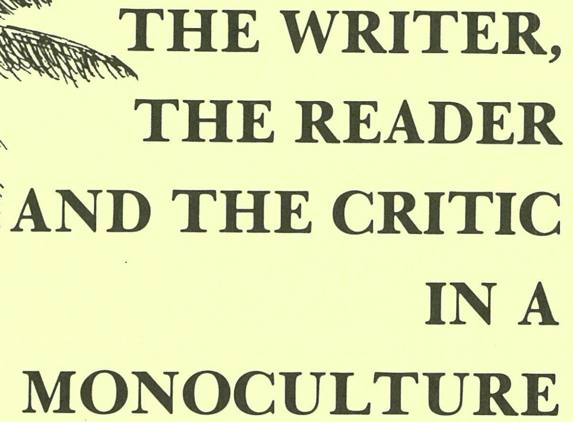

THE WRITER, THE READER AND THE CRITIC IN A MONOCULTURE

by

DOROTHY GREEN

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies 1986

THE COLIN RODERICK LECTURES : 1985

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'When the old gods withdraw, the empty thrones cry out for a successor, and with good management, or even without management, almost any perishable bag of bones may be hoisted into the vacant seat.'

E.R. Dodds: *The Greeks and the Irrational*

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INTRODUCTION

The Colin Roderick Lectures, sponsored by the Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, are delivered annually by a distinguished Australian writer or academic at James Cook University, and subsequently published by the Foundation. The series is named for Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick, Foundation Professor of English at James Cook University and distinguished Lawson scholar. Colin Roderick also established the Foundation in Townsville in 1966 and continues in his retirement to play an active role as its Vice-Patron. The publication of the Lectures makes them available not only to members of the Foundation but to the world-wide literary and academic community interested in the study of Australian literature.

Dorothy Green, the 1985 Lecturer, is one of the most distinguished critics of Australian literature. Her classic study of Henry Handel Richardson *Ulysses Bound* won the Foundation's prize for the best Australian book of 1973. Her revision of H M Green's standard *History of Australian Literature*, and her collection of essays *The Music of Love*, are also major contributions to Australian literary criticism. As Dorothy Auchterlonie she has also written three collections of poetry.

The modest price and format of the Foundation's monographs are designed to make them as widely available as possible.

Professor A J Hassall
Executive Director

THE WRITER, THE READER AND THE CRITIC IN A MONOCULTURE

THE COLIN RODERICK LECTURES, 1985

Preface

These articles are based on three lectures - the Annual Colin Roderick Lectures - given to a mixed audience of students and visitors in August 1985, at James Cook University.

Since it was impossible to know in advance of whom the audience would consist, the lectures were directed towards opening up lines of inquiry rather than towards establishing firm theoretical positions. Speaking and writing, however, are not the same sorts of activity and I have availed myself of Professor Anthony Hassall's courteous permission to revise the talks for publication. The exigencies of lecture-timetables made it necessary to omit a good deal of material. Some of this has been restored; in particular, material which had a bearing on the value of literary study. Since 1945, this can no longer be taken for granted, if indeed it ever could.

I came late to university teaching, and became aware not long afterwards of a difference in the attitude to literature which divided post-war from pre-war students: the loosening of the connection between literature and living. It became apparent that a sensitivity to fictional woes was no guarantee of a sensitivity to the troubles of a neighbour, a colleague, a fellow-citizen, an oppressed foreigner. The tears of Hecuba were far more interesting. Forster's "only connect" was certainly a favourite quotation, but it was rarely put into practice. If these lectures have a theme it is that literature and life are inextricably connected and that writer, reader and critic more than ever before need to combine to produce a 'humane literacy'.

The effort to achieve this object is all the more urgent in an age dominated by a blind faith in science without a corres-

ponding determination to understand the methods and products of science. The growing difficulty of understanding scientific language is one reason for the lack of this determination and the gap between knowledge, thought and speech puts humanity at grave risk. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt suggests, we could become 'the helpless slaves not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is'.

This possibility makes it essential for those convinced of the efficacy of the study of literature to know what it is they are doing. They can no longer take refuge in the traditional argument that humane studies make people humane. They obviously do not. But it is not self-evident that science either could or would want to take over the task. Indeed, the intrinsic character of science forbids it. To succeed in its own sphere science must increasingly concentrate on ever smaller areas of investigation, splinter into ever more specialisms, concentrate more intently on measurement and quantification; in short, continue to lose sight of the person for whose sake these investigations were supposed originally to have been undertaken. And to lose sight at the same time of the planet which is this person's only known home.

Literature is concerned inevitably with the person, as opposed both to the individual and the collective: the person in all the complexity, unpredictability, and uniqueness of his being-in-history. Literature's intrinsic nature is to take account of the whole, not the part; to chart the process by which the person, a social being, may flower as a unique entity, fully human; or by which he may remain forever imprisoned, ignorant of inner resources, an object, a statistic, instead of a subject, an agent in quest of his own destiny. Whether literature performs the task of which it is capable depends entirely on the way in which it is presented to impressionable minds. Those who teach it have a grave responsibility: they can handle it as a delicate instrument of human liberation in every sense of the word, or as a bludgeon which perpetuates the mass-mind, that mind which knows and is satisfied with only 'his own

tiny corner of the universe' and remains 'radically ignorant of all the rest'.

Sheer increase, in people and things, in the last century and this, has affected every aspect of human life, including the arts. We must recognise that populations have increased much too fast for them to become civilised, too fast for them to become capable of discriminating between the ephemeral and the essential. In every sphere, including the intellectual, 'the drive for limitless expansion can only bring us back around full circle to the régime of scarcity'.

Over-production, waste and mal-distribution, the principal evils of the Western economic "system", afflict every aspect of its culture. Literature, like everything else, is dominated by the growth myth: the health of a culture is assumed to be determined by the quantity of its consumable products. Little thought is given to its quality, and still less to the fact that satiety breeds indifference, or to the delusion that the mere devouring of books as they pour off the presses leads to an enlargement of the intellect, to what might be called wisdom.

Like every other commodity, writing is bought and sold, by means of promotion; is subject to market forces, not as much as painting perhaps, since unlike paintings, books are rarely a hedge against inflation. But books suffer the booms and slumps of fashion and are affected by technological change, by which they increase and multiply. The effect of technology on the arts was perceived fifty years ago by Constant Lambert in his book *Music Ho!*, in a chapter entitled "The Mechanical Stimulus". Lambert, the son of the Australian painter George Lambert, sub-titled the opening section of this chapter "The Appalling Popularity of Music", and what he says, applies equally to literature:

> Never has there been so much food and so much starvation, and never has there been so much music-making and so little musical experience of a vital order.

So far, over-production in writing has not led to the kind of torture inflicted on the public by *musak*. We do not yet have to listen to extracts from Mills and Boon or Colleen McCullough in buses, lifts, department stores, or aeroplanes during take-off. But when one looks around at the literary trade in general, the writing, the publishing, the reading, the criticism, the teaching and the rest, one wonders at times how many of the people involved in it have any genuine love of books for their own sakes. Do books mean any more to them than a spanner to a plumber? Do books have any effect at all on the way they conduct their lives? Do writers have any effect at all on the

conduct of public affairs? If the answer to all these questions is 'No', why do people go on writing?

The complaint about over-production is an old one, yet it has never been heeded. In the Old Testament, we read in the book of Ecclesiastes: 'Of making many books there is no end and much study is a weariness of the flesh'. Sir Thomas Browne, nearly two thousand years later, made the same complaint in his *Religio Medici*, when technology had advanced beyond stone slabs and papyrus and was up to the pen and the printing-press. There were too many libraries in the world, he thought, and it would be for the benefit of learning: 'to reduce it as it lay at first, in a few and solid Authors and to condemn to the fire those swarms and millions of Rhapsodies, begotten only to distract and abuse the weaker Judgements of scholars and to maintain the Trade and Mystery of Typographers'.

A hundred years or so later, Thomas De Quincey in a letter of advice to a young man, spoke of the 'enormous gluttonism for books' and added that the result was that 'literature becomes much more a source of torment than a pleasure'.

In the 1850s, John Henry Newman, one of the greatest educational theorists in English, was complaining of a new torment, the rapid growth of periodical literature, partly the cause and partly the effect of the pressure on supposedly cultivated people to have 'views' on every conceivable subject. He deplored the growing demand for 'a reckless originality of thought, and a sparkling plausibility of argument' and pitied the poor journalist 'under the stern obligation of extemporising ... his nutshell views for the breakfast table'. At least Newman was spared the Sunday papers of our own day.

It is true that similar complaints are heard in the Western world today, chiefly in countries well supplied with reading matter, but the prodigal consumption of paper goes on, the destruction of trees continues by the hour and the world's atmosphere in consequence is threatened with a serious imbalance.

This hyper-activity in the writing trade does not mean that a large number of authors earn their living by writing good books. The slaughter of trees is more likely to be caused by consumers of newsprint, producers of memos in government departments, PhD students, academics writing for journals on the 'publish or perish principle', advertisers and their junk mail, travel-agents and the tribe of misbegotten waste-paper merchants who make life such a misery that one longs for the days of stone tablets and cuneiform inscriptions. In comparison with these producers of dispensable products, the number of people engaged in writing what this audience would describe as literature is comparatively small. There are probably about 5,000 writers in this country who earn their living solely by writing; of these only about 5 per cent earn more than $6,000 a year. Of this 5 per cent most will probably be writers of 'How to' books: cookery books, gardening books, boat-building manuals. Most writers of serious literature will have another occupation, and write in their spare time, as authors used to do before the 17th century. This is why most good writers in former times were men, and occasionally women, of means, unless they had wealthy patrons. In our day, government has taken over the role of the patron, on the whole, to the benefit of writers.

In Anglo-Saxon countries, writers are not held in particularly high regard unless they write books which make them a fortune, or win prizes abroad, or which attract sensational headlines in the press. What they write is rarely taken seriously enough nowadays to get them into trouble, except in certain states of North America and Australia. Governments in English-speaking countries do not often feel threatened by criticism from *literati*, as they do, for instance, in Soviet Russia. It is not easy to discover, indeed, why people persist in wanting to write, or more precisely, in wanting to publish what they write. There is no reason why anybody and everybody should not write in private for his own pleasure or to clarify his thinking. But what is it that impels people to think they have something to say which it is imperative to communicate to as many people as possible? Do they expect anyone to listen? Will the motives, not for writing, but for publishing, always survive examination?

Samuel Johnson was of the opinion that 'no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money'. This may have been a piece of self-reproach arising from the fact that for most of his life he made a poor living out of writing and his options were limited. Nevertheless, Johnson had a point. For who in their senses, especially in a country with a fine climate, would want to take up a profession which demands staying indoors, solitude, long hours; which produces little financial rewards after years of work; which, in Australia, is held in low esteem, makes the back ache and from excessive sitting, leads to arthritis in old age?

In modern times, Johnson's motive makes some sense. Properly promoted by advertising experts, the occasional best-selling novel written with one eye on the film makes a fortune. On a more hum-drum level, those who confine themselves to 'How-to' books, or aim at school markets, can make a handsome living. So can the writers of disposable, super-market fiction, though here the threat of saturation is never far away.

The motives of those who aspire to become 'real writers', however, are less clear-cut, and at times border on dangerous delusions. Let us leave aside for a moment those who have new information to communicate, about whose usefulness to mankind there can be no argument; the component of egoism in such writers is probably low.

But in an age when the clamour of many voices from radio, television, video tapes, newspapers, magazines and books, drowns out one's own thoughts incessantly, the desire to be heard above the clamour becomes irresistible. In most artists, including writers, a streak of exhibitionism is inevitable, and perhaps necessary, as an initiating motive.

Among the others, the mystique surrounding the writer's trade is appealing to the young and inexperienced. So is the prospect of escaping routine working hours in office, factory or laboratory. Part of the mystique is the promise of publicity, of escaping the anonymity of an overcrowded world. The technology of modern publicity fuels the desire for it. To live in obscurity, for many Western young people, is feared as much as death.

An equally strong motive is the modern cult of 'creativity', equated with 'self-expression', a useful concept which has been degraded and corrupted. In its most exaggerated form, the urge to 'creative self-expression' is a dangerous delusion. It sees artistic creativity as a religion and the artist as a priest. In severe cases the artist begins to revere himself as a god and he justifies everything he does, however perverse it may be, on the grounds that he must acquire unlimited experience to fulfil his prophetic function. The prevalence of this delusion in our own day is tragi-comic. Never has the word 'creative' been bandied about so widely and so incongruously. It is applied to cooks and real estate agents, as well as to poets and painters. The subject is discussed at length in an essay on 'The Theology of Creativity' by the great American poet-priest Thomas Merton, who points out that in a world where everything is creative, nothing is creative and that the cult of creativity for its own sake becomes synonymous with despair. We should ponder the strange anomaly, he suggests, that this obsession with creativity should exist in the most violently destructive age in history.

Other perhaps less dangerous motives are social in character, rather than individualistic. They include the itch to promote some supposedly social good, like the superiority of one sort of political economy to another, the reform of the marriage laws, education or medicine; and the itch to be productive, to produce cultural commodities. The latter is a side-effect of living in a consumer society, a feeble protest asserting that it is more blessed to produce than to consume.

It is unlikely that any of these motives played a significant part in archaic literature. The songman or story-teller may have been regarded as one whose special duty it was to keep the tribe in touch with the ancestors, to record its history, or its connection with a higher reality. But the notion of a higher reality was in any case fluid, like that of history, and the difference between the sacred and the profane tenuous. There seems to have been little or no emphasis on self-expression. Self-expression does not necessarily need art, in any case. We cannot help expressing ourselves all the time, in everything we do or say. It is possible rather that the tribal artist in some

societies may have felt a certain pleasure in power, beside his proud consciousness of his service to his tribe.

The oldest of oral literatures is that of our own Aborigines and the finest account of one branch is T.G. Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia*. Apart from its splendid translations, the book has a special value for students of literature because of the comparisons it makes with other early literatures. Strehlow shows how Aboriginal literature often anticipated philosophical or religious ideas which we regard as the property of younger European or Eastern civilisations. The technical complexity of the songs is remarkable, a characteristic shared with ancient Irish poetry or with some of the songs of the East Indian archipelago. The purposes of song in the Aranda literature have elements in common with those in other oral literatures. They included songs to charm against enemies, injury and sickness; for rituals and totemic observances; songs to encourage increases in plants and animals; songs celebrating tribal history; songs of love and beauty, or of devotion to the home territory, its fauna and vegetation. There are songs dealing with cosmogony and the religious life, about man's place in the universe, about all those matters which ignorant journalists lump under the one word 'dreaming'. Dreaming is what white people do when they are asleep. The subject-matter of Aboriginal songs springs from minds spiritually awake and intellectually alert, as the anthropologist Ashley Montagu suggested as long ago as 1941.

