from a man on the West Coast:

Could you help me with this problem? I teach senior (high school) English and wish my students to read several novels by English (England) authors, and am hoping you could suggest about four from which to choose.

Here are the requirements:

- 1) Novel must not have foul language.
- 2) Novel must not deal in prurient sex.
- 3) Please eliminate the so-called classics, i.e. *Tom Jones*, etc.
- 4) It must be available in paperback.
- 5) Novel need not have any social significance, just so it is interesting and the students will *want* to read it.
- 6) Novel can be from any era.

For me it was a troubling letter, most of all because I couldn't help wondering whether a man who had to ask for such advice ought to be teaching English to high school students.

Then there was the problem of foul language and prurient sex. I am not much in the habit of using what I suppose this gentleman means by "foul language," but I have heard a good deal of it in the course of my life, and in recent years I have been reading it, and I don't believe I've suffered much. Being something of an old fogey, I'd probably be embarrassed if I had to read passages containing some of the four-letter words to a mixed group of high school students, but I doubt that the boys and girls would be ruined if they read them to themselves. A reviewer who ought to have known better scolded Bernard Malamud because there are a couple of Anglo-Saxon monosyllables in *The Fixer*. Malamud simply used the words that the people about whom he was writing would have used. A few years ago his publisher would have insisted on his substituting euphemisms, but every

reader would have known what was meant. In our present period of candor such subterfuges have become ridiculous, and anyone who can't bear to let his eyes rest on "foul" words is going to miss a lot of important writing.

I think I know what our correspondent has in mind when he speaks of "foul language," but I am far from sure about "prurient sex." What is prurient to one man is innocent to another and vice versa. To take extreme examples, I shouldn't want to teach D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park* to high school seniors, but perhaps I'd be protecting myself rather than the students. At any rate, there are scores of books that wouldn't bother me but might give pain to somebody else; many communities objected to the assignment of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

But these are minor problems; anyone can think of good English novels that would give pain to no one. What this man is asking for, however, is a list of novels that "the students will *want* to read."

How I wish I could answer that one! It's hard enough for me to find books to recommend to boys and girls I know well. Sometimes a kid comes into our local library with a long mimeographed list that has been given him by his English teacher. "I've got to read one of these books and write a report on it by Monday," he says resentfully. Some of the books on the list are way beyond this boy's grasp; others are quite unrelated to his life. He doesn't want to read a book anyway; he has a dozen things he'd rather do. Knowing a little about his interests, I may be able to suggest something he won't find completely boring, but that's the most I can hope. I couldn't be even as hopeful as that if I were dealing with strangers.

Things were simpler, if not better, in my day. The teacher was given a list of books she had to teach, and she taught

- 27 Literary Horizons: An essay on obscenity and sex
- 28 Letters to the Book Review Editor
- 29 One Thing and Another, by John K. Hutchens
- 30 "The Death of a President," by William Manchester
- 32 "The Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Memoirs," edited by Joseph Wechsberg
- 34 "On Iniquity," by Pamela Hansford Johnson
- 35 "Go to the Widow-Maker," by James Jones
- 36 "The 28th Day of Elul," by Richard M. Elman; "Nightmare of the Dark," by Edwin Silberstang
- 37 "I Want What I Want," by Geoff Brown. "Rosemary's Baby," by Ira Levin. "A Rose of Flesh," by Jan Wolkers
- 38 "Mrs. Satan: The Incredible Saga of Victoria C. Woodhull," by Johanna Johnston; "Vicky: A Biography of Victoria C. Woodhull," by M. M. Marberry
- 39 National Library Week Feature, by David Dempsey
- 42 Check List of the Week's New Books

them, even when she was convinced that they were utterly unsuitable. If she was a good teacher, she interested the bright students; if she was a bad teacher, she bored everybody. Those who couldn't or wouldn't read the books well enough to pass examinations were flunked; and if they didn't get into college, that wasn't regarded as the teacher's fault.

For some time, however, most teachers of high school English have made some effort to find books that would interest their students, and by and large the results have been good. If you are trying to convince teen-agers that reading can be both a pleasant and a profitable activity, *Rascal* is a better bet than *Silas Marner*.

On the other hand, there are many ways in which the difficulties of teaching English to high school students have increased. In the first place, since the end of World War II there has been a strong and understandable and perhaps necessary emphasis on the physical sciences, which have raised their standards and demanded more and more of the students' time. In the second place, at least in suburban communities, there have been more and more organized extracurricular activities. And there is an