

**THE
PARTISAN
READER**

THE PARTISAN READER

TEN YEARS OF PARTISAN REVIEW

1934-1944: AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY

WILLIAM PHILLIPS AND PHILIP RAHV¹

INTRODUCTION BY

LIONEL TRILLING

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Introduction

THIS book may be thought of as an ambiguous monument. It commemorates a victory—*Partisan Review* has survived for a decade and has survived with a vitality of which the evidence may be found in the quality and bulk of the present volume. Yet to celebrate the victory is to be at once aware of the larger circumstance of defeat in which it was gained. For what we are calling a notable and difficult achievement is no more than this: that a magazine which has devoted itself to the publication of good writing of various kinds has been able to continue in existence for ten years and has so far established itself that its audience now numbers six thousand readers.

Here is an epitome of our cultural situation. Briefly put, it is that there exists a great gulf between our educated class and the best of our literature.

I use the word *educated* in its commonest sense to indicate those people who value their ability to live some part of their lives with serious ideas. I limit the case to these people and do not refer to the great mass of people because that would involve us in an ultimate social question and I have in mind only the present cultural question. And I do not mean to assert that *Partisan Review* in itself contains the best of our literature, but that it is representative of the tendencies that are producing the best.

The great gulf to which I refer did not open suddenly. Some fifty years ago, William Dean Howells observed that the readers of the "cultivated" American magazines were markedly losing interest in literary contributions. Howells is here a useful witness, not only because he had his finger in so many important literary pies and was admirably aware of the economics and sociology of literature, but also because he himself was so interesting an example of the literary culture whose decline he was noting. The Ohio of Howells' boyhood had only recently emerged from its frontier phase and in its manner of life it was still what we would call primitive. Yet in this Ohio, and

while still a boy, Howells had devoted himself to the literary life. He was not unique or lonely; he had friends who also felt called to literature or scholarship. His elders did not think the young man strange. Literature had its large accepted place in this culture. The respectable lawyers of the locality subscribed to the great British quarterlies. The printing office of the elder Howells was the resort of the village wits "who dropped in, and liked to stand with their back to our stove and challenge opinion concerning Holmes and Poe, Irving and Macaulay, Pope and Byron, Dickens and Shakespeare." Problems of morality and religious faith were freely and boldly discussed. There was no intellectual isolationism and the reverberations of the European movement of mind were felt at least eventually. Howells learned an adequate German from the German settlers and became a disciple of Heine. The past was alive, and Howells, rooting in a barrel of books in his father's log-cabin, found much to read about old Spain—at the age of fifteen, having conceived a passion for *Don Quixote*, he vowed to write the life of Cervantes. At the outbreak of the Civil War, when Howells was twenty-three, Abraham Lincoln, wishing to reward the young author for a campaign biography, offered him, at the suggestion of John Hay, the consulship at Venice. It was then the common practice to place literary men in foreign diplomatic posts.

I am not trying to paint an idyllic picture of the literary life of our nineteenth century. It was a life full of social anomaly and economic hardship. What I am trying to suggest, however, is that in the culture of the time literature was assumed. What was true of Howells in Ohio was also true of Mark Twain in Missouri. Nothing could be falsier than the view that Mark Twain was a folk writer. Like his own Tom Sawyer, he was literate and literary to the core, even snobbishly so. The local literary culture that he loved to mock, the graveyard poetry, the foolish Byronism, the adoration of Scott, was the literature of the London drawing rooms naturalized as a folk fact in Missouri. We were once a nation that took its cultural stand on McGuffey's *Eclectic Readers*. When Oscar Wilde and Matthew Arnold came here on tour, they may have figured chiefly as curiosities, but at least these literary men were nothing less than that.

In the nineteenth century, in this country as in Europe, literature underlay every activity of mind. The scientist, the philosopher, the historian, the theologian, the economist, the social theorist, and even the politician, were required to command literary abilities which would now be thought irrelevant to their respective callings. The man of original ideas spoke directly to "the intelligent public," to the

lawyer, the doctor, the merchant, and even—and much more than now, as the old practice of bringing out very cheap editions suggests—to the working masses. The role of the “popularizer” was relatively little known; the originator of an idea was expected to make his own full meaning clear.