The religious beliefs of the Aranda and of most Aboriginal tribes, as Strehlow says, 'permeated the whole fabric of their everyday life and thinking', and hence their literature. To sum up, as with all primitive literatures, the work of the song-maker or the poet was social, inextricably woven with the daily activities of the people and necessary to the economy of the tribe. Where, as in pre-Christian Ireland, the bard had a special place, it was for a practical reason. Irish chiefs, for example, kept a satirist who was greatly feared by his master's enemies: his job was to conduct a war of words against them. In post-Christian Ireland, the bard or *ollamh* also had an honoured place in society. He, or often, she, was apprenticed to the

profession and followed a demanding course of instruction for twelve years. The bards were revered in consequence for wisdom and knowledge, which were part of their art. The contrast with most modern practitioners of poetry, especially in Australia, is painful.

In oral literatures the medium was principally verse, obviously because verse is easier to memorize, but also because its magical and mantric quality was important in ritual. Even after the invention of writing and before the invention of printing, verse long retained its supremacy because of its special fitness for ceremonial, especially in religious ritual - a fact brutally disregarded by contemporary Puritans, who have 'modernized' liturgies. In England, in early times, the contribution of religion to culture can hardly be over-estimated. The sermons preached by travelling friars helped to keep the vernacular alive, after the Norman Conquest; provided news, kept stories in circulation, denounced wicked rulers, taught people about ideas of justice and mercy, and maintained the common language in a fit state for poetic use. The source of much of the allegory, satire and drama in England is to be found in the early medieval sermons, and these had links with priestly orations of ancient times and with primitive Christian homilies.

In addition, the role of the secular minstrel lasted a long time, and of the poet-dramatist even longer. And while their role as entertainers grew more important, their function as historian, social critic, community conscience, was not lost sight of, as Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson make plain. The thread linking the morality plays of the pre-Shakespearean era with Horace's view that the poet must aim to instruct as well as to delight may be thin, but it is firm. But in spite of the street ballad-mongers, minstrels, court poets, and chroniclers hired by town councils, we are still a long way off from the professional writer or man of letters who could support himself and his family solely by his pen.

The rise of the secular drama and public theatres made playwriting profitable for a few, but serious writing remained in the

hands of the leisured class, or those with other professions or with wealthy patrons, until the spread of newspapers and periodicals and the increase in the number of readers in the 17th century. One cause of this development must have been the experience of the Civil War, the bitter religious controversies and the political dissensions which accompanied and followed it. It was the great age of pamphleteering and hired hacks were available to support any cause for small sums of money.

Towards the end of the 17th century 'a strange underworld of letters' was already in existence in England, chiefly in London. There is a vivid account of it in an article by Charles Whibley in Volume X of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*. It consisted, he said:

> of beggar students, tavern-keepers, idlers from the inns of court, adventurers who had trailed a pike in Holland ... spruce young squires "who knew the true manage of the hat" and loungers fresh from the universities. Thus, in the coffee-houses, there grew up a new public, for whose amusement a new literature was invented. The old days of dignity and leisure were passed. The wits of the town wrote, not to please themselves, but to flatter the taste of their patrons and many of them succeeded so well as to echo in prose and verse the precise accent of the tavern.

These ribald and irreverent young hopefuls congregated in Grub Street, not far from where Milton lived, and their descendants can be traced through literary life to this day. The Balmain push, the Friendly Street poets, II O and his friends in Melbourne, share many of their characteristics, except perhaps their appalling poverty, which still distinguished them when George Gissing wrote his *New Grub Street* in the late 19th century. There is much to be said for the Australia Council Literature Board. The staple by which the original Grub Street writers lived was translation and burlesques of the classics. Their contribution to English literature was to strengthen yet further the ties with the vernacular, laying a foundation for

realism in speech which novelists were later to make use of. It was this emergence of journalism which more than anything drew the attention of numbers of men and women to the possibility of earning a living by writing. Before that, Dr. Johnson's motive would have seemed eccentric, not to say vulgar. The desire for fame might have seemed permissible and comprehensible, as it was to Milton, but not the desire for money.

The desire for fame brings us into the realm of psychology, face to face with that streak of exhibitionism which we noted earlier as a possibly necessary element in the artistic temperament. For Freud (as for Plato) the stuff of fiction-writing was fantasy, the opposite of the 'real', and he was aware of the part played by vanity in the fantasy. According to Freud, the artist's disposition (which he seemed to think him fully conscious of):

> turns away from reality and transfers all his interest and all his libido, too, on to the creation of his wishes in a life of phantasy ... he understands how to elaborate his daydreams, so that they lose that personal note which grates upon strange ears ... he knows too how to modify them sufficiently so that their origin in prohibited sources is not easily detected ... he possesses the mysterious ability to mould his particular material until it expresses the ideas of his phantasy faithfully, and then he knows how to attach to this reflection of his phantasy-life so strong a stream of pleasure that, for a time at least, the repressions are outbalanced and dispelled by it. When he can do all this he opens out to others the way back to the comfort and consolation of their own unconscious sources of pleasure, and so *reaps their gratitude and admiration.* (Italics mine)

Freud's attempt to link the artist and the neurotic is hardly supported by such a passage; he undermines his own argument as he proceeds by dwelling on the consciousness of the writer's intention to manipulate the reader for his own advantage. Nevertheless, he derives his point of view from the Platonic

notion of the poet as madman or at least as liar. The imagination, on which we place so much stress, did not occupy a high place in classical poetics. Horace had harsh things to say about 'impossible figures wrought into a work of art like a sick man's dreams'. Shakespeare, whatever his own private opinion, makes his Theseus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, lump together the lunatic, the lover and the poet. The view that the writer should keep close to, or imitate nature, though not the only one, was the prevailing one until the early 18th century, when Italian and Swiss literary scholars began to praise imagination. A fine account of this new theory was given by Henry Handel Richardson's husband, J.G. Robertson in his *Studies in the Genesis of Romantic Theory in the 18th Century*. His book shows how the importance of the imagination permeated literary theory, until it issued in the notion of the artist as creator, akin to God himself. This is a notion which would have been shocking to most thinkers in previous centuries, when men were constantly reminded that only God created something out of nothing. It is also a notion which has addled the brains of large numbers of artists and members of the public since the early years of the 19th century to the present day. We need to be reminded once more that the greatest of artists did not invent colour, nor the greatest of musicians sound, nor the greatest of genetic engineers D N A. We may succeed in blowing up the world; it is unlikely that we could put another one together.

Freud perhaps was justified in warning that 'to those who are not artists the gratification that can be drawn from the springs of phantasy is very limited', even though he conceded that 'the intermediate world of phantasy is sanctioned by general human consent'. The fantasies of cowboy presidents and prime ministers who want to be generals certainly provide little gratification for their walk-on cast of millions. Nevertheless, Freud's anxiety to explain the mysteries of artistic production itself requires explanation. True, he was quick to acknowledge that the great writers of Europe had been before him in penetrating to the depths of the human soul and in recognising the unconscious; his job, he said, was to systematize all this knowledge and make it available for the ends of modern medicine. But in spite of this handsome tribute, Freud, as the modern

psycho-analyst, Charles Rycroft, makes clear, felt art to be in competition with psycho-analysis and so preferred to see the artist as neurotic. He worried about 'the problem of the artist' without asking himself why he should have to see the artist as a problem, or why he should expect psycho-analysis to solve it. At last, in 1928, Freud gave it up, recognising that artistic excellence is a mystery.

Some of his disciples have been less wise, and the notion that mental illness is advantageous to art still gets an airing from time to time, especially among literary people who have never had to take full responsibility for mentally ill patients. They are aided and abetted in their attack on the autonomy of the artist by the scientific reductionists. I was assured not long ago by a computer zealot on a TV program that it was only a matter of time before painting could be taken over by the computer. No more mess with paints, brushes, canvas or unsteady hands. The example exhibited on the screen did nothing to reassure me that the results would add to the sum of human pleasure. Since then a reputable academic poet was reported in the Press as saying that 'the word processor was not only a technical break-through. It is an artistic break-through. It allows continuous and massive revision. You are working at the frontiers of ability all the time'. The chop-logic of the statement is breath-taking. Apart from that, did the speaker really believe that Swift was not working at the frontiers of ability when he produced *A Tale of a Tub* or *Gulliver's Travels*? Did he really believe that *Antony and Cleopatra* would have been a more perfect play if Shakespeare had had a word-processor? Has he forgotten the numerous massive revisions which Tolstoy made to his master-pieces? Would a word-processor have done anything for Milton while he composed *Samson Agonistes*? Or, for that matter, for Shaw Neilson, when he dictated his exquisite lyrics to his work-mates? Genius operated for centuries without even a pen, and for centuries more with a goose-quill. The intellectual bond between hand and brain is not to be lightly broken.

The really puzzling thing about all this, which is a subject for psychiatry, is why human beings are so anxious to abdicate to machines. What Aristotle expressed as a wistful hope with

the object of dispensing with slaves, became an obsession during the Industrial Revolution and now looks as if it might become a reality as a result of a compact between genetic engineers and computer wizards. A publisher friend of mine who went to a Chicago Book Fair last year was tapped on the arm by a robot and asked if he were enjoying himself. When he started and chased it away, he was subject to reproachful looks from the people around him. Not so long ago, the representation in art form of a man behaving like a machine was sure of a laugh. Now it is more likely to arouse a reverent interest. Why do we wish to get rid of our humanity, to dispense with the *vita activa*? One of the chief tasks of artists in our time might be to explore these questions, to expose and resist the drift towards mechanization of the human being, who is distinguished from other kinds of life by his unpredictability.

Freud's theory about the role of fantasy in art implies a fundamental opposition between art and nature, as the ancients put it, or in more modern terms, between art and reality. It would be too much to attribute the modern movement towards abstraction in painting and sculpture, the rejection of realism in literature to Freudian influences, but it is interesting that the move to 'dehumanize' art coincided with the period when Freudian ideas dominated psychology. There were however other influences at work, including the natural revolt of a new generation against the dominant ideas of the past, and the increasing desire to make new, to achieve what had never been seen before on sea or land. Both the old theory that it was the business of art to imitate reality or nature, and the newer one that art is creation, transcending reality and revealing a higher reality are dualistic. The first permits a view of art as inferior, the second a view of art as superior. In the light of what is now known about the brain, about perception, memory and the function of language, these simple oppositions between art and reality must at least be open to question.

As far as we know, it appears everyone has to 'create' his own experience of reality. The brain does not passively receive sense impressions and recognise them at once for what they are. The eye has to learn to see, the ear to hear, the fingers to touch and

so on, and the brain has to sort out these crude sensations, transforming them into perceptions. The picture is complicated by the possibility that these operations may be performed at a far earlier period in human life than was thought until recently, and that the infant brain is capable of abstraction of some kind not long after birth. The capacity is speeded up as memory develops and language begins its task of encoding reality and shaping order out of what we have assumed to be a chaos of impressions. (It may even be that the child-oriented educational methods upon which we have prided ourselves have retarded its progress. Our forebears treated children as miniature adults. Without wishing to revert to such a practice, we should at least ask ourselves whether some of our kindergarten methods are carried on too long.)

The point is that the 'creativity' of the artist has to be seen as part of the general human capacity for 'creativity'. All human beings share an ability to describe experiences and these are not fully understood until the descriptions are communicated. Communication is the crux of human living and the crux of art. But that opinion should not delude us into thinking that more sophisticated technologies of communication improve human intercourse. The opposite may be the case. However that may be, art is impossible without interaction between artist and spectator. The emphasis at the moment laid on the proposition that the spectator does not receive passively what the artist offers simply highlights a truth which has always been known, but which in our 'spectator-sports' age has been too long forgotten. To put it crudely, the reader gets out of a book only as much as he is prepared to put into it. This fact does not put him on a footing of equality with the writer; it simply warns him that before he judges a book and finds it wanting, he must make sure that he has equipped himself to read it. In a different kind of society from ours the roles of writer and reader might be interchangeable at will: we should listen to one another's stories instead of to those of professional storytellers. But that would not mean that all stories would be equally enjoyable. It would however break us of the habit of attending too exclusively to masterpieces, when we talk of literature. There is much to be learnt from indifferent literature,

which the theory of general 'creativity' makes possible. In everyone lies a word which speaks to someone, somewhere, sometime. None should be denied the opportunity to *speak* it.

One motive for writing which we have not yet mentioned is of general cultural importance: the instinct for play. Henry Handel Richardson, at a loss what to do after graduating in music and before getting married, suddenly discovered that what she liked best to do was 'to sit behind a closed door and play with words and ponder phrases'. Her contemporary, the sculptor Maillol, when asked about his work, replied: "Je ne travaille pas, je m'amuse".

The writer who does not write because he enjoys it had far better not write. There is no time here to explore the concept of culture as play; instead I commend to you the fascinating book by Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. There are no doubt serious objections to its linguistic theories, but these do not cancel out its power to stimulate and to clarify our thinking. The chapter 'War as Play', for instance, has a terrible relevance for us which it did not have in 1936. The section which here concerns us most is 'Play and Poetry', in which Huizinga argues that *poiesis*, i.e. fiction-making, takes place in the playground of the mind. The child, the visionary, the animal, the savage all belong to the playground world created by the mind, whose elements are magic, ecstasy, laughter and the daydream. 'Kubla Khan' is a familiar, if sophisticated, example of this mélange. Nursery rimes are even more familiar. In many primitive poetic literatures, all the components of poetry as a game were present, along with elements of the sacred and profane. Riddling competitions, bragging matches, singing-duels: in them perhaps we have the shadowy ancestors of the obscurity which bothers so many readers of modernist poetry today. These poetic games were also social occasions, like the drumming-matches which originated in the women's gossip among the Eskimos. In Japan to this day the *haiku* festivals mark the seasons of the year and all the guests are expected to contribute a poem for the occasion. In Sydney, not long ago, a recital of African drumming-poetry was given by performers from the University of Ife, in Western Nigeria. This was welcome evidence that the

links between poetry and physiology, so rapidly being broken by the cerebral poets of the Western world, are still very much alive elsewhere.

