

World Rev. No 44

# The Man of Letters in the 1952 Modern World

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To the question: What should the man of letters be in our time?, we should have to find the answer in what we need him to do. He must do first what he has always done: he must re-create for his age the image of man, and he must propagate standards by which other men may test that image and distinguish the false from the true. But at our own critical moment, when all languages are being debased by the techniques of mass-control, the man of letters might do well to conceive his responsibility more narrowly. He has, as his immediate responsibility, to other men as well as to himself, the vitality of language. He must distinguish the difference between communication—of which I shall later have more to say—and the re-discovery of the human condition in the living arts.

The invention of standards by which this difference may be known, and a sufficient minority of persons instructed, is a moral obligation of the literary man. But the actuality of the difference does not originate in the critical intelligence as such; it is exemplified in the specific *forms* of the literary arts, whose final purpose is not the control of men, but self-knowledge. By these arts, one means the arts without which men can live, but without which they cannot live well, or live as men. To keep alive the knowledge of ourselves with which the literary arts continue to enlighten us, to separate them from other indispensable modes of knowledge, and to define their limits, is the intellectual, and thus the social, function of the writer. Here the man of letters is the critic.

The edifying generality of these observations is not meant to screen the difficul-

ties that they will presently encounter in their particular applications. A marked difference between communication and communion I shall be at some pains to try to discern in the remarks that follow. I shall try to explore the assertion: Men in a dehumanised society may communicate, but they cannot live in full communion. To explore this, I must first pursue a digression.

What happens in one mind may happen as influence or coincidence in another; when the same idea spreads to two or more minds of considerable power, it may eventually explode, through chain reaction, in a whole society; it may dominate a period or an entire epoch.

When René Descartes isolated thought from man's total being, he isolated him from nature, including his own nature; and he divided man against himself. (The demonology which attributes to a few persons the calamities of mankind is perhaps a necessary convention of economy in discourse.) It was not the first time that man had been at war with himself: there was that first famous occasion of immemorial antiquity; it is man's permanent war of internal nerves. Descartes was only the new strategist of our own phase of the war. Men after the seventeenth century would have been at war with themselves if Descartes had never lived. He chose the new field and forged the new weapons. The battle is now between the dehumanised society of secularism, which imitates Descartes' mechanized nature, and the eternal society of the communion of the human spirit. The war is real enough; but again one is conscious of an almost mythical exaggeration in one's description.

of the combatants. I shall not condescend to Descartes by trying to be fair to him. For the battle is being fought; it has always been fought by men, few of whom have heard of Descartes or any other philosopher.

Consider the politician, who as a man may be as good as his quiet neighbour. If he acts upon the assumption (which he has never heard of) that society is a machine to be run efficiently by immoral—or, to him, a-moral—methods, he is only exhibiting a defeat of the spirit that he is scarcely conscious of having suffered. Now consider his fellow-citizen, the knowing person, the trained man of letters, the cunning poet in the tradition of Poe and Mallarmé. If this person, who perhaps resembles ourselves, is aware of more, he is able to do less, than the politician, who does not know what he is doing. The man of letters sees that modern societies are machines, even if he thinks that they ought not to be; he is convinced that in its intractable Manicheism, society cannot be redeemed. The shadowy political philosophy of modern literature, from Proust to Faulkner, is, in its moral origins, Jansenist: we are disciples of Pascal, the merits of whose Redeemer were privately available but could not affect the operation of the power-state. While the politician, in his cynical innocence, uses society, the man of letters disdainfully, or perhaps even absent-mindedly, withdraws from it: a withdrawal that few persons any longer observe, since withdrawal has become the social convention of the literary man, in which society, in so far as it is aware of him, expects him to conduct himself.

It is not improper, I think, at this point, to confess that I have drawn in outline the melancholy portrait of the man who is writing this. Before I condemn him, I wish to examine another perspective, an alternative to the double retreat from the moral centre, of the man of action and the man of letters, that we have completed in our time. The alternative has had at least the virtue of recommending the full participation of the man of letters in the action of society.