Of two utterances of equal quality, one of the nineteenth and one of the twentieth century, we can say that the one of the nineteenth century had the greater *power*. If the mechanical means of communication were then less efficient than now, the intellectual means were far more efficient. There may even be a significant ratio between the two. Perhaps, as John Dos Passos has suggested, where books and ideas are relatively rare, true literacy may be higher than where they are superabundant. At any rate, it was the natural expectation that a serious idea would be heard and considered. Baudelaire is the poet from whom our modern disowned poets have taken their characteristic attitudes, yet Baudelaire himself was still able to think of “success,” to believe in the possibility of being seriously listened to by the very society he flouted, and he even carried his belief to the point of standing for election to the Academy.

This power of the word, this power of the idea, we no longer count on in the same degree. It is now twenty years since a literary movement in this country has had what I have called power. The literary movement of social criticism of the 1920's is not finally satisfying, but it had more energy to advance our civilization than anything we can now see and its effects were large and good. No tendency since has had an equal strength. The falling off from this energy may not be permanent. It could, of course, become permanent. There are circumstances that suggest it might become so. After all, the emotional space of the human mind is large but not infinite, and perhaps it will be pre-empted by the substitutes for literature—the radio, the movies, and certain magazines—which are antagonistic to literature not because they are competing genres but because of the political and cultural assumptions that control them. And the science and politics with which we are now being confronted may be of such a kind as to crush the possibility of that interplay between free will and circumstance upon which all literature stands. These conditions can scarcely encourage us. On the other hand, they must not be allowed to obsess us, so that we cannot work. They involve ultimate considerations, and—apart from the fact that it is always futile to make predictions about culture—the practical activity of literature requires that a sense of the present moment be kept paramount.

To the general lowering of the status of literature and of the inter-

est in it, the innumerable "little magazines" have been a natural and heroic response. Since the beginning of the century, resisting difficulties of which only their editors can truly conceive, they have tried to keep the roads open. From the elegant and brilliant *Dial* to the latest little scrub from the provinces, they have done their work, they have kept our culture from becoming wholly academic and wholly sociological. They are snubbed and snickered at, sometimes deservedly, and no one would venture to say in a precise way just what effect they have, except that they keep the new talents warm until the commercial publisher with an air of noble resolution is ready to take his chance, except that they keep a countercurrent moving which perhaps no one will be fully aware of until it ceases to move.

Among these magazines, these private and precarious ventures, *Partisan Review* does a work that sets it apart. Although it is a magazine of literary experiment, it differs from the other little magazines in the emphasis it puts upon ideas and intellectual attitudes. And to understand its special role in our culture, we must further particularize the cultural situation I have described—we must become aware of the discrepancy that exists between the political beliefs of our educated class and the literature that, by its merit, should properly belong to that class.

In its political feeling our educated class is predominantly liberal. Attempts to define liberalism are not likely to meet with success—I mean only that our educated class is likely to have a generous, if mild, suspiciousness of the profit motive and imperialism, a belief in progress, science, social legislation, planning, international co-operation, perhaps especially where Russia is in question. These beliefs do great credit to those who hold them. Yet it is a comment, if not on our beliefs then on our way of holding them, that not a single first-rate writer has emerged either to deal with these ideas in a great critical way or to deal in a great poetic way with the emotions that are consonant with these ideas.

Our liberal ideology has produced the author of *The Grapes of Wrath* or the author of *A Bell for Adano*, or lesser simulacra of these, but not, for several decades, a single writer who commands our real admiration—we all respond to the flattery of agreement, but perhaps even the simplest reader among us knows in his heart the difference between that emotion and the real emotions of literature. This contemporary literature of liberalism is often commercially very successful, but it cannot be accused of "commercialism," that old vice which we all used to scold. It is earnest, sincere, solemn. It is socially aware.

At its best it has the charm of a literature of piety. It has neither imagination nor mind.