Poetry and pleasure seem natural partners, but poetry, or literature in general, has as often, if not more often, been linked with pain. Some of the most powerful works in history we owe to the fact that writing about painful or difficult experiences purges and strengthens the writer, is cathartic, as the jargon has it. We are familiar with Aristotle's notion that tragedy by arousing pity and terror purges the audience of destructive emotions, but we are less willing to allow the writer to avail himself of his own medicine.

Nietzsche put the case more clearly than Aristotle and it may be that he was speaking not only of audiences:

> ... (when the will of man is imperilled by the awfulness of reality) art approaches as a healing and redeeming enchantress; she alone may transform ... horrible reflections on the terror and absurdity of existence into representations with which men may live. These are the representations of the sublime (the tragic) as the artistic conquest of the terrible, and of the *comic* as the artistic release from the nausea of the absurd.

The thought that art might have a therapeutic function for both artist and audience is no doubt anathema to those who believe it ought to have no purpose beyond itself, that literature is a mere arrangement of words on a page with no connection between the author, the time, the place or the circumstances. They are welcome to their belief. But if writing poems can help to keep a schizophrenic out of hospital and enable him to bear his wretched state for longer than he might otherwise have done, I can see no reason to complain. There will be no poems written during the attacks.

Nevertheless, we should remind ourselves at this point of the *caveat* with which we began this discussion: that though there is no reason why anybody and everybody should not

write for any reason they choose, there is no reason why they should expect to have what they write published. There is, unfortunately, an undoubted disposition to publish works because of the peculiar circumstances in which they were written; the news value of works written in prisons or mental hospitals, by alcoholics or drug-addicts can cloud judgement of quality. Those who object to art as therapy have a real point: that one of the most precious qualities of art is in fact its *uselessness*. Hannah Arendt is right to point out that:

> the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not 'using' it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use-objects to attain its proper place in the world.

What Arendt is insisting upon in this context is that art objects are unique, are not exchangeable in the same sense as chairs and tables are exchangeable and 'therefore defy equalization through a common denominator such as money; if they enter the exchange market, they can only be arbitrarily priced'. For example, Australians might remember that the *price* of *Blue Poles* has no relation to its value as a work of art. Arendt argues that works of art, particularly poetry, are 'thought-things', but until they are 'reified' by the artist, i.e. written down, painted, carved and so on, cannot attain that durability which is necessary to give human artifice 'the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men'. One of the chief functions of art is to provide a sense of the permanence of the world, which ordinary, 'use-things' cannot do. More than that, art bestows permanence on activity. It is not the man of action who perceives the meaning of his actions, but the poet or the historian who comes after him. Without the writer, or the song-man, heroes might never have lived, or 'signified'.

Yet, in his consciousness of his proud task, the writer must not fall into the error of over-rating the contemplative life at the expense of the active life. To despise as subject-matter activity in the public realm, to concentrate more and more exclusively on the private, is to acquiesce in the trend to passivity which is only too popular with those who hold power in

the modern world. And thought itself, from which art springs, is a more and more difficult activity in a world full of the din of half-baked opinions, peddled by TV commentators and reporters.

This brief survey of the motives which lead writers to take up the profession demonstrates that the motives are mixed. The only common one is the small spark of exhibitionism, present even in a writer who has some valuable information to impart; in such a case one cannot complain of the motive if the result justifies it. But it is a motive which results only too often in self-indulgence.

For the moment, we may set aside the question of motive, and concentrate on the functions and responsibilities of those who have become writers. If one were to judge by the bookstalls at airports and newsagents, one might be forgiven for concluding that to talk about responsibilities in relation to most writers is simply silly. Their main function is to make money, their responsibility to the publisher is to enable him to make money; to the reader to enable him to pass the time without demanding more than a fraction of his attention. The function of these books resembles that of *musak*; they fill in a silence which Western man can no longer tolerate. Having served that purpose, they are disposable.

Next up the scale are the purely utilitarian books, the myriads of 'How-to' books already referred to, which make up the bulk of publishers' incomes. These may claim some minimal sense of responsibility from the author: a reliable gardening book, simply and clearly written, will have a greater appeal for readers than one which depends on flashiness. If you wish to learn about the astonishing range and popularity of these books, you cannot do better than consult the essay on "Howtoism" in Dwight Macdonald's *Against the American Grain*, one of the funniest and most scarifying literary essays I have read. Nevertheless, it contains a long extract from a treatise by a German author, Ludwig Börne, entitled "The Art of Becoming an Original Writer in Three Days", which Freud acknowledged, according to his biographer Ernest Jones, as having an

important influence on the founding of psycho-analysis. Macdonald's inclusion of the extract shows that 'How-to' books do not need to be bad. The real objection to them is that so many are duplicates under different titles.

At the same time, they are pathetic evidence of the preoccupation of our society with techniques, with professional 'expertise', inseparable from a culture which has prostrated itself at the feet of science. There are indeed not two cultures, as C.P. Snow thought, but one, the scientific. This has spawned a host of sub-cultures, some, like astrology and scientology, inimical to true science. The humanities, literature in particular, out of envy of the hegemony of science, have striven to make their disciplines more scientific, hence the mushroom growths every few years or so, of new schools of literary criticism, which it is hoped will produce *obiter dicta* as supposedly infallible as those of Watson and Crick or Einstein. This hope merely reveals a confusion about the manner in which knowledge is accumulated and about the nature and function of science and art.

Some thinkers hope to resolve the confusion by stressing the similarities between scientists and poets, drawing analogies between poetic metaphors and scientific hypotheses. This attractive theory no longer seems to me tenable. It is more likely Science and Art complement one another because they are opposites. Science so far has been concerned with abstractions and measurement. Art, like life itself, is concerned with the particular instance, with the concrete, with quality rather than quantity. Science must fragment in order to solve problems; art looks at subjects holistically, taking account of the fact that they may have blue eyes and brown hair. Art is never statistical; it does not deal with averages, but with the unique.

It is obvious that both these ways of looking at the world have been necessary, but it is important not to confuse them, nor to suppose they will be eternally serviceable. The scientist began to study nature in order to understand it and enable us to feel less threatened by it. Sometimes his achievement, as in the case of atomic physics, contradicts his intention. The

artist is interested in the variety, the complexity of human existence; he enjoys its very mystery; 'reductionism', 'dreams are nothing but ...' are phrases alien to his thinking. Or they once were. For as the 20th century has worn on, artists have succumbed, perhaps unconsciously, to certain scientific habits of thought, for example, to the demand for the explicit. Suggestion was a powerful tool in post-Romantic art until the advent of Joyce and Proust, even in works described as 'realistic'. Think of the scene in *Middlemarch*, at the beginning of Dorothea's honeymoon in Rome. Her visit to the museum and her wandering among the cold statues tell us all we wish to know about Mr. Casaubon's deficiencies as a newly-married husband. Today, a novelist would not have spared us a single physical detail. After a prolonged diet of modern novels, one begins to long for a row of asterisks.

Another scientific influence is the intense concentration on experimental technique, or method, in preference to significant subject-matter. Just as scientists often appear to hate the world given to them and wish to make another, or take off into space, so writers often appear to hate language and wish to invent a new means of communication of their own. It is as though a cook wished to create dishes out of something which did not originate from food. Scientists have of course already invented a language, largely based on mathematics, in which they can describe what they are doing for other scientists, but this language is no longer of any use for general communication. We are growing accustomed to using objects which we cannot think or talk about, without thinking of the political implications of the fact. One of these is enforced silence, which leads to passivity.

The notion of a 'value-free, pure' science, the object of which is to satisfy curiosity, has gained currency as science has gained power, and it is doubtful whether the recent appearance of 'ethics' committees, in areas like genetic engineering, will have more than a cosmetic function, without some powerful revolution in public thinking. Anyone who still believes Francis Bacon's proposition that science is 'for the merit and emolument of man' had better read Bernard Dixon's *What is Science*

For? (Penguin, 1973), especially pages 138-42. Science, like every other profession in modern times, exists for the benefit of the practitioners: any advantage accruing to those they are supposed to serve is peripheral. This is why the notion of a 'value-free' science is untenable: 'merit and emolument of man' has been narrowed to 'merit and emolument of scientists'. In any case, to divorce science from subjectivity and morality is logically impossible: it is to impose value on it in the form of a negation of value. If purpose, profit and moral justification are absent, the result is to reduce it to a way of filling in time, a game, 'a glorious entertainment'.

It is extraordinary that the myth of disinterestedness, of objectivity, could delude a poet-critic like John Crowe Ransom into declaring that the poetry of the feelings is not one the critic is compelled to prefer to the poetry of knowledge, because it taints it with subjectivity! Poets, he insists, should be pursuing the objective, like scientists. What he is really asking is that the human being, one of the chief subjects of art, must remove himself from it, just as he is removed, by the passive voice, from accounts of scientific investigations. It is possible for arts like music, painting, sculpture and architecture to follow this advice. The art of Islam does not permit the use of the human figure, and abstract painting has ruled the Western roost for most of this century. But writers so far have resisted this move to abstraction, even if only under the compulsion of their medium. No matter how one jumbles up words, they still retain an aura of meaning which relates to the external world. A musical note, separated from a context, has no particular significance; a word separated from other words carries associations in itself. It is still recognisably part of the speech which differentiates the human from the non-human. Speech is still inextricably bound up with human activity. Any attempt therefore on the part of writers to follow scientists along the path of abstraction, towards the further 'dehumanising' of speech, or its fragmentation into specialized dialects, is ultimately a political act, a step towards docility.

In the 19th century the dangers of commitment to scientism and materialism were clearly seen and expressed by numbers of

writers, at the same time as they welcomed the possibility of release from hunger and degrading toil. Their denunciations of the negative side of this commitment, showing life as it was, always carried the implications of what it might be. In much of modern literature, disgust with the human, with modern life, is total and the temptation to join the scientists in their rejection of the earth for the unknown joys of outer space is widespread, even though the counter-revolution in support of Mother Earth, the "Gaia" movement, promises some opposition, especially from feminists and ecologists.

It would be foolish to imagine we had the right to tell authors what they ought or ought not to write about, though of course readers do that by refraining from buying or borrowing their books. But with the unprecedented threat facing human beings and the habitat they occupy, it is perhaps not too much to ask writers to consider in which direction their writing may be taking us: towards more participatory activity in our affairs or towards more passivity?

One thing we should be able to expect in addition is that writers should hesitate to reduce their art to the level of consumer-goods, while at the same time demanding to be treated seriously as writers. There is no limit to the capacity of the production-consumption economy to press every good thing into its service, no limit, that is, unless we become conscious of the fact. Writers can help to increase that consciousness - or dampen it down into a fatal acquiescence.

Over-production, the most striking anomaly of our economic system, is the surest way to the devaluation of books which we could devise, and only writers can do anything about that by making sure that self-indulgence forms no part of their ambition to publish. If our motives do not stand up to examination, we should take up some other trade.

The best advice about whether to enter upon the profession of writer was given by Rainer Maria Rilke, the German poet, to a young man who wrote to him asking if his verses were any good and whether he should go on writing. In his reply, Rilke

was thinking about poetry, which he regarded as the highest of all the arts. Nevertheless, his answer applies to all would-be writers:

> You ask me whether your verses are good ... You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts. Now ... I beg of you to give up all that. You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you. Nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all – ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple '*I must*', then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it ...
>
> Perhaps it will turn out that you are called upon to be an artist. Then take that destiny upon you and bear it, its burden and its greatness, without ever asking what recompense might come from outside. For the creator must be a world for himself and find everything in himself and in Nature to whom he has attached himself ...

This is hard advice, but those who aspire to devote their lives to writing must remember that they are making a free choice. No one is compelled to be a writer, as a child born in the gutters of Calcutta is compelled to be a beggar if it wishes to survive. In Western society, there are still choices to be made about ways of earning a living.

As we have seen, one of the great mischiefs of modern technological society clouding this issue is our unwillingness to distinguish writing from publishing. To repeat, there is no reason why everyone who wants to write should not write, but it does not follow automatically that every piece of writing should be published. The Japanese who attend moon-viewing parties compose poems and read them to one another, but few of them end up in print.

It is possible of course, to be too harsh in condemning what appears to be a hypocritical craze for 'creativity' and a passion to have it recognised. Both may be symptoms of resistance to the contempt for the person, which along with contempt for the earth is characteristic of those who wield power in our times.

It is, after all, blessedly human to want to make something, and the desire to share what one has made, to show it, is natural enough, and indeed indispensable to culture. But these desires could to a large extent be satisfied by other means than slaughtering precious forests to make paper. Poems could be circulated among friends, as was the Elizabethan custom. One may read what one has written to those who want to hear, in a drawing-room. An evening spent in such a way would be more enjoyable than most of the television programs we are offered. There could be more sharing of books in small communities, as was necessary before the invention of printing.

There is another exercise we might perform for ourselves, besides submitting to Rilke's harsh self-examination. We might imagine that a dictator had decreed that all publications in the future must be signed "Anon", on pain of imprisonment. This would clear the ground of all but the most dedicated and necessary authors, allow trees to breathe more freely, and diminish the carbon imbalance. It is worth thinking about.

II

The Reader

There is a mysterious and subtle interaction between readers and what they read which can affect indirectly even those who never read. Most educated people are familiar with the fact that large numbers of young men at the end of the 18th century fancied themselves as Werther, or as a Byronic hero, just as numbers of young women thought and behaved like Werther's Charlotte. No doubt a hundred and thirty odd years later, many thousands of Rhett Butlers and Scarlet O'Haras were produced by reading *Gone with the Wind*. Everyone here will be able to think of contemporary instances, most of them less innocuous. A responsible writer will find this fact alarming rather than flattering, unless, like the scientists, he repudiates any connection between his work and the use to which it is put. Readers should find it even more alarming that they can be so easily wrought upon by writers.

There are one or two cases of writers who wrote to please themselves, caring little whether they were read or not. On the whole, however, writers seem to prefer to have readers, while readers expect writers to provide books for them to read. Unless, like Samuel Butler, readers write their own books, in order to have something to read in their old age.

Modern literary theorists explained to me at a conference a few years ago that writing and reading are identical activities, but this piece of mysticism is out of my reach. It still seems to me that George Eliot must have provided herself with a pile of blank paper, pen and ink, must have sat down and made marks on the paper, which turned into *Middlemarch*; and that if she had not done that, there would have been nothing which we now refer to as *Middlemarch*, from which we could extract variant readings. Readers do not take the blank sheets of paper and impose *Middlemarch* upon them, in any of its forms. They need George Eliot's version, before they can begin making their own as they read. These simple and incontestable facts would hardly be worth stating, if they had not been so passionately denied.