The phrase, 'the action of society', is

abstract enough to disarm us into supposing that perhaps here and there in the past, if not uniformly, men of letters were hourly participating in it: the supposition is not too deceptive a paralogism, provided we think of society as the City of Augustine and Dante, where it was possible for men to find in the temporal city the imperfect analogue to the City of God. (The Heavenly City was still visible, to Americans, in the political economy of Thomas Jefferson.) What we, as literary men, have been asked to support, and what we have rejected, is the action of society as *secularism*, or the society that substitutes means for ends. Although the idolatry of the means has been egregious enough in the West, we have not been willing to prefer the more advanced worship that prevails in Europe eastward of Berlin, and in Asia. If we can scarcely imagine a society, like the Russian, deliberately committing itself to secularism, it is no doubt because we cannot easily believe that men will prefer barbarism to civilisation. They come to prefer the senility (which resembles the adolescence) and the irresponsibility of the barbarous condition of man, without quite foreseeing what else they will get out of it. Samuel Johnson said of chronic drunkenness: 'He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.' There is perhaps no anodyne for the pains of civilisation but savagery. What men may get out of this may be seen in the Western world today, in an intolerable psychic crisis expressing itself as a political crisis.

The internal crisis, whether it precedes or follows the political, is inevitable in a society that multiplies means without ends. Man is a creature which in the long run has got to believe in order to know, and to know in order to do. For doing without knowing is machine behaviour, illiberal and servile routine, the secularism with which man's specific destiny has no connection. I take it that we have sufficient evidence, generation after generation, that man will never be completely or permanently enslaved. He will rebel, as he is rebelling now, in a shocking variety of 'existential' disorders, all over the world. If his *human* nature as such cannot participate in the action of society, he will not

capitulate to it, if that action is inhuman: he will turn in upon himself, with the common gesture which throughout history has vindicated the rhetoric of liberty: 'Give me liberty or give me death.' Man may destroy himself but he will not at last tolerate anything less than his full human condition. Pascal said that the 'sight of cats or rats is enough to unhinge the reason'—a morbid prediction of our contemporary existential philosophy, a modernised Dark Night of the Soul. The impact of mere sensation, even of 'cats and rats' (which enjoy the innocence of their perfection in the order of nature)—a simple sense-perception from a world no longer related to human beings will nourish a paranoid philosophy of despair. Blake's 'hapless soldier's sigh', Poe's 'tell-tale heart', Rimbaud's nature careening in a 'drunken boat', Eliot's woman 'pulling her long black hair', are qualities of the life of Baudelaire's *fourmillante Cité*, the secularism of the swarm, of which we are the present citizens.

Is the man of letters alone doomed to inhabit that city? No, we are all in it—the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker, and the banker and the statesman. The special awareness of the man of letters, the source at once of his Gnostic arrogance and of his Augustinian humility, he brings to bear upon all men alike: his hell has not been 'for those other people': he has reported his own. His report upon his own spiritual condition, in the last hundred years, has misled the banker and the statesman into the illusion that they have no hell because, as secularists, they have lacked the language to report it. What you are not able to name, therefore, does not exist—a barbarous disability, to which I have already alluded. There would be no hell for modern man if our men of letters were not calling attention to it.

But it is the business of the man of letters to call attention to whatever he is able to see; it is his function to create what has not been hitherto known and, as critic, to discern its modes. I repeat that it is his duty to render the image of man as he is in his time, which, without the man of letters, would not otherwise be known.

What modern literature has taught us is not merely that the man of letters has failed to participate fully in the action of society; it has taught us that nobody else has either. It is a fearful lesson. The roll-call of the noble and sinister characters, our ancestors and our brothers, who exemplify the lesson, must end in a shudder: Julien Sorel, Emma Bovary, Captain Ahab, Hepzibah Pyncheon, Roderrick Usher, Lambert Strether, Baron du Charlus, Stephen Dedalus, Joe Christmas—all these and more, to say nothing of the precise probing of their, and our, sensibility, which is modern poetry since Baudelaire. Have men of letters perversely invented these horrors? They are rather the inevitable creations of a secularised society, the society of means without ends, in which nobody participates with the full substance of his humanity. It is the society in which everybody acts his part (even when he is most active) in the plotless drama of withdrawal.

