

Books by Dwight Macdonald

AGAINST THE AMERICAN GRAIN

PARODIES: AN ANTHOLOGY

(Editor)

MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONIST

THE ROOT IS MAN

THE FORD FOUNDATION

HENRY WALLACE, THE MAN AND THE MYTH

AGAINST THE AMERICAN GRAIN

Dwight Macdonald

NEW INTRODUCTION BY

JOHN SIMON

A DA CAPO PAPERBACK

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Masscult & Midcult

FOR ABOUT two centuries Western culture has in fact been two cultures: the traditional kind—let us call it High Culture—that is chronicled in the textbooks, and a novel kind that is manufactured for the market. This latter may be called Mass Culture, or better Masscult, since it really isn't culture at all. Masscult is a parody of High Culture. In the older forms, its artisans have long been at work. In the novel, the line stretches from the eighteenth-century "servant-girl romances" to Edna Ferber, Fannie Hurst and such current ephemera as Burdick, Drury, Michener, Ruark and Uris; in music, from Hearts and Flowers to Rock 'n Roll; in art, from the chromo to Norman Rockwell; in architecture, from Victorian Gothic to ranch-house moderne; in thought, from Martin Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy* ("Marry not without means, for so shouldst thou tempt Providence;/But wait not for more than enough, for marriage is the DUTY of most men.") to Norman Vincent Peale. (Thinkers like H. G. Wells, Stuart Chase, and Max Lerner come under the head of Midcult rather than Masscult.) And the enormous output of such new media as the radio, television and the movies is almost entirely Masscult.

I

This is something new in history. It is not that so much bad art is being produced. Most High Culture has been undistinguished, since talent is always rare—one has only

to walk through any great art museum or try to read some of the forgotten books from past centuries. Since only the best works still have currency, one thinks of the past in their terms, but they were really just a few plums in a pudding of mediocrity.

Masscult is bad in a new way: it doesn't even have the theoretical possibility of being good. Up to the eighteenth century, bad art was of the same nature as good art, produced for the same audience, accepting the same standards. The difference was simply one of individual talent. But Masscult is something else. It is not just unsuccessful art. It is non-art. It is even anti-art.

There is a novel of the masses but no Stendhal of the masses; a music for the masses but no Bach or Beethoven, whatever people say . . . [André Malraux observes in "Art, Popular Art and the Illusion of the Folk"—(*Partisan Review*, September-October, 1951).] It is odd that no word . . . designates the common character of what we call, separately, bad painting, bad architecture, bad music, etc. The word "painting" only designates a domain in which art is possible. . . . Perhaps we have only one word because bad painting has not existed for very long. There is no bad Gothic painting. Not that all Gothic painting is good. But the difference that separates Giotto from the most mediocre of his imitators is not of the same kind as that which separates Renoir from the caricaturists of *La Vie Parisienne*. . . . Giotto and the Gaddi are separated by talent, Degas and Bonnat by a schism, Renoir and "suggestive" painting by what? By the fact that this last, totally subjected to the spectator, is a form of advertising which aims at selling itself. If there exists only one word . . . it is because there was a time when the distinction between them had no point. Instruments played real music then, for there was no other.

But now we have pianos playing Rock 'n Roll and *les sanglots longs des violons* accompanying torch singers.

Masscult offers its customers neither an emotional catharsis nor an aesthetic experience, for these demand

effort. The production line grinds out a uniform product whose humble aim is not even entertainment, for this too implies life and hence effort, but merely distraction. It may be stimulating or narcotic, but it must be easy to assimilate. It asks nothing of its audience, for it is "totally subjected to the spectator." And it gives nothing.*

Some of its producers are able enough. Norman Rockwell is technically skilled, as was Meissonier—though Degas was right when he summed up the cavalry charge in *Friedland, 1806*: "Everything is steel except the breastplates." O. Henry could tell a story better than many contributors to our Little Magazines. But a work of High Culture, however inept, is an expression of feelings, ideas, tastes, visions that are idiosyncratic and the audience similarly responds to them as individuals. Furthermore, both creator and audience accept certain standards. These may be more or less traditional; sometimes they are so much less so as to be revolutionary, though Picasso, Joyce and Stravinsky knew and respected past achievements more than did their academic contemporaries; their works may be seen as a heroic breakthrough to earlier, sounder foundations that had been obscured by the fashionable gimcrackery of the academies. But Masscult is indifferent to standards. Nor is there any communication between individuals. Those who consume Masscult might as well be eating ice-cream sodas, while those who fabricate it are no more expressing themselves than are the "stylists" who design the latest atrocity from Detroit.