For the purpose of this discussion, then, I shall assume that there are those who can be referred to as readers, as distinct from writers, even though some of us may be both. I shall also assume that readers are of importance to writers, though this importance may vary in degree.

Readers read for many reasons, and most of the main ones were given in Francis Bacon's essay, *Of Studies*, about 400 years ago. In the 1597 version of his essay, he began: 'Studies serve for pastime, for ornaments, for abilities'. That is, people read to fill in time, to shine in conversation, and to equip themselves to make sound judgements in the conduct of their affairs. The first object, to pass the time, became a problem only in wealthy, civilised societies. Hunter-gatherers and modern labourers who toil for a bare living (most of the world's population) are not troubled by it.

In the last edition of his essay, in 1625, Bacon altered his first sentence to 'Studies serve for *delight*, for ornament, for ability'. He proposed that reading was positively enjoyable, not merely a device for filling in time. He went on to warn the reader, nevertheless, not to spend too much time on reading, for that was sloth. He also warned that to use reading to ornament conversation led to affectation, and that to make judgements solely on the basis of what was derived from books was 'the humour of the scholar'. Sound judgement required practical experience and observation as well as theory.

He then gave some hints to readers on how to read books, which are still of great practical value:

> Read not to contradict and to confute, nor to believe and take for granted, but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

Bacon, like that great educator Cardinal Newman, after him, encouraged readers to make *active* use of books, to be in control of them, not to drift passively from one to another.

His opening phrase is particularly important today, when readers have become more and more conscious of the professional critic judging their performance, as well as the writer's: they have become nervous about expressing opinions. There has grown up in pedagogical circles a widespread habit, unconscious perhaps, of thrusting books at young people with the implication that it is their duty to find out what is wrong with them, rather than to understand them. Newspapers are full of reviewers anxious to peddle their opinions of the subject in hand, leaving little space to deal with the book about which they are supposed to be informing their readers. But Bacon is right: the first object of reading is pleasure; the next to 'weigh and consider' or evaluate. To put the second first, is presumptuous.

The passion for contradicting and confuting the writer has led to some curious excesses, especially since the days of the supposed discovery by Wimsatt and Beardsley of 'the intentionalist fallacy' (1954). This subject was given an airing without any fuss more than a hundred years before by the Australian parliamentarian William Forster, in an article on Frank Fowler. He pointed out that a writer's intention might be purposely concealed, obscured, maybe hidden altogether from his contemporaries and even from himself, that is, it could be unconscious. This shrewd observation did not lead Forster to presume to deny that an author could have an intention and could succeed in writing about it; he assumed that the reader's task was to recognise it, understand it and decide whether or not the writer had succeeded in carrying it out. There is no reason in logic why a writer may not have an intention and be able to state it.

As to the 'sub-text', which everyone now seems to think should occupy the forefront of the reader's attention, instead of the main text, there is always the possibility that readers may be deceiving themselves about what *that* is, just as they

may deceive themselves about the 'main' text, and just as the author may be deceiving them about his intention. The history of the reception by two sorts of readers of Samuel Butler's *The Fair Haven*, and indeed of Furphy's *Such is Life*, which had a deliberate and stated intention, is evidence enough of the subtlety with which a writer may continue to pull a reader's leg. *Caveat lector.*

And it is not as easy to read a simple plot or 'main' text, as critics assume. It is wonderful what fantastic theories can be woven into a 'new' interpretation of a piece of fiction, which can be shot down in flames simply by attending carefully to what the author allows to happen to his characters. For example, at what exact point in the play does Hamlet turn and kill Claudius? Why, at that point, and no other?

Bacon's second warning: 'nor to believe and take for granted', is as essential as the first, indeed more essential than it has ever been before. Readers in the modern world are bombarded with reading matter from all directions, much of it filtered through the medium of television. This material serves one of the most powerful instruments of control in the world, a 'brain-washing' industry of frightening sophistication and technological mastery, whose purpose is to maintain existing power-structures. So far, in the western world this 'brain-washing' industry has made it unnecessary to resort to physical force to retain control of populations, as has been done in countries in other parts of the world. But the signs of that apparatus can be read in the sky. 'People must not be allowed to get ideas beyond their station', as Britain's Minister for Education put it so quaintly, last year, an opinion echoed not long after by a Sydney academic. Cuts to education budgets can be as effective as the nocturnal visits of secret police.

University students under pressure to 'weigh and consider' will be comforted by Bacon's approval for the gentle art of skipping, and most modern novels can easily be read a page at a time. Some of them can be swallowed whole, a few pages at the beginning and a few at the end, simply to find out what happens – that is, if we haven't the moral courage to stop

reading half-way through the first chapter. Only a few books ever demand our whole attention, i.e. to be read 'curiously'. If we persevere attentively to the end, our first question should be: 'Do I want to own this book, to read it again and again? How does it compare with books I am in the habit of re-reading?' If readers feel that they themselves do not measure up to a book the first time, it is better to leave it aside, trusting instinct to bring them back to it, if they need it. Only reviewers ought to read twice a book which bores them, to avoid being unjust to the author. We are under no compulsion to read what we do not wish to read.

Bacon's remarks about the specific benefits of reading, conversation and writing are equally helpful. 'Reading', he rightly says, 'maketh a full man', by which he means a person with a well-informed mind; 'conference' (or what we call 'discussion') 'maketh a ready man'. That is, we sharpen our wits by exposing our ideas to others. His third point, that 'writing maketh an exact man' may be an ideal, but it is a useful one. The attempt to express meaning by finding the right words and putting them in the right order is the best exercise in precision we can practise. It is also the hardest.

Bacon amplified his precepts as follows:

> And therefore if a man write little, he had need have a good memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit; and if he read little, he had need of much cunning to seem to know that which he doth not.

Only the first of these three observations needs further comment: 'If a man write little he had need have a good memory ...' Here Bacon is harking back to an age-old cultural question, raised by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, and perceived down to the present day by many so-called primitive people and some not primitive at all. It is the question posed by the opposition between an oral and a written culture. Plato asked, like the New Guinea savage, 'Cannot a man remember?' Or, in other words, is there any necessary connection between true culture and the ability to read and write? It is strongly argued by Indian schol-

ars, for example, that what students cannot remember, they do not really know. In an age when, in the Western world, there is over-production and over-consumption of books, and memorising is despised, the question is urgent. In the 1850s, Cardinal Newman wrote:

> Nothing is more common in an age like this when books abound than to fancy that the gratification of a love of reading is real study.

He regarded most of this apparent passion for books as little more than mental restlessness and curiosity, the 'pleasurable excitement of reading what is new'. It is as true now as when Newman wrote that what the intellect most needs is not wide reading, but precise and exact reading, 'not to swallow knowledge whole, but to masticate and digest it'. 'In all learning', he insisted, just as Bacon did, 'you must not trust to books, but only make use of them'.

It is clear then that readers, as well as writers, must examine their motives for what they do. Does Constant Lambert's statement about music adapt itself to reading as well as writing? 'Never has there been so much reading, and so little reading experience of a vital order?' Or to put it another way, what difference does reading make to our personal and public lives?

One of the saddest things to have to admit is that the accumulated wisdom of the ages, repeated in different ways every generation, sits on my study shelves, yet none of the powerful people who control our lives takes the faintest notice of it. Do these people ever read? If they do, why does what they read have no effect on their policies? Take the present governments', State and Federal, attitude to forestry. The CSIRO and Agricultural departments have stated again and again that our soil will cease to feed us by the end of the century if we do not do something to reclaim it at once. We live in the driest continent in the world, where cutting down trees and overstocking help to increase aridity; but this is the moment politicians choose to permit more logging in rain-forests and an increase in a woodchipping industry which destroys some of our most valuable

woods and increases soil erosion. The result of wood-chipping ends up in Japanese waste-paper baskets; most of the financial profits end up, not in Australian, but in Japanese pockets. This sort of lunacy applies in every sphere of social life; instances can be multiplied indefinitely. To win seats in the next election, our politicians have already mortgaged our future, or at any rate yours and my grandchildren's. After a lifetime of reading, the question I ask myself now most often is: 'What is the use of writing books? Who takes any notice?' The pen may once have been mightier than the sword, but it is doubtful if the word-processor is more powerful than the laser-gun. One looks back wistfully to the days nearly two hundred years ago when both the unlettered and the lettered could be inflamed to struggle for liberty by Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*. One wonders why E.P. Thompson's *Writing by Candlelight* and Hugh Stretton's essay on 'The Quality of Leading Australians' (in a recent issue of the American magazine *Daedalus*) stir no ripples of rebellion in the Australian consciousness. One wonders why a penetrating book like *The Dissenting Academy* (ed. Roszak, 1967), containing Noam Chomsky's great essay 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals' made little or no difference to the pattern of American university life, nor dissuaded scientists from selling themselves to the military, to politics and to industry. Why, in the face of the greatest knowledge explosion in history is there less willingness than ever to apply it? Everyone joins the knowledge-rush as adventurers once joined the gold-rushes, but collectively, we have no more sense than the miners had, when we pick up a nugget in our searches.

There are many reasons why we fail to put our finds to good use; I can do no more than suggest a few of them. One may be a simple failure of will: nations may pass their point of high purpose and of energy, just as human organisms do, though arguments by analogy are never very reliable. As far as the individual reader is concerned, one obstacle to action is the sheer bulk of reading matter which the conscientious student feels obliged to attend to. Beset on all sides, students find themselves able to give their whole minds to very little: in fact, a kind of paralysis sets in. For, even sympathy with misfortune falters if the misfortune lasts too long, and 'there is no good

feeling in the soul of man that does not wear out'. Significant action, therefore, is more likely to result from studying intensively a few good books on a particular subject, than from too expansive an investigation.

If there were a moratorium on the publication of books for the next ten years, there would still be enough to keep good readers busy for many years more than that. They could begin by taking a vow not to read any more books about books, but to study the primary sources themselves. Instead of the airy allusion to the *Iliad* at second-hand, we might read through the *Iliad* itself and find out what a pernicious book it was which influenced the education of the ruling classes of Europe for so many centuries; or at least make up our minds whether the perniciousness is in the book or was in the minds of its readers. We might even find the time to learn to read the original Greek.

Australians are dangerously ignorant of other languages and other cultures, not only of those of Europe, but of those in their own country and round the Pacific rim. It should be chastening for them to read in Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia* of the similarity in plot and psychology between a Southern Aranda epic of courtship and marriage, and sections of the great Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. Strehlow's translation of 'The Song of the Kwalba chief of Tera' shows that Aboriginal poetry has much to teach us. One of the things it teaches is that primitive poetry can have an intricate structure: it is hard to believe the poem was chanted 'by a poet who could not write to an audience which could not read'. It dispels forever the myth that literacy has any direct connection with culture or education.

That is not to deny that in modern industrial society, literacy, the ability to read and write at a minimal level, is necessary for survival. The multiplicity of languages in Australia and the need to translate important public notices into the main ones drive the point home. At the same time, about 10 per cent of native-born Australians manage somehow to get through life without literacy, and there are many other levels of illiteracy in the country besides sheer inability to read. Sometimes there is

little motivation to read, resulting in semi-literacy, caused by the absence of books in the home and bad teaching. At every educational level, including the highest, there is a great deal of careless reading, writing and speaking. Academics, journalists and disc jockeys combine to destroy the structure of the language and to debase its currency to the lowest common coin, with all the assistance modern technology can give them. The inability of the current Prime Minister – a Rhodes scholar – to frame a clear, simple sentence is now a national joke. Supposedly educated ABC commentators utter phrases like: 'to he and I's surprise ...'

My colleagues assure me that none of this matters, language has to change. I am aware of that, but I still fail to see why it has to change overnight because an ill-educated reporter with a poverty-stricken vocabulary and no grasp of syntax is privileged to have a microphone in front of his mouth. Our public figures have been educated by the third generation of illiterate teachers; even the vocabulary for discussing syntax is being forgotten. Surely one of the duties of both writers and readers is to see that language changes only for the better, that is, that it becomes more and more precise, more, not less, rich and poetic. Thought, speech and action are intimately related; an attack on any one of them is an attack on all. A careful study of George Orwell's essay 'The Politics of the English Language' should be obligatory for all students old enough to understand it, especially for women.

Our culture, while it is busy debasing one of the noblest European languages, pays a great deal of lip-service to literacy. We need to examine carefully what those benefits are which we assume are conferred by the ability to read and write. Why do we rejoice to hear, for example, when a new régime takes over in a poor country, that the literacy rate has gone up by leaps and bounds? Is it because we approve of freedom of information, or that we are concerned for the health of the native culture? Or is it because we know that literacy will make it easier to impose Western culture on the native inhabitants?

Certainly, the 'proselytising fury' common among the colonising powers of the 19th century has by no means died out.

As a young journalist, I well remember interviewing the United States Post-master General, James Farley, when he visited Australia during the Pacific War. He was also Chairman of the Coca-Cola Company, and during the course of conversation, he shouted with evangelistic fervour that it was his company's aim to place a bottle of Coca-Cola on every French dinner-table. If the French have been able to resist this missionary zeal, it is only because they resemble the Americans in nationalism and sentimentality. The Americans have never been able to understand that there are people in the world who might not want to be Americans and the French think that all rational people would prefer to be French. The present so-called foreign policy of the one and the colonial policy of the other still illustrate these curious provincial ideas. Literacy always has been and still is a powerful instrument of these policies.

The Anglo-Indian scholar, Ananda Coomaraswamy, in *The Bugbear of Literacy* has put the point with disturbing frankness and accuracy:

> Modern 'education', imposed upon traditional cultures, (e.g. Gaelic, Indian, Polynesian, American Indian) [and he might have added Aboriginal] is only less deliberately, not less actually, destructive than the Nazi destruction of Polish libraries, which was intended to wipe out their racial memories; the Germans acted consciously, but those who Anglicise, or Americanise, or Frenchify are driven by a rancour which they do not recognise and could not confess. This rancour is, in fact, their reaction to a superiority which they resent and therefore would like to destroy.

Evidence for Coomaraswamy's accusation was provided a couple of weeks ago by Australian tourists visiting the Quinkan caves in North Queensland, who asserted their cultural superiority by damaging the priceless paintings.