I trust that nobody supposes that I see the vast populations of Europe and America scurrying, each man to his tree, penthouse or cave, and refusing to communicate with other men. Humanity was never more gregarious, and never before heard so much of its own voice. Is not then the problem of communication for the man of letters very nearly solved? He may sit in a sound-proof room, in shirt-sleeves, and talk at a metal object resembling a hornet's nest, throwing his voice, and perhaps also his face, at 587,000,000 people, more or less, whom he has never seen, and whom it may not occur to him that, in order to love, he must have a medium even less palpable than air.

What I am about to say of communication will take it for granted that men cannot communicate by means of sound over either wire or air. They have got to communicate through love. Communication that is not also communion is incomplete. We *use* communication; we *participate* in communion. 'All the certainty of our knowledge,' says Coleridge, 'depends [on this]; and this becomes intelligible to no man by the ministry of mere words from without. The medium, by

which spirits understand each other, is not the surrounding air; but the *freedom* which they possess in common.' (The italics are Coleridge's.) Neither the artist nor the statesman will communicate fully again until the rule of love, added to the rule of law, has liberated him. I am not suggesting that we all have an obligation of *personal* love towards one another. I regret that I must be explicit about this matter. No man, under any political dispensation known to us, has been able to avoid hating other men by deciding that it would be a good thing to love them; he loves his neighbour, as well as the man he has never seen, only through the love of God. 'He that saith that he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.'

I confess that to the otiose ear of the tradition of Poe and Mallarmé the simple-minded Evangelist may seem to offer something less than a solution to the problem of communication. I lay it down as a fact, that it is the only solution. 'We must love one another or die,' Mr. Auden wrote more than ten years ago. I cannot believe that Mr. Auden was telling us that a secularised society cannot exist; it obviously exists. He was telling us that a society which has once been religious cannot, without risk of spiritual death, preceded by the usual agonies, secularise itself. A society of means without ends, in the age of technology, so multiplies the means, in the lack of anything better to do, that it may have to scrap the machines as it makes them; until our descendants will have to dig themselves out of one rubbish heap after another, and stand upon it, in order to make more rubbish to make more standing-room. The surface of nature will then be literally as well as morally concealed from the eyes of men.

Will congresses of men of letters, who expect from their conversations a little less than mutual admiration, and who achieve at best toleration of one another's personalities, mitigate the difficulties of communication? This may be doubted, though one feels that it is better to gather together in any other name than that of Satan, than not to gather at all. Yet one must assume that men of letters will not love one

another personally any better than they have in the past. If there has been little communion among them, does the past teach them to expect, under perfect conditions (whatever these may be) to communicate their works to any large portion of mankind? We suffer, though we know better, from an ignorance which lets us entertain the illusion that in the past great works of literature were immediately consumed by entire populations. It has never been so; yet, dazzled by this false belief, the modern man of letters is bemused by an unreal dilemma. Shall he persist in his rejection of the existential 'cats and rats' of Pascal, the political disorder of the West that 'unhinges the reason'; or shall he exploit the new media of mass 'communication'—cheap print, radio and television? For what purpose shall he exploit them?

The dilemma, like evil, is real to the extent that it exists as privative of good: it has an impressive 'existential' actuality: men of letters on both sides of the Atlantic consider the possible adjustments of literature to a mass audience. The first question that we ought to ask ourselves is: *What* do we propose to communicate to *whom*?

I do not know whether there exists in Europe anything like the steady demand upon American writers to 'communicate' quickly with the audience that Coleridge knew even in his time as the 'multitudinous Public, shaped into personal unity by the magic of abstraction.' The American is still able to think that he sees in Europe—in France, but also in England—a closer union, in the remains of a unified culture, between a sufficiently large public and the man of letters. That Alexis St. Leger Leger, formerly Permanent Secretary of the French Foreign Office, could inhabit the same body with St. John Perse, a great living French poet, points to the recent actuality of that closer union; while at the same time, the two names for the two natures of the one person suggest the completion of the Cartesian disaster, the fissure in the human spirit of our age: the inner division creating the outer, and the eventual loss of communion.