The difference appears if we compare two famous writers of detective stories, Mr. Erle Stanley Gardner and Mr.

* "Distraction is bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which . . . the masses are subject. . . . People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire."—T. W. Adorno: *On Popular Music*.

Edgar Allan Poe. It is impossible to find any personal note in Mr. Gardner's enormous output—he has just celebrated his centenary, the hundredth novel under his own name (he also has knocked off several dozen under pseudonyms). His prose style varies between the incompetent and the nonexistent; for the most part, there is just no style, either good or bad. His books seem to have been manufactured rather than composed; they are assembled with the minimum expenditure of effort from identical parts that are shifted about just enough to allow the title to be changed from *The Case of the Curious Bride* to *The Case of the Fugitive Nurse*. Mr. Gardner obviously has the production problem licked—he has rated his “native abilities” as Very Good as a lawyer, Good as a business analyst, and Zero as a writer, the last realistic estimate being the clue to his production-line fertility—and his popularity indicates he has the problem of distribution well in hand. He is marketing a standard product, like Kleenex, that precisely because it is not related to any individual needs on the part of either the producer or the consumer appeals to the widest possible audience. The obsession of our fact-minded culture with the processes of the law is probably the lowest common denominator that has made Mr. Gardner's unromantic romances such dependable commodities.

Like Mr. Gardner, Mr. Poe was a money-writer. (That he didn't make any is irrelevant.) The difference, aside from the fact that he was a good writer, is that, even when he was turning out hack work, he had an extraordinary ability to use the journalistic forms of his day to express his own peculiar personality, and indeed, as Marie Bonaparte has shown in her fascinating study, to relieve his neurotic anxieties. (It is simply impossible to imagine Mr. Gardner afflicted with anything as individual as a neurosis.) The book review, the macabre-romantic tale, the magazine poem, all served his purposes, and he even invented a new one, the detective story, which satisfied the two chief and

oddly disparate drives in his psychology—~~fascination with~~ horror (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*) and obsession with logical reasoning or, as he called it, “ratiocination” (*The Purloined Letter*). So that while his works are sometimes absurd, they are rarely dull.

It is important to understand that the difference between Mr. Poe and Mr. Gardner, or between High Culture and Masscult, is not mere popularity. From *Tom Jones* to the films of Chaplin, some very good things have been popular; *The Education of Henry Adams* was the top nonfiction best seller of 1919. Nor is it that Poe's detective stories are harder to read than Gardner's, though I suppose they are for most people. The difference lies in the qualities of Masscult already noted: its impersonality and its lack of standards, and “total subjection to the spectator.” The same writer, indeed the same book or even the same chapter, may contain elements of both Masscult and High Culture. In Balzac, for instance, the most acute psychological analysis and social observation is bewilderingly interlarded with the cheapest, flimsiest kind of melodrama. In Dickens, superb comedy alternates with bathetic sentimentality, great descriptive prose with the most vulgar kind of theatricality. All these elements were bound between the same covers, sold to the same mass audience, and, it may well be, considered equally good by their authors—at least I know of no evidence that either Dickens or Balzac was aware of when he was writing down and when he was writing up. Masscult is a subtler problem than is sometimes recognized.