But before we become justifiably indignant, there are two things which must be said. One is that the Australian vandals should perhaps be seen as victims of the same kind of cultural

deprivation as that suffered by foreign races subject to colonial powers. Sections of a population can become 'colonists' within their own country at the hands of dominating classes. Women in white society have long had this experience. Wiping out the memory of a noble tradition is a mode of domination which working-class people have had practised on them for nearly two hundred years. How many of those who now use the word 'Luddites', for example, as a term of abuse really know who the Luddites were and what they were trying to do?

Secondly, to sentimentalise primitive cultures is as foolish as to deny them any value. European culture has certain values of its own, the loss of which would impoverish the world as a whole, though that is no reason for foisting them on anyone else by force of arms. And yet one has to balance awareness of these values by remembering that most of the intellectual energy of Western culture and most of its irreplaceable resources are at the moment devoted to wiping out civilisation altogether.

The capacity of 'literate' cultures to blot out racial memory and class memory is one of the reasons it is dangerous to rely exclusively on reading for the transmission of culture. The itch to re-write history in favour of the powerful is incurable. This is why the modern educational practice of discouraging memorising in young children when their ability to memorise is at its keenest is so mischievous. It is doubly mischievous when children are persuaded to depend on electronic gadgets instead of on their own reasoning processes. What happens, as E.M. Forster asked in a memorable short story written before 1914, when 'the machine stops'?

It is not self-evident then that a century of 'free, secular and compulsory' education has done more for the spiritual and mental health of Australian people than the oral cultures of former times did for their peoples. Certainly, it can hardly be said of present-day Australians what was once said of Gaelic Highlanders a hundred and fifty years ago:

> The poorest classes speak the language admirably ... some recited thousands of lines of heroic poems.

Most Australians would be hard put to it to recite correctly the words of 'Waltzing Matilda', or their own national anthem, or the second verse of 'God Save the Queen'.

What was observed of Gaelic culture was also noted when African, Indian or other cultures came into contact with European colonisers. One of the things which surprised a Scotch traveller in Ceylon in the 17th century was the unity of the culture:

> ... and their ordinary Ploughmen do speak elegantly and are full of compliment. And there is no difference of ability and speech of a Countryman and a Courtier.

Similarly it was written of medieval Englishmen that 'even the unlettered could read the meaning of sculptures that now only trained archeologists could interpret'.

Nearer home, one wonders what happened to 'the hard-reading colonials' of whom the historians F.B. Smith and Geoffrey Serle have written? How many people would now turn out on the wharves to meet a mail-steamer from London with the latest instalment of a Dickens serial on board?

There are many explanations of which the improvement in communications is the most obvious. It is also clear that people are less dependent on reading for home entertainment; they are also more mobile and can enjoy exciting experiences themselves instead of reading about them. But one reason which is sometimes overlooked is more serious: the functional fragmentation of an audience, which has affected publishing like everything else, because it makes marketing easier. This has produced reading publics, instead of a reading public, with dubious effects on both reading and writing. Readers' horizons are more circumscribed, writers have become less confident about whom they are addressing; they tend to address a particular market, or to write for one another, for the critics, or with one eye on

the film industry. Before the passing of universal education acts, whoever learned to read usually started with the Bible (with which he or she was probably already familiar 'by ear') and then went on to read what other educated people were reading. Class considerations, like age considerations, were marginal; in any case, plenty of well-off country squires and well-descended gentry didn't bother to learn to read. But gradually through the 19th century, the idea of providing books addressed to particular groups of people prevailed: novels for women, edifying handbooks for the rude mechanicals. By the time universal education was the law, considerable attention had been given to books for children, and the acts lent further support to the idea. The number of children who cut their literary teeth on the Bible, Scott, Shakespeare or anything they could lay their hands on gradually diminished; the fine, rich, challenging, miscellaneous feeding of minds ceased to be the norm and gave way to the systematised syllabus, 'suitable' for particular age-groups. The introduction of the teaching of English literature into universities, beginning with London and the Catholic University of Dublin in the 1850s, tended to emphasise its utilitarian rather than its pleasure-giving role. The nadir of this tendency was reached in my own experience when an academic colleague of mine wrote a booklet entitled: *Macbeth as a Teaching Aid*. I thought of all the children I had once read about, and even known, who had dressed up in sheets and plush table-cloths to act out Caesar's murder or Antonio's trial, in playroom or classroom. Even the memory of all this is now being exorcised from many minds. Not long ago, a lecturer in English in Adelaide questioned her ill-prepared students about what Shakespearean plays they had read at school before matriculating. One smug young woman answered proudly that Shakespeare was being 'phased out' at her school and she hadn't read any. This is a far cry from the illiterate swagman of Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles*, who carried a copy of Shakespeare's plays around with him in his swag, in the hope of finding someone who could read it to him now and again.

The final blow to this cross-class, cross-age reading, the ghostly remains of a common oral culture, came with the rise

of the yellow press in the last quarter of the 19th century. Henceforth the under-estimation of the intelligence and of the aspirations of so-called ordinary people by journalists and newspaper owners, whose one purpose was to make money, became an entrenched policy. The policy easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the knowledge of excellence is withheld from the public long enough to make them forget it ever existed, then it is easy to persuade them that the rubbish they get is what they want. The creation of wants is the business of our economy.

With the publication of newspapers like *Tit-bits*, the way was now open for any number of specialised reading markets composed of a number of age-groups of both sexes. The idea of writing down to the public, except in professional journals, became the prevailing one and the habit of regarding literature as a common cultural forum, capable of bridging the gap between numerous sub-cultures began to fade from the mind. How deeply unconscious is this policy of writing 'for' a particular audience was illustrated in October 1985 when a Melbourne newspaper reviewed the new *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. This work had three authors, a woman and two men. A large photograph of the two men appeared over the review. The woman was interviewed separately 'for the women's page', an interview which appeared much later, without her photograph. Is one to assume that the review of the book appeared on 'the men's pages'?

It should be stated that this fragmentation of culture may not be as complete as it seems to be to the academic mind, which derives its opinions chiefly from reading. People whose trade is the study of literature always tend to be surprised if a carpenter quotes poetry. Some of us who watched any of the episodes of an ABC TV serial *Palace of Dreams* might have been tempted to raise an eyebrow when the young man washing the pub floor turned out to have read Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Still, the main argument, sited in the public arena, is not affected by the exceptions, though there may be more than we think.

Again, the effect of the popular press was not wholly bad – nothing ever is. Readers of popular weekly papers like the *Bulletin* were encouraged to help write the newspaper; the general 'creativity' of the human mind, which, as we saw, has a biological base, found in such journals a particular outlet for expression. In some cases, the culture benefited by it, though precisely in what way needs more definition than it has received. It would certainly be foolish to assume that the choice between having a few good readers and a multitude of poor ones is permanent. It is well within our power to make poor readers better, i.e. less gullible.

At the same time, it is not self-evident that the division of culture into 'high' and 'popular' has been an unmixed blessing. For one thing, it has tended to sharpen rather than blur class divisions, and that process seems to me to be accelerating at the moment, rather than slowing down, for various not very edifying reasons. Certain cultural historians, who sincerely regret the fragmentation of culture, unfortunately seek to remedy it by elevating the status of pop-culture. Aided and abetted by the electronic media, which are only too anxious to enforce Gresham's law, they try to unify culture once more by exterminating as 'élitist' and 'undemocratic' everything which is not 'pop-culture'. These efforts are usually made by those who have had all the advantages of the best the traditional educational system can offer them. They then hasten to demolish the ladder by which they have climbed, or to pull it up after them. The result, or so it seems to me, will be to lock the great majority of people into a pop-culture prison. In a sort of Leavisite-process-in-reverse, instead of increasing the possibilities of pleasure for everyone, they are bent on diminishing them. The process is the opposite of democratic; it is a kind of upside-down 'élitism'. Is the last refuge of excellence in the future to be sport?

The fact is that children left to themselves, before the market, the media and the educational system get at them, do not divide what they see and hear and read into 'élitist' or 'classical' or 'popular'. To use an old-fashioned expression, they have, as H.G. Wells once pointed out, a natural good taste. I

have seen young children between the ages of three and ten get up from playing on the floor and dance to the music of Bach's Brandenburg concertos. They had no idea what the music was but said they liked to dance to it because 'it got into their feet'. I have seen teenagers, who never normally bother about poetry, sit spell-bound on the edge of their chairs, listening to the ABC broadcasting Virgil's *Aeneid*. Why should they be deprived of these experiences in the name of pseudo-democracy?

If sales-figures are to be the future criterion of what school children are encouraged to read, then we can expect to see Mills and Boon novels on the syllabus before too long. There is a great deal to be learnt from these novels which sociologists and psychologists find disturbing, but presenting them as English Literature to inexperienced children is no answer to their power to mesmerise. On the clichés and wish-fulfilment fantasies of which they are composed large numbers of girls and women in this country base their expectations of life and marriage. Their popularity among all classes tells us something saddening about our society. No wonder so many of its members founder in the Family Courts; no wonder they are an easy prey to propaganda and provide a large proportion of donkey voters.

If a Mills and Boon novel were measured alongside an account of love and marriage like E.H. Young's *William*, Ada Cambridge's *A Marked Man*, or *Materfamilias*, or Charlotte Bronte's *The Professor*, and *Shirley*, much good might come of the comparisons. But the more likely approach is to assume that a novel that is popular must therefore be good. This proposition would be worth attention only if the readers had a free choice, i.e. were aware of other novels on a similar subject.

If young readers are denied access to traditional excellence, they will set too high a value on the secondhand or the second-rate. The more gifted ones will come to despise reading altogether, unless they are lucky enough to discover they have been robbed, because the schools have failed to do their job.

In the course of reading literature at tertiary level, many students do discover this. They realise that turning to reference books and classical dictionaries to understand allusions that were once common knowledge is a waste of their time and no substitute for having grown up knowing their significance. It should be a matter for some concern among those who frame English syllabuses, when a supposedly well-educated journalist believes that Manning Clark invented the phrase 'put down the mighty from their seats'; any school child fifty years ago could have told him it came from the Bible. It may not matter if we do not transmit the language of King James's Bible (though I think it does), but it certainly matters if we do not transmit its passion for justice, for freedom and for mercy. The indifference of large numbers of Australians to the whittling away of their civil liberties is not unconnected with the content of modern English and History courses.

Good readers, in short are not born, they are made at their mother's knees. Failing the blessing of a home where books abound and are read aloud, much can be done by education departments. They should be required to recognise that young children can be introduced to their literary heritage at quite an early age. My primary school teachers in England introduced me to the stories of *Beowulf* and *Piers Plowman* before I was nine. They read Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* to us and Morris's *King of the Golden River*. The soil was prepared long before we went to the university, and if we did not go, the mind had some basic literary furniture instead of a void. In New South Wales, before the days of the Wyndham Report, it was possible to leave high school with a useful map in one's head with which to find one's way around English Literature, and with some basic vocabulary for discussing it. Yet as late as 1980, I have had to teach university students for whom it was news that Shakespeare wrote his plays in verse. Students can find better uses for their time at university than finding out elementary facts like that. Most of the time-wasting deprivation which takes place in Australian schools occurs in the name of something called 'self-expression', without anyone ever considering what the process is by which the 'self' comes into existence. And no one ever dares to say that some of the

products of so-called 'self-expression' are frankly boring. The truth is that the self does not appear *sui generis*, even though each self is unique. It is compounded of our ancient and complex genetic inheritance from innumerable other past 'selves', together with the infinite influences that work upon us from outside, from past and present environments. It is galvanised into uniqueness by mimesis. Children are not spiders, spinning all the thread they need out of their own secretions. They learn by copying, as every mother knows, just as great artists once learned their trade. Tradition is not dead, nor static. It behaves like yoghurt: you need a bit of the old brew to set the new one working. In this way a new tradition can be invented at any time; without one we are like the displaced Aboriginals, deprived of our racial memories, disabled. Yet see, how quickly, if Aboriginal artists are introduced to European colours new to them, they can incorporate them with ease into their own passionate designs, into the pattern-making which is the centre of their art and song.

The English-speaking world has for the last twenty years been ruthlessly destroying the focal point of its art and literature. The last act of vandalism of the Puritan revolution has been to destroy the language of the Bible and replace it with the language of the ad-man. It would be interesting to know exactly how many people have been drawn into the churches by this revolution. I know of none, though I know of many who have been driven out by it.

The progressive secularisation of culture may provide a partial answer to our question: 'Why, with so much knowledge at our disposal, is so little notice taken of it?' In primitive societies, as we have seen, the distinctions between religion, art and daily life were less rigid, and myth, tradition and ritual were binding forces. In the Western world Christianity took over this binding role, to a large extent, providing an iconography and a literature which maintained links between the sacred and the secular: unconsciously, those who were exposed to its art learned to be at ease with symbolism; those who listened to its Book, developed a sensitivity to poetic diction and rhythms.

Secularisation is not necessarily bad in itself; indeed it may be essential for human growth, compelling humankind to stand on its own feet morally and aesthetically. But as yet, it seems, no compelling moral imperative has taken the place of the old one, fitfully obeyed as that old one was. At first, it was hoped to put art in the place of religion, but art could not seem to supply its own mythology, and the one offered by science turned out too often to be a hangman's rope. The moral collapse of the international community of scientists in 1945 put an end to any hope of redemption from that direction. Philosophy in our days has proved as barren. The verbal games of logical positivism provide no guide to conduct, or scope for the starved imagination. In the 20th century, humanism tried to take over what had been formerly the function of primary schools, 'the initiation of the young into the mysteries of human existence'. Now, it seems, only the outward forms remain and what we have is a mass of cultural commodities. We take these no more seriously than what we buy in supermarkets. If we judge by what goes on in the public realm, we do not allow them to change the way we live; and the public realm is at least a partial reflection of the private.

Paul Tillich, the great theologian, has put this point succinctly in his *Theology of Culture*, (p.151):

> Today, the means of mass communication mediate these empty remnants of former cultural creations to everybody, day and night. But we must ask, which of these cultural goods speaks to us as the German poet, Rilke, felt that the torso of a Greek Apollo spoke to him – "Change thy life!" Cultural goods have become trimmings, means for having a good time, but nothing ultimately serious, nothing through which the mystery of being grasps us. Humanism has become empty, and so has the humanistic ideal of education.