Another way of looking at the question: *What* do we propose to communicate to

whom? would eliminate the dilemma, withdrawal or communication. It disappears if we understand that literature has never communicated, that it cannot communicate; from this point of view we see the work of literature as a participation in communion. Participation leads naturally to the idea of the common experience. Perhaps it is not too grandiose a conception to suggest that works of literature, from the short lyric to the long epic, are the recurrent discovery of the human communion as experience, in a definite place and at a definite time. Our unexamined theory of literature as communication could not have appeared in an age in which communion was still possible for any appreciable majority of persons. The word communication presupposes the victory of the secularised society of means without ends. The poet, on the one hand, shouts to the public, on the other (some distance away), not the rediscovery of the common experience, but a certain pitch of sound to which the well-conditioned adrenals of humanity obligingly respond.

The response is not the specifically human mode of behaviour; it is the specifically animal mode, what is left of man after Occam's razor has cut away his humanity. It is a tragedy of contemporary society that so much of democratic social theory reaches us in the language of 'drive', 'stimulus', and 'response'. This is not the language of free men; it is the language of slaves. The language of free men substitutes for these words, respectively, *end*, *choice*, and *discrimination*. Here are two sets of analogies, the one sub-rational and servile, the other rational and free. (The analogies in which man conceives his nature at different historical moments is of greater significance than his political rhetoric.) When the poet is exhorted to communicate, he is being asked to speak within the orbit of an analogy that assumes that genuine communion is impossible: does not the metaphor hovering in the rear of the word communication isolate the poet before he can speak? The poet at a microphone desires to sway, affect, or otherwise influence a crowd (not a community) which is then addressed as if it were

permanently over *there*—not *here*, where the poet himself would be a member of it; he is not a member, but a mere part. He stimulates his audience—which a few minutes later will be stimulated by a news-commentator, who reports the results of a 'poll', as the Roman *pontifex* under Tiberius reported the colour of the entrails of birds—the poet thus elicits a response, in the context of the pre-conditioned 'drives' ready to be released in the audience. Something may be said to have been transmitted, or *communicated*; nothing has been shared, in a new and illuminating intensity of awareness.

One may well ask what these observations have to do with the man of letters in the modern world? They have nearly everything to do with him, since, unless I am wholly mistaken, his concern is with what has not been previously known about our present relation to an unchanging source of knowledge, and with our modes of apprehending it. In the triad of *end*, *choice*, and *discrimination*, his particular responsibility is for the last; for it is by means of discrimination, through choice, towards an end, that the general intelligence acts. The general intelligence is the intelligence of the man of letters: he is not committed to the illiberal specialisations that the nineteenth century has proliferated into the modern world: specialisations in which means are divorced from ends, action from sensibility, matter from mind, society from the individual, religion from moral agency, love from lust, poetry from thought, communion from experience, and mankind in the community from men in the crowd. There is literally no end to this list of dissociations because there is no end, yet in sight, to the fragmenting of the Western mind. The modern man of letters may, as a man, be as thoroughly the victim of it as his conditioned neighbour. I hope it is understood that I am not imputing to the man of letters a personal superiority; if he is luckier than his neighbours, his responsibility, and his capacity for the shattering peripetias of experience, are greater: he is placed at the precarious centre of a certain liberal tradition, from which he is as strongly tempted as the next man to escape. This tradition

has only incidental connections with political liberalism; it means quite simply the freedom of the mind to discriminate the false from the true, the experienced knowledge from its verbal imitations. His critical responsibility is thus what it has always been—the recreation and the application of literary standards, which in order to be effectively literary, must be more than literary. His task is to preserve the integrity, the purity, and the reality of language, wherever and for whatever purpose it may be used. He must approach his task through the letter—the letter of the poem, the letter of the politician's speech, the letter of the law; for the use of the letter is in the long run our one indispensable test of the actuality of our experience.

The letter, then, is the point to which the man of letters directs his first power, the power of discrimination. He will ask: Is there in this language genuine knowledge of our human community—or of our lack of it—that we have not had before? If there is, he will know that it is liberal language, the language of free men, in which a choice has been made towards a probable end for man. If it is not language of this order, if it is the language of mere communication, of mechanical analogies in which the two natures of man are isolated and dehumanised, then he will know that it is the language of men who are, or who are waiting to be, slaves.