“What is a poet?” asked Wordsworth. “He is a man speaking to men . . . a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and one who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him.” It is this human dialogue that Masscult interrupts, this spirit of life that it exterminates. Evelyn Waugh commented on Hollywood, after a brief experience there: “Each book purchased for motion pictures has some individual quality, good or bad,

that has made it remarkable. It is the work of a great array of highly paid and incompatible writers to distinguish this quality, separate it and obliterate it." This process is called "licking the book"—i.e., licking it into shape, as mother bears were once thought to lick their amorphous cubs into real bears; though here the process is reversed and the book is licked not into but out of shape. The other meaning of "licked" also applies; before a proper Hollywood film can be made, the work of art has to be defeated.

II

2 The question of Masscult is part of the larger question of the masses. The tendency of modern industrial society, whether in the USA or the USSR, is to transform the individual into the mass man. For the masses are in historical time what a crowd is in space: a large quantity of people unable to express their human qualities because they are related to each other neither as individuals nor as members of a community. In fact, they are not related to *each other* at all but only to some impersonal, abstract, crystalizing factor. In the case of crowds, this can be a football game, a bargain sale, a lynching; in the case of the masses, it can be a political party, a television program, a system of industrial production. The mass man is a solitary atom, uniform with the millions of other atoms that go to make up "the lonely crowd," as David Riesman well calls our society. A community, on the contrary, is a group of individuals linked to each other by concrete interests. Something like a family, each of whose members has his or her special place and function while at the same time sharing the group's economic aims (family budget), traditions (family history), sentiments (family quarrels, family jokes), and values ("That's the way we do it in *this* family!"). The scale must be small enough so that it "makes a difference" what each person does—this is the first condition for human, as against mass, existence. Paradoxically, the indi-

vidual in a community is both more closely integrated into the group than is the mass man and at the same time is freer to develop his own special personality. Indeed, an individual can only be defined in relation to a community. A single person in nature is not an individual but an animal; Robinson Crusoe was saved by Friday. The totalitarian regimes, which have consciously tried to create the mass man, have systematically broken every communal link—family, church, trade union, local and regional loyalties, even down to ski and chess clubs—and have reforged them so as to bind each atomized individual directly to the center of power.

The past cultures I admire—Periclean Greece, the city-states of the Italian Renaissance, Elizabethan England, are examples—have mostly been produced by communities, and remarkably small ones at that. Also remarkably heterogeneous ones, riven by faction, stormy with passionate antagonisms. But this diversity, fatal to that achievement of power over other countries that is the great aim of modern statecraft, seems to have been stimulating to talent. (What could be more deadly than the usual post-Marx vision of socialism as equality and agreement? Fourier was far more perceptive when he based his Utopia on cabals, rivalry, and every kind of difference including what he called "innocent mania.") A mass society, like a crowd, is inchoate and uncreative. Its atoms cohere not according to individual liking or traditions or even interests but in a purely mechanical way, as iron filings of different shapes and sizes are pulled toward a magnet working on the one quality they have in common. Its morality sinks to the level of the most primitive members—a crowd will commit atrocities that very few of its members would commit as individuals—and its taste to that of the least sensitive and the most ignorant.

Yet this collective monstrosity, "the masses," "the public," is taken as a human norm by the technicians of

Masscult. They at once degrade the public by treating it as an object, to be handled with the lack of ceremony of medical students dissecting a corpse, and at the same time flatter it and pander to its taste and ideas by taking them as the criterion of reality (in the case of the questionnaire-sociologists) or of art (in the case of the Lords of Masscult). When one hears a questionnaire-sociologist talk about "setting up" an investigation, one realizes that he regards people as mere congeries of conditioned reflexes, his concern being which reflex will be stimulated by which question. At the same time, of necessity, he sees the statistical majority as the great Reality, the secret of life he is trying to unriddle. Like a Lord of Masscult, he is—professionally—without values, willing to take seriously any idiocy if it is held by many people (though, of course, *personally* . . .). The aristocrat's approach to the masses is less degrading to them, as it is less degrading to a man to be shouted at than to be treated as nonexistent. But the *plebs* have their dialectical revenge: indifference to their human quality means prostration before their statistical quantity, so that a movie magnate who cynically "gives the public what it wants"—i.e., assumes it wants trash—sweats with anxiety if the box-office returns drop 5 per cent.