Tillich goes on to point out the inevitable result of the failure to replace one living tradition by another: the frantic search for symbolic 'meaning' of some kind or other, even if it turns out to have a demonic-destructive character. One symptom of this

search is the popularity of astrology in a science-dominated age. Moonies, scientologists, half-baked European cultisms, promoters of Armageddon by 'Christian' fundamentalists, all testify to a widespread central emptiness. This lack of a firm centre helps to explain why it is possible for the commandant of a concentration camp to enjoy Mozart, or for a designer of nuclear missiles to profess a love for fine literature: neither has any reference point. Institutionalised religion failed because it lost sight of its reference point; secularism has yet produced none which commands common consent. The solution is most certainly not a return to institutionalised religion, but a facing of the fact that this earth is the only 'home' of which we can be certain and that if we scuttle it, we have no power to create another out of nothing. From the facing of these two facts, all else follows.

Writers cannot bear all the blame for the power-crazed delusions which, from time to time, bring societies to the edge of destruction. From the Old Testament prophets onwards there have been plenty of warnings of the folly of mistaking cleverness for 'godlike creativity'. Readers must accept their share of the blame for misreading the warnings. If we read merely to consume books, to fill in time, to shine in conversation, to get on in our profession, or merely for the best of these motives, for pleasure, we still remain in the realm of play. There is a time for play, which is an indispensable component of art and science, but to play all the time is infantile. And the less harmful forms of play, like art, show no signs of displacing the destructive forms, like war. Nor will they, until critical readers who take what they read seriously, form a demanding majority of voters who will compel their representatives to look further ahead than the next election.

Destruction, it must be admitted, is an evolutionary necessity, in so far as it leaves the way open for future growth. But for the first time in history we can no longer be sure of this. And yet this very uncertainty itself may be the first step on the road that will put some real content into humanism, or else provide us with a new theology compatible with the psychic and spiritual needs our times thrust upon us. The August, 1985

issue of the Australian Conservation Foundation magazine *Habitat* has a message of hope: an article on the two main divisions of eco-philosophy, one of which directs attention to the sacramental. It would be poetic justice if science, which led us away from the sacramental, were to lead us, not back to it, but forward to a new perception of it, founded on experience as well as innocence.

We may at last arrive in our intellectual life at that happy symbiosis foreshadowed by Wordsworth in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he saw the poet as the natural and equal partner of the scientist, 'carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of science itself'. He goes on:

> The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, of the Botanist, of the Mineralogist will be as proper subjects of the poet's art as any upon which he could be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.

'Manifestly and palpably', 'enjoying and suffering' ... Perhaps the new depth-ecology will at last allow the abstraction and supposed objectivity of science to give way to the particularity, the concreteness and the feeling which characterise literature and which a fully humane culture demands. Writing which encourages the humanisation of science deserves all the support it can get from discriminating readers, equipped to tell the difference between the sham and the genuine. For above all else, we need no more shams, no more fashions. If this new eco-philosophy stands up to rigorous examination, careful readers will have to be prepared to prevent the press from trivialising it.

The word 'discriminating' is a reminder that in considering the deceptions that can be practised on readers by those who have the power to manipulate reading material, we arrive at a paradox. To avoid being deceived, deprived or manipulated,

one needs to be well-informed, i.e. to read widely. To avoid superficiality, one needs to study a few worthwhile books intensively. The dilemma becomes more insoluble as each year passes: one needs the past for balance, the present because one lives in it. Academic readers in particular feel beleaguered by the demands of specialisation, the supposed duty to read all that has been said about a particular subject before they venture an opinion on it. Science students meet the problem by reading journals rather than books: the books, they say, are out of date by the time they are published.

If readers are looking for nothing but information, that may be true, but one rarely reads even scientific books merely for information, and it would be fatal for readers of literature to adopt this practice.

What readers of literature need most to get into their heads is that there is no inevitable 'progress' in art, except perhaps in music, where the technical aspects of instrument making have made some progress possible. But good writing and good painting do not depend on technical innovation. There has not as yet been a better play written than *Antony and Cleopatra*, and there are no modern novels I should swap for *War and Peace* or *Middlemarch*, and few I should swap for *Maurice Guest* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, though I should not like to have to choose.

The only advice of any use to the freewheeling reader faced with a multitude of books is, keep freewheeling. Blessed are those who are privileged to read what they like.

To those harassed students of English, whose reading is programmed for them, one can repeat only that if something has to go, it should be books about books. At all costs go to the originals. It is better to struggle through a good annotated edition of Chaucer for yourself than to read what someone has written about him. The more criticism one reads, the more one finds the same old ideas turning up in various guises; if you miss a point in one book, you will pick it up in another. If you feel the need of help, it is far more useful to read the books an

author is known to have read, rather than criticism. You will learn more about the relationship between fact and imagination from doing so than you otherwise would. Critics are sometimes useful for pointing out such books, for example, Livingstone Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* is a signpost not merely for a particular poet, but for a general insight into a process. Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal* performs a similar task.

Next to going to the primary sources and to the sources of a writer's inspiration, is the importance of informal discussion. The hard-pressed student need not try to do everything himself. Knowledge can be shared and this sharing is one of the supreme functions of a university. The mere gathering together of intelligent young people with common interests has an educational value, even if no teaching takes place. Or so it once seemed. Looking back on my own student days, I realise we learnt as much from one another as we did from most of our lecturers. We seemed, in comparison with modern students, to have a great deal of time and inclination to discuss our work and argue about it among ourselves. Contemporary students in comparison appear niggardly about sharing ideas; ideas are now more marketable perhaps. The old-fashioned reading party, common at Oxford and Cambridge in the 19th century, might be due for a revival. Our generation made use of something of the kind, during long week-end walks in the bush, or camping or sharing a shack at the beach. The labour of revision was lightened, the free exchange of ideas stimulating. The nearest analogue I can think of today is the proliferation of small reading groups among women around Australia: little pockets of cultural activity ignored by male cultural historians. Not all the women manage to read all the books on their chosen list, but all take part in the discussions, if only as listeners, and carry away something they had not thought about before.

Another help to good reading is to include some foreign literature in one's program, if only in translation. Nothing is more calculated to throw a flood of light on one's own culture than to stand in the shoes of an outsider and attempt to share his or her feelings. Australians have a particular need to see themselves as others, Asians for example, see them.

Finally, conscientious readers need to learn to trust their own responses. When they have done everything to safeguard against superficial judgements, remembering that books judge us, though we claim to judge them; when they have made sure that they have read and understood the words on the page, and not the ones they think are there or would like to be there, then they must have the courage of their own convictions. There is no one reading of a book, but there are some that fit the facts better than others. Each reader is standing in a different place from that of every other and is able to offer a contribution to the interpretation of a book which is unique. Each contribution can be tested against the others and against the text, and the less tenable discarded. So truth advances by slow accretion and slow elimination.

All our knowledge must be tentative; we gather evidence and hold our temporary truths in suspension, prepared to abandon them when better evidence turns up. Or so it should be. The sad fact is that readers and critics of literature tend to cling to opinions in despite of evidence rather more than scientists do. For example, the doctrine of the fatal flaw in tragedy has long been shown by classical scholars to be nonsense, but it still has a vigorous half-life. So does the view that 'Hamlet was a man who couldn't make up his mind'.

Australian literature also abounds with myths which commonsense or good scholarship could demolish, such as the one fashionable at the moment, that Henry Handel Richardson felt like a stranger in her own country.

One hopes that the careful readers whom our writers need more than anything else will put an end to this kind of nonsense.

III

The Critic

The literary critic's relation to writer and reader is somewhat analogous to that of the Holy Ghost to the other two members of the Trinity: it is less clearly perceived and therefore less appealing. The writer is seen and sees himself as in some sense a 'creator'; the reader is in some sense his partner in the process, since, if no one read what he had to say his ideas would not be made manifest. But what is there left for a critic to do? Is a special kind of reader-writer really necessary? No one who is not already more than reasonably literate would read literary criticism. Moreover a good deal of what passes for literary criticism belongs in reality to experimental psychology, evolutionary biology, history, linguistics or biography: some critical generalisations can be tested experimentally. But there has not been so far any convincing aesthetic dogmatism which has succeeded in eliminating personal preference from one's response to art. We can have a duty to believe two and two make four, but not a duty to like a book against our will.

Between 'creative' writers and critics there has been almost continual internecine warfare. 'Succubus', 'parasite', 'saprophyte', 'eunuch', have been some of the milder epithets hurled by artists at critics who have purportedly undervalued or misrepresented their works. The artists have been equally outraged if critics have failed to write about them at all. Critics have defended their trade by pointing out, quite rightly, that a healthy culture is impossible without free, open, disinterested criticism, though some of them are reluctant to notice that original writers themselves, if they are serious about their work, cannot help practising criticism, any more than a person can help acting politically, whether he votes or not.

One could put an end to this war by asking a simple question, though the answer would not demonstrate that critics are superfluous or useless. The question is: Would you rather have created Hamlet than written one of the thousands of books about him? Leon Edel claims to know more about Henry James

than anyone on earth. Which would you rather be: Henry James or Leon Edel? Few genuine lovers of literature would hesitate.

But there is a curious fact about *English* literature which makes one wonder whether the contempt artists have for critics is as single-minded as it appears. That is, the willingness (which George Watson has written about persuasively) for poets to turn to literary criticism, as if they found the boundaries of their art too narrow for what they wanted to say. From Dryden onwards we have an imposing roll-call of 'creative' writers who became critics: Addison, Pope, Fielding, Johnson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Arnold, Eliot, Empson. Why? Is there a parallel register of imposing names in the world of painting, music or architecture or sculpture of artists who turned critics? I doubt it. Perhaps the reason is simple: to take up music or art criticism, one must, apart from parody, employ words. That is, one must move from the domain of the auditory or visual arts to the art whose medium is words, i.e. literature, and no musician or painter or sculptor worth his salt would do that. But the poet who turns from poetry to criticism, that is, to prose, remains within the frontiers of literature and may be judged by its canons. The ultimate test of a poet's prose, as of his verse must be based on style: his choice of the right words in the right order. A good example of such a test is Swift's sentence in *A Tale of a Tub*, Ch.8, in which rhythm plays as crucial a role as it would have done in a poem:

> Or whether Fancy, flying up to the Imagination of what is Highest and Best, becomes over-short, and spent, and weary, and suddenly falls, *like a dead Bird of Paradise, to the ground*.

Not: 'and suddenly falls to the ground, like a dead Bird of Paradise'. It is open to the critic, therefore, as it is to any other prose writer, to provide poetic pleasure, and in so far as he does so, he has some claim to be regarded as an artist. The trouble is that to read much fashionable contemporary criticism is like chewing sawdust.

No doubt it is true that the ultimate test of writing, whether poetry or prose is not the only one; a novel ought not to be judged by the canons proper to a lyric poem, nor a play by what is proper to epic. All other things considered, including style, the difference between a good work and a great work will be determined by matter. It is possible to write well upon a broomstick, as Johnson said of Swift, but not to write greatly. In both 'creative' writing and criticism, the true artist rises to his subject.

The writer's attitude to the critic has been and continues to be ambivalent partly because he is reluctant to recognise him as a fellow-writer, one who uses language; but above all because of his self-congratulatory belief that he is a god-like being who 'creates' and therefore merits homage, not criticism. This belief, as we have seen, is a delusion. Writers use and develop what is 'given'. In the last analysis, we are all parasites upon the vegetable kingdom, and even vegetables, for all they have learned the trick of photo-synthesis, did not invent light. The critic must come to terms, like all living things, with his 'parasitism', his secondariness. In reality, he is doing what the writer is doing, taking certain materials already in existence, and using them to make a statement, which, he hopes, has not been made before. The hope frequently tempts him as it tempts the poet, to an unseemly lust after mere novelty, but even this error may be fruitful.

To use the modern jargon, the critic takes a text as his starting-point for making a new text. Whatever objections can be raised about texts must therefore apply to *his* text. There is no such thing as being above the battle, though the impression we get from reading each new wave of criticism in the 20th century is that critics are not subject to the weaknesses they discover in the texts they examine. Nor are they willing to disclose why they choose some texts to examine and not others. Could it be that some suit their theories and others do not?

English literary criticism as a systematic way of discussing literature is of fairly recent origin. It can be divided into various

kinds: prescriptive, intended for the instruction of poets and addressed to them, a legacy of classical rhetoric, with an immense technical vocabulary; aesthetic, or theoretical, largely derived from the Italians, who derived it from Greece; and descriptive criticism, which developed into the analysis of individual works. The first kind is practised only in a debased form by so-called 'creative writing' schools. The second, after the drifting apart of critic and philosopher is at the moment experiencing a rejuvenation, largely at the hands of philosophers, semioticians and historians. Descriptive criticism, the most lively form of criticism in English will probably survive the onslaught of the theoreticians because of its close dependence on particular texts.

Considered purely as a trade, criticism may be said in modern times to have four branches, book reviews or literary journalism; academic criticism and literary history; interpretation and appreciation, partly professional, partly amateur in the good sense, and literary theory, which threatens to appropriate literature itself. It has all the features of a bureaucracy, an institution which exists not to serve the writer but the critical theorist. It is not that literary theory in itself is new which makes it disturbing, but that it is now clamorous and highly organised. Literary theory must always have existed wherever there were groups of writers, though only a small proportion has survived in print. The best of it occurs incidentally in the work of great writers, poets and dramatists: Hamlet's speech to the players for example, or the 17th chapter of George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, which pauses to acquaint the reader with the author's theory of realism in the novel. The interruption is forgivable because of the charm with which it is presented and the sympathy with human weakness it discloses.

The appropriation of literary theory in the 1970s by philosophers and semioticians is an example of the rise of specialisms and division of labour characteristic of our political economy. The jargon spawned by these specialists is arid and forbidding, and writers as well as readers have become infected by it. People do not 'say' or 'state' what they are thinking anymore, they 'signal'; a metaphor with a faint military overtone. The

literary theorists combine to banish the 'writer'; so the writer pretends he isn't there, or else that the reader can't believe a word he says, because he is only playing games. The object seems to be to break down the trust between writer and reader altogether, to destroy genuine communication. It is one thing however to discourage readers from slavishly identifying with fictional characters or with the 'narrator' of their stories; it is quite another to invite them to spend time which they can ill afford on confidence tricks. If a writer has no ideas or experiences which he thinks are worth communicating, he had better not write at all. As a mere pastime, an alternative to *ennui*, literature can no longer compete with the sheer physical pleasures modern life has to offer. The one trump card left to it is fully to engage the mind. For that to happen the lover of literature must be allowed to have direct experience of the work. The real objection to much of the currently fashionable methods of analysis is that they are far more deadly than the old habits of paraphrase and précis. From these there was a chance that the student would come back to a poem later with increased understanding. Under structural and all the other modish analyses the poem too often disappears, never to return. The analysis has taken its place as an object of admiration. At least no one could admire a paraphrase, which often had the merit of arousing a healthy resistance to its exercise. Nowadays we are struck dumb with wonder at a succession of 'isms'.