And if on the other hand we name those who, by general consent—by consent of the very class of educated people of which we speak—are to be thought of as the typical and monumental literary figures of our time, we see that to them the liberal ideology has been at best a matter of indifference. Proust, Joyce, Lawrence, Eliot, Mann (in his creative work), Kafka, Rilke, Gide—all have their own love of justice and the good life, but in not one of them does it take the form of a love of the ideas and emotions which liberal democracy, as known by our educated class, has declared respectable. So that we can say that no connection exists between our liberal educated class and the best of the literary mind of our time. And this is to say that there is no connection between the political ideas of our educated class and the deep places of the imagination. The same fatal separation is to be seen in the tendency of our educated liberal class to reject the tough, complex psychology of Freud for the easy rationalistic optimism of Horney and Fromm.

The alienation of the educated class from the most impressive literature of our time has of course been noted before. Van Wyck Brooks in several dramatically vindictive utterances and J. Donald Adams in his weekly exposition have made the world aware of the dichotomy and have even offered a diagnosis. They attribute the lack of connection to the literal difficulty of the writers themselves and they blame this difficulty on the writers' snobbishness and irresponsibility. They even go so far as to denounce as traitors to democracy all writers who do not turn, as Mr. Adams puts it, "away from the preferences of the self-appointed few, and toward the needs and desires of the many." One might be the more willing to accept this diagnosis if Mr. Brooks and Mr. Adams were more adept in their understanding of what, after all, a good many people can understand, or if they were not so very quick to give all their sympathy and all their tolerance to works of an obviously inferior sort merely because they are easy to read and "affirmative" and "life-giving" and written for the needs and desires of the many. Myself, I am inclined rather to suppose that our tolerance should go to those writers from whom, whatever their difficulty, we hear the unmistakable note of seriousness—a note which, when we hear it, should at once suggest to us that they are not devoting their lives to committing literary suicide.

It would be futile to offer a counterdiagnosis to the one of literary snobbery and irresponsibility made by Mr. Brooks and Mr. Adams,

a counterdiagnosis which would undertake, perhaps, to throw the blame for the cultural situation upon the quality of the education, intelligence, and emotion of our educated class or upon the political ideas of this class. The situation is too complex and too important for so merely contentious a procedure. Neither blame nor flattery can do anything to close the breach that I have described.

But to organize a new union between our political ideas and our imaginations—in all our cultural purview there is no work more necessary. It is to this work that *Partisan Review* has devoted itself for over a decade.

It is of some importance that *Partisan Review* began its career as an organ which, in the cultural field, was devoted to the interests of the Communist Party. Considering it for the moment quite apart from any considerations of politics, the cultural program of the Communist Party in this country has, more than any other single factor, given the license to that divorce between politics and the imagination of which I have spoken. Basing itself on a great act of mind and on a great faith in mind, it has succeeded in rationalizing intellectual limitation and has, in twenty years, produced not a single intellectual work of distinction or even of high respectability. After *Partisan Review* had broken with the Communist Party, some large part of its own intellectual vitality came from its years of conflict with Communist culture at a time when our educated class, in its guilt and confusion, was inclined to accept in serious good faith the intellectual leadership of the Communist Party. In recent years the political intensity of *Partisan Review* has somewhat diminished, yet its political character remains.

As it should remain—for our fate, for better or worse, is political. It is not in itself a happy fate, even when it has an heroic sound. But there is no escape from it and the only possibility of enduring it is to force into our definition of politics every human activity and every subtlety of every human activity. There are manifest dangers in doing this, but greater dangers in not doing it. Unless we insist that politics is imagination and mind, we will learn that imagination and mind are politics, and of a kind we will not like. What marks *Partisan Review* is that it has made this right insistence and within its matrix of politics it has accommodated the old and the new, the traditional and the experimental, the religious and the positivistic, the hopeful and the despairing. In its implicit effort to bring about the union of the political idea with the imagination, it has drawn on a wider range of human personality and interests than any other cultural periodical of our time. And yet, as I think the present volume shows, it has its

own unity. It is the unity conferred on diversity by intelligence and imagination.