Whenever a Lord of Masscult is reproached for the low quality of his products, he automatically ripostes, "But that's what the public wants, what can I do?" A simple and conclusive defense, at first glance. But a second look reveals that (1) to the extent the public "wants" it, the public has been conditioned to some extent by his products, and (2) his efforts have taken this direction because (a) he himself also "wants" it—never underestimate the ignorance and vulgarity of publishers, movie producers, network executives and other architects of Masscult—and (b) the technology of producing mass "entertainment" (again, the quotes are advised) imposes a simplistic, repetitious pattern so that it is easier to say the public wants this than to say the truth which is that the public

gets this and so wants it. The March Hare explained to Alice that "I like what I get" is not the same thing as "I get what I like," but March Hares have never been welcome on Madison Avenue.

For some reason, objections to the giving-to-the-public-what-it-wants line are often attacked as undemocratic and snobbish. Yet it is precisely because I do believe in the potentialities of ordinary people that I criticize Masscult. For the masses are not people, they are not The Man in the Street or The Average Man, they are not even that figment of liberal condescension, The Common Man. The masses are, rather, man as non-man, that is man in a special relationship to other men that makes it impossible for him to function as man (one of the human functions being the creation and enjoyment of works of art). "Mass man," as I use the term, is a theoretical construction, an extreme toward which we are being pushed but which we shall never reach. For to become wholly a mass man would mean to have no private life, no personal desires, hobbies, aspirations, or aversions that are not shared by everybody else. One's behavior would be entirely predictable, like a piece of coal, and the sociologists could at last make up their tables confidently. It is still some time to 1984 but it looks unlikely that Orwell's anti-Utopia will have materialized by then, or that it will ever materialize. Nazism and Soviet Communism, however, show us how far things can go in politics, as Masscult does in art. And let us not be too smug in this American temperate zone, unravaged by war and ideology. "It seems to me that nearly the whole Anglo-Saxon race, especially of course in America, have lost the power to be individuals. They have become social insects like bees and ants." So Roger Fry wrote years ago, and who will say that we have become less apian?

III

Like the early capitalism Marx and Engels described in *The Communist Manifesto*, Masscult is a dynamic, revolu-

tionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes, scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture, after another American achievement, the homogenization process that distributes the globules of cream evenly throughout the milk instead of allowing them to float separately on top. The interesting difference is that whereas the cream is still in the homogenized milk, somehow it disappears from homogenized culture. For the process destroys all values, since value-judgments require discrimination, an ugly word in liberal-democratic America. Masscult is very, very democratic; it refuses to discriminate against or between anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill and all comes out finely ground indeed.

Life is a typical homogenized magazine, appearing on the mahogany library tables of the rich, the glass cocktail tables of the middle class, and the oilcloth kitchen tables of the poor. Its contents are as thoroughly homogenized as its circulation. The same issue will present a serious exposition of atomic energy followed by a disquisition on Rita Hayworth's love life; photos of starving children picking garbage in Calcutta and of sleek models wearing adhesive brassières; an editorial hailing Bertrand Russell's eightieth birthday (A GREAT MIND IS STILL ANNOYING AND ADORNING OUR AGE) across from a full-page photo of a matron arguing with a baseball umpire (MOM GETS THUMB); nine color pages of Renoir paintings followed by a picture of a roller-skating horse; a cover announcing in the same size type two features: A NEW FOREIGN POLICY, BY JOHN FOSTER DULLES and KERIMA: HER MARATHON KISS IS A MOVIE SENSATION.*

* The advertisements provide even more scope for the editors' homogenizing talents, as when a full-page photo of a ragged Bolivian peon grinningly drunk on cocoa leaves (which Mr. Luce's conscientious reporters tell us he chews to narcotize his chronic hunger pains) appears opposite an ad of a pretty, smiling, well-dressed American mother with her two pretty, smiling, well-dressed children (a boy and a girl, of course—children are

Somehow these scramblings together seem to work all one way, degrading the serious rather than elevating the frivolous. Defenders of our Masscult society like Professor Edward Shils of the University of Chicago—he is, of course, a sociologist—see phenomena like *Life* as inspiring attempts at popular education—just think, nine pages of Renoirs! But that roller-skating horse comes along, and the final impression is that both Renoir and the horse were talented.