The trouble is that unmediated experience of any kind is rare in modern life – unless perhaps one is illiterate, in which case experiences may be limited in number. Even in our most private encounters, the voice of the specialist seems to be whispering in the background, urging us to measure the experience we are having against the one he has told us we ought to be having. If we need this kind of assurance, the old-fashioned poets and novelists themselves are less harmful guides: they have no certificates and we know they are writing fiction.

In the past, neither writers nor critics were cut off as specialist professionals from the society in which they lived. Sophocles, Herodotus, Sidney, Donne and Raleigh were all deeply

implicated in the public affairs of their time. Jonathan Swift, who was passionately and continually active in the political, religious and social conflicts of the early 18th century wrote brilliantly about all of them, and especially about literature and learning. Some of his diatribes had practical results, and his gloomy prophecy about the outcome of party government, of which he observed the origins, has proved all too accurate. What is true of English writers, is also true of the finest writers of other European nations. The man of letters, content to be nothing else, is a relatively modern phenomenon. So is the 'creative writer' who is also a good critic. Too often those who enjoy a reputation in both fields, like Dryden and Eliot, are indulging in self-justification, sometimes at the expense of accuracy. Once a reputation is established, especially in the Australian literary climate, it becomes difficult to challenge it; a curious blindness to evidence sets in.

Critics in our society, many of whom depend on reviewing to supplement a meagre income, are more subject to its pressures than writers themselves. For one thing, serious writers seem to be self-employed, or fortunate enough to enjoy government patronage, however limited in scope it may be; patronage which has on the whole bravely resisted efforts to make it prescriptive. The freedom of Australian writers to speak their minds has also partly been protected by the country's notorious anti-intellectualism; no one takes writers seriously enough to feel threatened by them, except, forty years ago, on the grounds of sexual morality.

Writers are also more fortunate than critics in that they are one degree nearer to reality; the critic, however much immersed in his society he may be, is compelled to comment on it as it presents itself in fiction. It is harder therefore for him to maintain his independence when subjected to pressure. Or, as George Steiner put it, 'In the twentieth century, it is not easy for an honest man to be a literary critic'.

I learnt that lesson in 1941, as a theatre reviewer for a daily newspaper. In 1985, the pressures on critics are less blatant, but more pervasive, as the case of the book I mentioned earlier

demonstrates. Why were reviewers so reluctant to draw attention to the real substance of Hugh Stretton's essay 'The Quality of Leadership in Australia', in *Daedalus*, (Winter, 1985)? Because of the links between government, the professions, business and newspaper ownership? Because any fundamental criticism can now be absorbed into the prevailing blandness? Because the conventional wisdom states that if there is anything wrong with the economy, it can only be the fault of unions demanding higher wages, never of management's inefficiency? No doubt all these reasons were operating at the same time.

The fate of Stretton's article suggests that there is no more need for open pressures on critics. By emphasising one kind of criticism rather than another, by writing out of the historical record whatever is regarded as 'destabilising', by encouraging magazines and newspapers to censor themselves, information can be withheld from the Australian public without any apparent oppression. [Since I delivered these lectures, I have had occasion to witness a major act of censorship in the literary field, committed by one of the largest and most supposedly 'liberal' of Australian newspapers].

Some journals frequently welcome trenchant criticism of the *status quo* as a means of sustaining their reputation for impartiality. The editor of an authoritarian journal can often disarm opponents by pointing to the fact that he has published an article from time to time opposed to his paper's policy. That is, he can turn dissidence to his own purposes. This puts critics in a difficult position. They do not wish to preach forever to the converted and welcome an opportunity to address an audience whose views differ from their own. But they also do not welcome being 'used'. There is no satisfactory solution to this dilemma, except to insist that one's copy shall in no wise be tampered with.

Since 1945, of course, the threat of nuclear war has been enough to persuade restive populations of their supposed helplessness, and large proportions of them have indeed rendered themselves truly helpless by succumbing to alcohol, drugs and mindless sexual indulgence to avoid facing their

anxieties, anxieties compounded by their government's use of unemployment as a weapon of control. Hardly any western governments have any policies for the welfare of their people; their aim is merely to stay in power. The insistence of much literary criticism that literature must be 'pure', must be studied in isolation from the world in which it occurs plays into the hands of those who wish to remain in power; 'neutrality' maintains the *status quo*; to challenge it might make things worse. It is the argument used by those who lived near the Nazi concentration camps.

The fact is that 'pure' literature, unlike music or the visual arts, is an impossibility, mainly because its material is not reducible to an abstraction. It uses language and language is difficult to disengage from what is distinctively human, ie speech. Even before the formation of city-states, the Greeks regarded speech and action as equal activities; one implied the other, and were regarded as the highest of human activities, essential to the life of the *polis*. The order in which action, thought and speech operate is not clear; their interrelationship is indubitable.

It is clear that, as the work of Swift shows so brilliantly, writing can serve all the different views of literary art we noted earlier, at one and the same time: passionate involvement in the life of one's age, art as sheer exuberant fun, art as a vehicle for personal expression, art as dialectic, communication, intercourse; art as a problem of language – the arrangement of 'the right words in the right order'. In the passage from *A Tale of a Tub*, already referred to, where Swift likens Fancy or Imagination to a bird of paradise, we have exercised a pure act of literary criticism by suggesting that it would make a difference if the last phrase were put somewhere else in the sentence. At the same time, we can look at the context of the sentence and ask whether Swift's analysis of human mental activity is convincing, and finally in the wider context of the book as a whole, ask what is the bearing of this activity on religion, learning, social and political behaviour. We cannot stop at the order of the words; we must look at their content and their context if we are to perform a whole critical act. But content is not

something which has invariably interested certain influential Australian critics or writers now or in the recent past. Hope's much-anthologised 'Australia' for example, a 'critical' poem, needs more rigorous analysis than it has yet received, starting with its inert and irrelevant opening metaphor. So does his extraordinary 'valedictory' 'On the Death of Pius XII', which is written as though this Pope existed outside of history. Much criticism in the last decade encourages this kind of passivity in reading.

It is not surprising then that the 'in' word at the moment in literary criticism is 'textuality', the up-to-date version of the anti-historical, 'words-on-the-page' theory made fashionable by the ill-defined and variegated New Criticism movement, which set out to purify criticism from about 1910 onwards. It was as if no one in the past had ever looked at words on a page, or practised 'close' criticism. Since then there has been upheaval after upheaval: no sooner is one new, sure and certain way of reading and criticising literature proposed than another springs up to replace it. It is possible that 'textuality' will be out of fashion before these lectures are published.

There are two possible reasons for this: that a flurry of critical activity distracts attention from the fact that we now live in a world in which it seems to some critics themselves that to spend one's life practising literary criticism is fiddling while Rome is about to burn.

But a more compelling reason for the obsession with theorising is the one which is part of our theme: the fact that we live predominantly in a scientific age. Every study, nowadays, claims to be 'scientific', even economics, which, if we are to judge by its meagre results, is pure fiction. Art and music flirt with mathematics, and poets and novelists make ritual gestures in the direction of the 'soft' sciences.

Literary criticism falls into the same trap, which sadly, is not a new one. From the beginning of its career, criticism has refused to admit that it is subjective, and has striven vainly to establish objective canons by which to justify opinion. Now, with the help of linguistics, semioticians, and the paraphernalia

of computers, a more powerful technology has been pressed into service. When I was a student, statistical and stylometric methods were becoming the rage; the great white hope was Caroline Spurgeon, who began counting Shakespeare's images. Today the computer tells us that Shaw Neilson referred most often to the colour 'green', a fact which must be obvious to anyone who reads his verse. As far as I know, the significance of the fact has not yet been established by the computer.

It is argued in favour of some of the new -isms, Structuralism, for instance, that they have enabled readers to break free from the spell of the author and increased the capacity for independent judgement, instead of subjecting them to a false 'reality'. Did we really need Structuralism to do that? Did Fielding ever allow us to forget he was telling a story, when he constantly addressed us as 'Dear Reader'? It is doubtful whether readers are ever as stupid as writers and critics imagine them to be, as was recognised long ago by W.M. Skeat, in his Introduction to *The Kingis Quair*:

> The literary merit of the poem has often been discussed and I have nothing more to say about it here. To point out the beauties or demerits of a poem is not always a kindness to the reader, for it deprives him of the pleasure of forming his own judgement upon a subject which he may be peculiarly competent to consider.

Skeat, who belonged to that company of bibliographical critics, whose work is arguably far more useful, and more thankless, than any other kind, had no illusions about scientific objectivity in descriptive criticism. He knew too much about soulful interpretations based on incorrect texts.

All the scientific apparatus in the world is not going to turn what is personal in its nature into anything even as provisionally reliable as the Second Law of Thermodynamics. We can arrive at tentative judgements about a work of art by discussion based on a wide acquaintance with various literatures and a deep study of a few texts, but there is no way of *proving* them correct and certainly no way of compelling posterity to accept

them. Oddly enough, one of the most convincing statements of this position comes from a scientist, the zoologist Alex Comfort, in an essay called 'On Laying Plato's Ghost' in his book *Darwin and the Naked Lady*. In it he points out that books, like animals, can become fossilised when there is no longer a need for them, though, unlike the fossilised animals, as long as they exist in print, they can be resurrected if a new 'ecological niche' occurs. More important, however, is his argument that just as medicine has discovered that each of us has a blood pressure or a digestion individually 'normal', so there may be a polymorphism of taste, which makes it pointless to try to shame someone into liking Henry James or Ezra Pound if he does not. The best a critic can do, he suggests, is to write about the works he likes and to like the works he writes about. He still has a duty to expose sham and pomposity, but he needs to be sure he is dealing with those vices and not merely with someone whose literary stomach differs from his own. Comfort's book is immensely stimulating, especially for its chapters on the origin of violence in European literature. It does not throw much light on the problem of why literary critics since the 17th century have had such a passion to transform their art into science, but it does remind us that we must be more precise in our objections to the invasion of literature by 'science'.

Architecture could not exist without physics; music depends on mathematics and acoustics. Literature can get along without science at all. But it is doubtful whether any of the arts can match in complexity and difficulty sciences like genetics, immunology and molecular biology. These ought to command respect from even a superficial reader for the immense effort required to study them. The effort is so immense that it must of necessity be a corporate one; no individual working on his own could hope to succeed. It is true that there is a place in this corporate effort for humdrum minds, but unless these were directed by minds of outstanding quality, discoveries would come to an end. There are similarities with literature: plenty of hacks, few geniuses. But having paid homage to one of mankind's greatest intellectual adventures, we are free to point out that it is this very corporateness of science that differentiates it from literature, which is practised in solitude. Individual

scientists must fragment and narrow their areas of interest and then recombine. The ambition of science to explain makes it hostile to the polysemous, whereas the poet rejoices in multiple meanings. The writer and the critic, therefore, who hope to impose scientific method on literature run the risk of destroying its distinctiveness altogether. The wistful yearning for aesthetic certainty is a denial of that personal, human element which ought to be the chief boast of literature, not a matter for apology.

Mixed up with this yearning, however, is something less acceptable. There is also an element of unacknowledged envy for the power and prestige accorded to scientists in modern technological society as compared to the diminishing respect accorded to humanists. 'Let's make criticism scientific' is an ambition which has its dark side.

It has been suggested that the kind of mind which is attracted to science in the first place is one which is ill at ease in human relationships, more comfortable with things. Things are not prone to conflict and collisions, to unpredictability; order is more easily imposed on their confusions than upon human chaos. In addition to discomfort with chaos and the thirst for irreducible explanations, the desire for control is a significant factor in the choice of a career. The scientist who really 'knows' something, enjoys a faint sensation of power, however commonplace the rest of his thinking might be. His feeling of power is reinforced by the admiration of the layman, who rarely takes the trouble to understand what real science means. The real scientist knows that the popular enthusiasm for economic growth will end up permanently impoverishing the planet. But the literary world shows no sign of recognising the need for questioning satiety in its own field, or any other.

Now that science has been integrated for half a century with the power-brokers of industry and the military the pretence of benefiting mankind has become farcical: the business of fouling our own nest proceeds faster than ever. The techniques of the factory assembly-lines and of the laboratory can now meet and join hands with the same end in view: the aim of dispensing with the 'superfluous' human being.

What is there to resist these pressures except the liberal studies which include art and literature? How will they resist them if writers and critics capitulate to the yearning for the predictable, for dogma, forming a fifth column within the ranks of literature itself? Will literature benefit by competing with science as a growth industry? Must the computer pluck the heart out of every mystery?

The connection between art and living in the world certainly appears to be what the current fashion for textuality denies. It may be true, as up-to-date historians argue, that there is no way to get past texts and apprehend history directly. But to admit this does not mean we cease to be interested in past or present events. These, as Edward Said argues in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) are *in* the world, events are part of the social life of the world. They share historical moments which can be recognised and interpreted. If we still want to defend a liberal education, we cannot ignore the historical world which liberal studies, including literature, occupy. But, Said continues, textuality is now being used to displace history; textuality is not supposed to occur in any time or place except on the pages of a book. Worst of all, to my mind, is that it is isolated from the senses, and education of the senses has never been a feature of Australian education. There are many Australians who do not even *see* trees.

Said believes that the philosophy of textuality is no chance phenomenon, but a side effect of increasing militarisation and the Cold War. The assumption is that literature should not interfere in the life of society, should not question the *status quo*. My own experiences as a critic in Australia bear this out; any mention of public affairs in what I have written incurs the wrath of 'established' critics, even though I may have written about authors who were deeply critical of public affairs in their work. Critics — especially males — in powerful positions in Australia tend to be preoccupied with formal concerns, with the narrative stance of novels, for instance, instead of the subject matter of the novels. Compared with the heroism of the great Russian writers of the 19th century under Czarist oppression, or with the dissidents of today, many of our men and

women of letters appear curiously complacent; Patrick White and Judith Wright are notable exceptions, but they are now 'not in good odour with the Best People'. It is difficult not to agree with Said, therefore, when he claims that 'Western criticism has retreated from its constituency, the citizens of modern society. What it holds up for admiration is too often far removed from daily life'.