But if we grant the importance of the work, we are bound to ask how effectively it can be carried out by such an organ as *Partisan Review*. We are dealing again with power. The question of power has not always preoccupied literature. And ideally it is not the question which should come first to mind in thinking about literature. Quality is the first, and perhaps should be the only, consideration. But in our situation today, when we think of quality, we must ask what chance a particular quality has to survive, to establish itself in the world, and how it can turn itself into transmissible energy that will lead to action. This is not a desirable state of affairs. "Art is a weapon" and "Ideas are weapons" were phrases that a few years ago had a wide and glowing currency; and sometimes, as we look at the necessities of our life, we have the sense that the weapon-metaphor all too ruthlessly advances—food has become a weapon, sleep and love will soon be weapons, and our final slogan will perhaps be, "Life is a weapon." And yet the question of power is forced on us.

At least let us not fall into the temptations it always offers—of grossness and crudeness. Mr. Brooks and Mr. Adams yield to these temptations when they denounce the coterie and the writer who does not write for "the many." The matter is not so simple as these earnest minds would have it. From the democratic point of view, we must say that in a true democracy nothing should be done *for* the people. The writer who defines his audience by its limitations is indulging in the unforgivable arrogance. The writer must define his audience by its abilities, by its perfections as far as he is gifted to conceive them. He does well, if he cannot see his right audience within immediate reach of his voice, to direct his words to his spiritual ancestors or posterity, or even, if need be, to a coterie. The writer serves his daemon and his subject. And the democracy that does not know that the daemon and the subject must be served is not, in any ideal sense of the word, a democracy at all.

The word coterie should not frighten us too much. Neither should it charm us too much—writing for a small group does not insure integrity any more than writing for the many. But the smallness of the audience does not, as Mr. Brooks would have us believe, limit the "human" quality of the work. Some coterie authors will no doubt always be difficult and special, like Donne or Hopkins. But Chaucer, writing for a small court group, did not lack in that broad humanity which Mr. Brooks and Mr. Adams seem to deny to those who do not have a large audience in mind. Shakespeare, as his sonnets show, had

something of the aspect of the coterie poet. Milton was content that his audience be few, though he insisted it be fit. The Romanticists wrote for a handful while the nation sneered. And our Whitman, now the often unread symbol of the democratic life, was through most of his career the poet of what was even less than a coterie.

This stale argument should not have to be offered at all—and it is a grim portent of our political situation that, in the name of democracy, critics should try to make it a poet's shame that he is not widely read.

When we try to estimate the power of literature, we must not be misled by the fancy pictures of history. Now and then periods do occur when the best literature overflows its usual narrow bounds and reaches a greater mass of people than usual. The nineteenth century seems to have been such a period and we honor it for that. Periclean Athens also had this kind of overflowing. But the occasions are rare when the best literature becomes, as it were, the folk literature, and, generally speaking, literature has always been carried on within small limits and under great difficulties. Most people do not like the loneliness and the physical quiescence of the activity of contemplation and many do not have the time or the spirit left for it. But whenever it becomes a question of measuring the power of literature, Shelley's old comment recurs and "it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world" if literature did not continue in existence with its appeal to its limited groups, keeping the road open.

This does not answer the question of a period like ours when a kind of mechanical literacy is spreading more and more, when more and more people insist on an equality of cultural status and are in danger of being drawn to what was called by Tocqueville—who saw the situation in detail a century ago—the "hypocrisy of luxury," the satisfaction with the thing that looks like the real thing but is not. *Partisan Review*, with its six thousand readers, cannot seem very powerful here. Yet to rest with that judgment would be to yield far too easily to the temptations of grossness and crudeness which appear whenever the question of power is raised. We must take into account what would be our moral and political condition if the impulse which *Partisan Review* represents did not exist, the impulse to make sure that the daemon and the subject are served, to insist that the activity of politics be united with the imagination and subject to the criticism of mind.

LIONEL TRILLING

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1: A GROUP OF STORIES