IV

The historical reasons for the rise of Masscult are well known. There could obviously be no mass culture until there were masses, in our modern sense. The industrial revolution produced the masses. It uprooted people from their agrarian communities and packed them into factory cities. It produced goods in such unprecedented abundance that the population of the Western world has increased more in the last two centuries than in the preceding two millennia—poor Malthus, never has a brilliantly original theorist been so speedily refuted by history! And it subjected them to a uniform discipline whose only precedent was the "slave socialism" of Egypt. But the Egypt of the Pharaohs produced no Masscult any more than did the great Oriental empires or the late Rome of the proletarian rabble, because the masses were passive, inert, submerged far below the level of political or cultural power. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century in Europe that the majority of people began to play an active part in either history or culture.

Up to then, there was only High Culture and Folk Art.

always homogenized in our ads) looking raptly at a clown on a TV set, the whole captioned in type big enough to announce the Second Coming: RCA VICTOR BRINGS YOU A NEW KIND OF TELEVISION—SUPER SETS WITH "PICTURE POWER." The peon would doubtless find the juxtaposition piquant if he could afford a copy of *Life*, which, luckily for the Good Neighbor Policy, he cannot.

To some extent, Masscult is a continuation of Folk Art, but the differences are more striking than the similarities. Folk Art grew mainly from below, an autochthonous product shaped by the people to fit their own needs, even though it often took its cue from High Culture. Masscult comes from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen. They try this and try that and if something clicks at the box office, they try to cash in with similar products, like consumer-researchers with a new cereal, or like a Pavlovian biologist who has hit on a reflex he thinks can be conditioned. It is one thing to satisfy popular tastes, as Robert Burns's poetry did, and quite another to exploit them, as Hollywood does. Folk Art was the people's own institution, their private little kitchen-garden walled off from the great formal park of their masters.* But Masscult breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of domination. If one had no other data to go on, Masscult would expose capitalism as a class society rather than the harmonious commonwealth that, in election years, both parties tell us it is.

The same goes even more strongly for the Soviet Union. Its Masscult is both worse and more pervasive than ours, a fact which is often not recognized because in form Soviet Masscult is just the opposite, aiming at propaganda and pedagogy rather than distraction. But like ours, it is imposed from above and it exploits rather than satisfies the

* And if it was often influenced by High Culture, it did change the forms and themes into its own style. The only major form of Folk Art that still persists in this country is jazz, and the difference between Folk Art and Masscult may be most readily perceived by comparing the kind of thing heard at the annual Newport Jazz Festivals to Rock 'n Roll. The former is musically interesting and emotionally real; the latter is—not. The amazing survival of jazz despite the exploitative onslaughts of half a century of commercial entrepreneurs, is in my opinion, due to its folk quality. And as the noble and the peasant understood each other better than either understood the bourgeois, so it seems significant that jazz is the only art form that appeals to both the intelligentsia and the common people. As for the others, let them listen to *South Pacific*.

needs of the masses—though, of course, for political rather than commercial reasons. Its quality is even lower. Our Supreme Court building is tasteless and pompous but not to the lunatic degree of most Soviet architecture; post-1930 Soviet films, with a few exceptions, are far duller and cruder than our own; the primitive level of *serious* Soviet periodicals devoted to matters of art or philosophy has to be read to be believed, and as for the popular press, it is as if Hearst or Colonel McCormick ran every periodical in America. Furthermore, while here individuals can simply turn their back on Masscult and do their own work, there no such escape is possible; the official cultural bodies control all outlets and a *Doctor Zhivago* must be smuggled out for foreign publication.

v

Masscult first made its appearance in eighteenth-century England, where also, significantly, the industrial revolution was just beginning. The important change was the replacement of the individual patron by the market. The process had begun in Elizabethan times, when journalists like Nashe and Greene made a hard living from the popular sale of their pamphlets and when the theatre depended partly on subsidies from noble patrons and partly on paid admissions. But Masscult's first sizable body of professionals were the hacks of Grub Street, ready to turn their hand to ballads, novels, history, encyclopedias, philosophy, reportage or anything else the publishers thought might go. Dr. Johnson was one of them in his impoverished youth, and his letter to Lord Chesterfield (who had neglected Johnson while the dictionary was being compiled and who, when it was finished, tried to wangle a dedication) was the consummate expression of the change.