If fashions in criticism lead to political quietism, that is all the more reason to be disturbed by admiration for the methods of modern science. No one would wish to deny the central values of science, the search for truths, precision and clarity. But these are goals which were once expected of literature. 'I am a poet,' said Rilke, 'and therefore hate the approximate'. Yet the search for truths in both disciplines may sometimes issue in an accumulation of facts not worth knowing. It is not always 'precise' to ignore the whole, in favour of the parts, nor to ignore the moral implications of scientific research. These are integral aspects of being human and scientists cannot expect other people to make their moral decisions for them. The secularisation of science, the attempt to get rid of its moral content and its religious base, may have been necessary to free the intellect from superstition, but the failure of science to develop a compelling moral imperative of its own is not reassuring. Science, as at present constituted, provides only an equivocal model for literary criticism.

One of the main tasks of literary critics would seem to me to be to reclaim their territory for the humanities and restore to it the centrality of the personal point of view, which takes in the living, breathing, unique man and woman. They inhabit a social and historical world, not a domain of 'instrumental reason'.

One indication of how much this world has been surrendered to the abstractions of science is the contempt expressed so often nowadays for the novel of character and of the interactions between characters. Types, puppets, symbols, allegory have their place, especially if they retain a link with human content and purpose. Macbeth may symbolise ambition, or remorse, or soldierliness, or all of these, but we weep for him

because he has betrayed his essential self and put himself outside the human community. To prefer the puppet-like style of writing to Shakespeare's plays, to the novels of Stendhal, Tolstoy, Turgenev, George Eliot, Henry Handel Richardson, and Patrick White tells us something not about the novels, but about the critics. Alexander Herzen, that most subtle of all 19th century Russian thinkers, pointed out 150 years ago that 'one of the greatest modern disasters is to be caught up in abstractions instead of realities'. His own unhappy country was not the only one to prove the truth of this statement. Whatever writers, readers and critics do to encourage abstraction is a betrayal. Any critical fashion which removes a poem to a laboratory bench, is a falsification. The deeply engrained reverence for the experimental methods of science, need to be questioned, not endorsed by literary critics. How unconscious is this reverence is illustrated by the following quotation from a text-book of psychiatry published in 1967. The writer, whose book was full of kindliness and common sense, was discussing the role of learning in infantile sense perception. He then remarked:

> Artificial blinding of infant chimpanzees with later uncovering of the eyes has re-duplicated these findings.

Re-duplicated ...!

Abstraction, symbols, allegory, it is too often forgotten, can all play a part in training for the widespread trade of human as well as animal torture. To allegorize a whole nation as 'a focus of evil' is one of those great disasters foreseen by Herzen, and the same nation was the victim in his day, though it was ruled by the Czars. As a young student I used to wonder why the distinguished critic of Italian literature, De Sanctis, was so implacably opposed to the typological, to symbol and allegory: to me they seemed interesting. In my old age, I see his point only too well. Their tendency is to intoxicate the intellect and blunt the sensibility. The fashionable assumption of the 1950s that symbolism was good in itself was tempting to critics who saw their role as interpretative and explicatory. The more there was to explicate, the more they had to write about. The assumption is no longer tenable. Metaphors can be used to mis-

lead as well as to enlighten. The Royal Society in 1660 had a point in outlawing figurative language from science. Unfortunately, it failed to notice that it was substituting some metaphors for others. Generalisation is an abstraction and the substitution of the passive voice for the active in writing up experiments was an important step in the direction of dehumanising science. The end result is the willingness to treat people as things. The nauseating abstractions and euphemisms of the language of modern warfare illustrate the degradation of language which inevitably accompanies the degradation of thought, feeling and the capacity for moral discrimination. With these science has as yet little to do: psychology and psychiatry are still in their infancy.

In general, science describes, that is, tells us what is happening and how it happens as far as it is able to do that. Literature, on the other hand, narrates. It tells a human being's story, and in an attempt to discover the meaning of that story ('history') asks 'why', as well as 'what happens' and 'how'. It does this with varying success: the novelist and the psychiatrist complement one another in their dealings with the human 'psyche' or 'soul', and the palm for insight does not necessarily go to the novelist. It goes, in literature, to the great dramatists of the world, compelled to pare down their material to speech and action, dispensing with the pretence that it is possible to enter another person's mind. But at least literature's search for meaning keeps the seekers in touch with the human, offering a check to the encroachment of the mechanical.

The reference to the importance of narrative is unfashionable. We are expected to prefer the weary voice of E.M. Forster saying 'Oh, the story!' without telling us why it is wicked to like a story. Flaubert, on the other hand, possibly a better novelist than Forster, worried about the fact that he had not made *Madame Bovary* 'entertaining' enough (we should remember the etymology of the word 'entertaining'). Too many novelists since then have ceased to worry, and the retreat of the 'common reader' to science fiction and crude violence is not surprising. The once calmly accepted fact that readers or listeners were interested in exciting stories, the marvellous and

the unusual, in 'tales that hold children from play and old men from the chimney corner' has been forgotten. Too few readers or critics now would dare to say that a book simply bores them: the level of boredom tolerance has risen sharply during my lifetime. On this point I commend to you the essay 'Notes on the Novel' in Ortega y Gasset's *The Dehumanization of Art*, which treats Proust as a crucial case. 'Proust,' he says, 'has demonstrated the necessity of movement by writing a paralytic novel'.

Devotees of Proust must reconcile themselves to the fact that there is no way of refuting this statement, (which I happen to find convincing), as a scientist might be able to refute the proposition that the earth is flat. A literary critic is what George Steiner says he is: 'an individual man (sic) judging a given text according to the present bent of his own spirit, according to his mood or the fabric of his beliefs. His judgement may be of more value than yours or mine solely because it is grounded on a wider range of knowledge or because it is presented with more persuasive clarity. It cannot be presented in a scientific manner, nor can it lay claim to permanence'.

Fashions come and go; reputations rise and fall, as the publishers' lists on the fly-leaves of Victorian novels reveal only too painfully. A.G. Stephens thought Maeterlinck as notable as Tolstoy and Balzac regarded Mrs. Radcliffe as a great writer. In the past these idiosyncrasies seemed of little moment, the quirks of men of letters which the age could afford. Today in a world faced with a crisis that has no real precedent, what the literary critic does too often seems peripheral to the central issues of our time. But need it be? Leavis's attempt to rescue literary criticism from the charge of frivolity deserves respect, even though it foundered on an authoritarian narrowness. Raymond Williams, for many, has opened far more windows in his practice of criticism. Yet there is something missing in his work, a quality which one finds with delight in a personal critic like F.L. Lucas, of Cambridge. Lucas practised instinctively the kind of criticism advocated by Alex Comfort. He wrote about the works he liked and liked the works he wrote about, and accepted as perfectly natural a polymorphism of taste.

The missing quality, I think, is that Lucas *listens*, content to let the author speak for himself, whereas the persistent drone of Williams' analysis dulls the reader's hearing. It would be hard to find a piece more enjoyable and more useful to the general reader than Lucas's essay on 'Books' in his *The Greatest Problem and Other Essays*. Equally illuminating is his essay on Housman's poetry. And unlike so much modern criticism, Lucas's has style and a voice instantly recognisable.

Perhaps what all writers in both science and literature need to learn nowadays is a little more humility towards life itself. Readers have less to boast about, except about the number of books they have read; they may be more easily redeemed than writers and critics who still fancy themselves as 'creative', or scientists who believe there is nothing they will not be able to fix. Once the air is cleared of the cant that life exists *for* culture, instead of culture *for* life, artists and scientists may discover that they need one another. They may come to recognise that they do not inhabit a domain of 'reason' or 'spirit' separate from biological life, but that reason and spirit are as much a part of that life, an expression of its needs, as the operations of the liver or the kidneys, without which there would be neither reason nor spirit, humanly speaking. At the present time, literary criticism seems to me to stand in greater need of this kind of recognition than it has ever done before. Literary criticism is a part of literature, and like literature, is *for* life, not the other way round.

To draw together some of the random ideas raised in our discussions: we have emphasised the fundamental importance of communication in human growth and its special importance to an artist. A child describing a film to her mother is discovering her feelings, hoping that the mother will help in some obscure way to clarify them. Response to this kind of communication is essential to growth. Lack of response to art is as withering as solitary confinement to a human being. This may be partly because the artist retains longer the child's uncertainty about the 'self'. His urge to communicate to as wide an audience as possible may be a search for confirmation of his self-hood. Keats saw the artist as a chameleon, having no self, but the

capacity to enter into every other self, even into inorganic objects. Patrick White has written vividly about this problem in *Flaws in the Glass*. What may give pleasure to the reader may be an agony for the artist, yet one which he would not willingly forgo.

If this is so, there can be no real response to literature unless the reader shares to some extent the artist's capacity for 'negative capability', his capacity to *become*: a tree, a dog, a lake, a human being of the opposite sex. This capacity, if fully exercised in the real world, is implicit in the operations of justice, and a lively teacher of literature, a vital literary criticism, would enable students to make the connection for themselves. Literature is the most effective means of enlarging this capacity for an active empathy, because it is not subject to the limitations of time and space: a book carried in the pocket can put a girdle round the earth in a few seconds and abolish millennia.

We are assuming of course that the book will survive to relate writer, reader and the special reader-writer, the critic. There is no guarantee that it will, as far as mere information-gathering is concerned. But it may be that disgust with computer print-outs and with the infuriating slowness of tape-recorders may generate a revolt in favour of the book, perhaps even in favour of the hand-written book. It is hard to curl up in bed with a computer on a winter's night.

There is another threat more insidious which we have not considered, though it was foreseen by 19th century fiction-writers. If by some miracle at present unlikely, mankind decides to solve its problems of social injustice and the psychological problems which flow from these, there may be less for artists to write about. So far, as Bulwer Lytton and William Morris both acknowledged, the stuff of great literature has been conflict and suffering; art has had a vested interest in human woe. It is true Morris pointed out that economic justice would not eliminate human passions, or accident, old age and death. Faced with a choice between art and the elimination of starvation, he chose the latter. The choice raises the question whether so far, the main function of art has been to enable human beings the world over simply to bear life as it is, and suggest what it might be.

Yet it is on this point that modern writing seems to me to have parted company with the past. Implicit in most of the great works of former ages, however tragic they were, was the possibility of an alternative life. Too many modern writers are content simply to record horrors, without attempting to locate the real perpetrators who hide behind them. They are equally reluctant to celebrate the obscure heroisms that exist in the meanest life, and thus redeem it. In other words, they ignore the fact that if the good could be destroyed it would have disappeared long ago, since evil has far more often occupied the seats of power. Writers may argue that the mere depiction of depravity without comment is in itself a criticism, but the argument seems to me as specious as the scientists' excuse that they are not responsible for the uses made of their discoveries. A comparison of two books about obsession, Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* and Richardson's *Maurice Guest* may be instructive on this point.

The question 'Why study literature at all' is not often asked in academic circles in Australia, but it is an urgent one for writer, reader and critic in a scientific culture. It is possible to curdle the blood by documenting the ignoble motives of some who teach and some who learn. But I doubt if literature attracts a higher proportion of these than law, economics, or medicine. Our business is to examine our own motives. We should be asking why, for instance, it is necessary to support so many Australian Studies Centres throughout the country? What are they doing which history and literature departments are not doing? Why do students win a scholarship and then come to ask for advice about a subject? The only reason for writing anything is that one has been seized by a subject. Ways and means come second. Why do we expect students who cannot construct a simple sentence and who exhibit no poetic feeling to write down opinions about *Antony and Cleopatra*, long before they are ready to do so? Why do some of us encourage students to think that literature is the solution to all the problems of life, and that a popular novelist is worth listening to on every subject under the sun, including constitutional law?

What *should* we expect from writers? Imagination, yes; intensity of feeling, yes; intelligent thinking, yes; and a dis-

tinctive personality. These are essentials; so is style. The possession of them will probably guarantee that the writer is on the side of those who oppose the mechanical man, the mass-mind. The mass mind has nothing to do with class at all. It is the kind of mind which comes into a world of wonders and takes it all for granted as 'natural', never thinking to inquire how those things came to be, or whether they will continue. The mass mind floats in a vacuum, as unconscious of its obligation to the past, as of its responsibility to the future. It is found in parliament houses and pin-ball parlours. If one might suggest an honourable occupation for writer, reader and critic it would be to awaken the mass mind from sleep. If it is not awakened, the outlook for civilisation is somewhat bleak. If it is awakened, there are exciting possibilities.

Literature can at times be a solace, a refuge, or at worst, a bolt-hole. But in our age it will earn more respect if it is an area of conflict, in which society cannot help being interested. The study of literature is as good a way as any, apart from personal experience, to raise questions of human freedom. For example, would it be possible nowadays to write such a confident poem as Lovelace's 'To Anthea from Prison'? After half a century of social engineering can we talk about minds or souls being free? How do we read this poem in the light of Defence of the Realm Acts, Official Secrets Acts, terms like 'public interest', 'national security', a venal Press, tendentious television pictures?

Yet no matter how sceptical a view we might take of the poem, it contains a real truth of which Martin Boyd made memorable use in *Lucinda Brayford* and *Much Else in Italy*. (In passing, we might note how few Australian critics allude to the point). In the latter book, Boyd calls up the image of the ermine, which will die rather than soil its white coat with mud, to remind us that we do not have to surrender our essential selves.

But if writers, readers and critics continue to content themselves with simply recording horrors, with simply entertaining themselves reading about them, with earning a living simply by holding up the skill of the recorder for admiration, then they

compound the surrounding darkness. If, on the other hand, they point to the possibility that humans might re-think themselves, they light a candle in that darkness.

It is the privilege of the writer to point the way, of the reader to make an active response, instead of yielding to cynicism or passivity, for the critic to make the partnership of writer and reader more dynamic (literally) until his critical task becomes superfluous.

To end on a frivolous note with a message of high seriousness:

To the writer: Let him be kept from paper, pen and ink:
So he may cease to write and learn to think. (Matthew Prior)

To the reader: The three practical rules, then, which I have to offer, are –

1. Never read any book that is not a year old.

2. Never read any but famed books. [Emerson lived before books were promoted like soap]

3. Never read any but what you like. (R.W. Emerson)

To the critic: Fancy reading critics! And fancy taking any notice of them! (William Morris)

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