If the man of letters does not daily renew his dedication to this task, I do not know who else may be expected to undertake it. It is a task that cannot be performed today in a society that has not remained, in certain senses of the word that we sufficiently understand, democratic. We enjoy the privileges of democracy on the same terms as we enjoy other privileges: on the condition that we give something back. What the man of letters returns in exchange for his freedom is the difficult model of freedom for his brothers, Julien Sorel, Lambert Strether, and Joe Christmas, who are thus enjoined to be likewise free, and to sustain the freedom of the man of letters himself. What he gives back to society often enough carries with it something that a democratic society likes as little as any other: the courage to condemn

the abuses of democracy, more particularly to *discriminate* the usurpations of democracy that are perpetrated in the name of democracy.

That he is permitted, even impelled, by the democratic condition itself, to publish his discriminations of the staggering abuses of language, and thus of choices and ends, that vitiate the cultures of Western nations, is in itself a consideration for the second thought of our friends in Europe. Might they not in the end ill prefer the upper millstone of Russia to the nether of the United States? Our formidable economic and military power—which like all secular power the man of letters must carry as his cross, our bad manners in Europe, our ignorance of the plain fact that we can no more dispense with Europe than almighty Rome could have lived without a reduced Greece, our delusion that we are prepared to 'educate' Europe in 'democracy' by exporting dollars, gadgets, and sociology—to say nothing of the boorish jargon of the State Department—all this, and this is by no means all, may well tempt (in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr) 'our European friends to a virtual Manicheism and to consign the world of organisation to the outer darkness of barbarism.' But it should be pointed out, I think, to these same European brothers, that the darkness of this barbarism still shows forth at least one light which even the black slaves of the Old South were permitted to keep burning, but which the white slaves of Russia are not: I mean the inalienable right to talk back, of which I cite the present article as an imperfect example.

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The man of letters has, then, in our time a small but critical service to render to man: a service that will be in the future more effective than it is now, when the cult of the literary man shall have ceased to be an idolatry. Men of letters and their followers, like the *parvenu* gods and their votaries of decaying Rome, compete in the dissemination of distraction and novelty. But the true province of the man of letters is nothing less (as it is nothing more) than culture itself. The state is the mere operation of society, but culture is the way

society lives, the material medium through which men receive the one lost truth which must be perpetually recovered: the truth of what Jacques Maritain calls the 'supra-temporal destiny' of man. It is the duty of the man of letters to supervise the culture

of language, to which the rest of culture is subordinate, and to warn us when our language is ceasing to forward the ends proper to man. The end of social man is communion in time through love, which is beyond time.

# The New American Conservatism

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'It is too bad for America,' a leader of opinion in the United States writes to me, 'that both parties in their platforms continue to straddle all basic issues. We shall still have only one party under two names and with no principles.' Certainly the programmes of the Republicans and the Democrats very nearly approach identity. And they express a common groping sentiment: conservatism. For the most part, this is what Walter Bagehot called the conservatism of fear: 'dread that their shop, their house, this life—not so much their physical life as their whole mode and sources of existence—will be destroyed and cast away.' Yet the new American conservatism is a vast force to be reckoned with; and politicians are going to court it. America needs statesmen and moralists to direct this movement.

During the next generation, at least, the United States will be under the influence of that conservative impulse which dominated the Chicago conventions of both great parties. Collectivistic 'liberalism', through the past twenty years the driving strength behind the New Deal and the Fair Deal, now stands affrighted at the consequences of kindred systems abroad, and is disappointed in its own performance at home. No matter what party wins the elections in November, the United States will undertake

no important leftward-verging measure: there will be no repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, no interference with the internal policies of the Southern states, no flirtation with state socialism, no grandiose new scheme of international improvement. The United States is entering upon what Matthew Arnold called 'an epoch of concentration'—as Britain did after 1790, guided by Burke's ideas and Pitt's arm. This profound change in the climate of opinion will be discerned in politics, letters, education, and even philosophy. It may be a time of enduring achievement, if America finds the ideas and the men she needs to endow the conservative impulse with views that are liberal in the eighteenth-century meaning of that abused word. She must transmute the conservatism of fear into the conservatism of reflection. But can she find men capable of this work?

The United States has no twentieth-century Burke or Adams to be the philosopher of the new era, and no modern Pitt or Washington to direct a confused government. There is no American Disraeli to envelop the conservative cause in an imaginative splendour. The Americans have almost forgotten their conservative leaders of the past—John Adams, John Randolph, John C. Calhoun

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