Seven years, my Lord, have now passed since I waited in your outward rooms or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through dif-

faculties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it at last to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favor. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a patron before. . . .

Is not a patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labors, had it been early had been kind. But it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it.

I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the public should consider me as owing that to a patron which Providence has enabled me to do for myself. . . . For I have long been wakened from that dream of hope in which I once boasted myself with such exultation, my lord—

Your lordship's most humble, most obedient servant.

SAM. JOHNSON

This Declaration of Independence, written eleven years before our own, made a similar point: Sam. Johnson found the noble lord as superfluous to his existence as the American colonists did His Britannic Majesty.

It must be added that, however defective as a patron, Lord Chesterfield reacted in the grand manner. Far from crushing him, the muted thunders of Johnson's letter seem to have delighted him as a connoisseur. When the bookseller Dodsley called on him soon afterward, he found the letter open on a table for his lordship's visitors to enjoy. "He read it to me," Dodsley writes, "said 'this man has great power,' pointed out the severest passages, and observed how well they were expressed." Boswell thought Chesterfield's reaction "glossy duplicity," but there was more to it than that. The old order went out on a high note of aristocratic taste, very different from the new cultural forces that were superseding it.

For the eighteenth century in British letters began with optimism and ended with doubt and even despair; and both were reactions to the same phenomenon: the enormous increase in the audience. "From 1700 to 1800 the reading public expanded from one which had included mainly the aristocracy, clerics and scholars to one which also included clerks, artisans, laborers and farmers. . . . The annual publication of new books quadrupled."* At first almost every one, with the notable exceptions of Pope and Swift, assumed this growth was simply A Good Thing—the Victorians made the same mistake about popular education. The new readers would be elevated by contact with good literature and the result would be a larger but not a qualitatively different public. The initial success of Addison's and Steele's *Spectator* was encouraging. Published as a daily in 1711-1712, it quickly reached 3,000 circulation, about what some of our most respected Little Magazines have achieved in a population many times larger. (A real circulation-manager type, Addison estimated that with multiple readership in the coffee houses, the total coverage was close to 60,000).

But by the middle of the century, a similar magazine, Johnson's *Rambler*, never got above 500 and was abandoned as a failure. The new public, it would seem, had read the *Spectator* because there was nothing worse to read. The Grub Street publishers hastened to fill the gap,

* For this quote and for most of the material in this and the next paragraph, I am indebted to one of Leo Lowenthal's several interesting studies in Masscult, "The Debate over Art and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century England" (written in collaboration with Marjorie Fiske), which appears in a volume unpromisingly titled *Common Frontiers of the Social Sciences* (Free Press, 1951). Q. D. Leavis, in her *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Chatto & Windus, 1932), still the best book on the deterioration of standards as a result of the rise of the mass public, puts the turning point about a century later. The precise dating of a great historical change like this is, of course, a matter of opinion. I think Mrs. Leavis' book exaggerates the solid merits of the pre-1830 popular novels and journalism. But we can all agree on the main point—the effects of the mass market on literature.

Gresham's Law began to work, and the bad drove the good out of circulation (though for the opposite reason from the law's original application, for in currency people circulate the bad because they prefer the good and therefore hang on to it, while in books they circulate the bad because they like it better than the good). By 1790, a bookseller named Lackington was lyrical about the change:

The poorer sort of farmers, and even the poor country people in general, who before that period spent their winter evenings in relating stories of witches, ghosts, hobgoblins, etc., now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances, etc., and on entering their houses you may see *Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random* and other entertaining books stuck up in their bacon racks. . . . In short all ranks and degrees now READ.

Lyrical, charming, democratically heartening, but few of the books in the bacon racks were on the level of *Tom Jones* and perhaps the farmers should have stuck to their witches and hobgoblins. Certainly the effect on literary taste was alarming. By the end of the century, even such successful writers for the new public as Johnson, Goldsmith and Fielding were showing concern as the flood of trash steadily rose.

The mass audience was taking shape and a corresponding shift in literary criticism was beginning, away from objective standards and toward a new subjective approach in which the question was not how good the work is but how popular it will be. Not that the creator is ever independent of his time and place; the demands of the audience have always largely determined his work. But before 1750, these demands were themselves disciplined by certain standards of excellence which were accepted by both the limited public of informed amateurs and the artists who performed for them. Today, in the United States, the demands of the audience, which has changed from a small body of connoisseurs into a large body of ignoramuses, have become the chief criteria of success. Only the Little

Magazines worry about standards. The commercial press, including the *Saturday Review* and the *New York Times Book Review*, consider books as commodities, rating them according to audience-response. The newspaper movie columns are extreme examples. There, the humble effort of the "critic"—and indeed one would have to put even "reviewer" in quotes—is merely to tell his readers which films they will probably like. His own tastes are suppressed as irrelevant.

With the prescience of a snob of genius, Alexander Pope wrote *The Dunciad* a half-century before the tide of vulgarization had begun to gather full force. Grub Street (read: Madison Avenue or perhaps Sunset Boulevard) was its target and its anti-heroes were Theobald and Cibber, the former a lawyer who pretended to scholarship and the latter an actor whose vanity led him to write serious books. These dunces, who were getting away with their impostures, symbolized the confusion in the world of letters that the expansion of the audience had introduced. Two centuries later, when the goddess of Dullness has so extended her realm that one takes it for granted that most current productions will be of her kingdom, one is startled by Pope's vindictive passion, as in the ending:

*She comes! She comes! the sable throne behold
Of Night primeval and of Chaos old!
Before her, Fancy's gilded clouds decay,
And all its varying rainbows die away.
Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,
The meteor drops and in a flash expires.*

.

*Thus at her felt approach and secret might,
Art after art goes out, and all is night.*

.

*Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall,
And universal darkness buries all.*

This is magnificent but exaggerated. With the best will in the world, we have not been able to ring down the curtain; the darkness is still far from universal. Man's nature is tough and full of unexpected quirks, and there are still many pockets of resistance. But in some ways history has surpassed Pope's worst imaginings. With the French Revolution, the masses for the first time made their entrance onto the political stage, and it was not long before they also began to occupy a central position in culture. Grub Street was no longer peripheral and the traditional kind of authorship became more and more literally eccentric—out of the center—until by the end of the nineteenth century the movement from which most of the enduring work of our time has come had separated itself from the market and was in systematic opposition to it.

This movement, was, of course, the "avant-garde" whose precursors were Stendhal and Baudelaire and the impressionist painters, whose pioneers included Rimbaud, Whitman, Ibsen, Cézanne, Wagner, and whose classic masters were figures like Stravinsky, Picasso, Joyce, Eliot, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Perhaps "movement" is too precise a term; the avant-gardists were linked by no aesthetic doctrine, not even by a consciousness that they *were* avant-garde. What they had in common was that they preferred to work for a small audience that sympathized with their experiments because it was sophisticated enough to understand them. By an act of will dictated by necessity (the necessity of survival as a creator, rather than a technician) each of them rejected the historical drift of post-1800 Western culture and recreated the old, traditional situation in which the artist communicated with his peers rather than talked down to his inferiors. Later on, they became famous and those who survived even got rich—the avant-garde is one of the great success-stories of this century—but their creative work was done in a very different atmosphere.

VI

The two great early best sellers in Grub Street's triumph were Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott. Both exploited romanticism, a new creed whose emphasis on subjective feeling as against traditional form was suitable to the democratization of taste that was taking place. But they differed interestingly. Each represented an aspect of Masscult, Scott the production line, Byron the emphasis on the artist himself. Antithetical but also complementary: the more literature became a branch of industry, the more the craving for the other extreme—individuality. Or rather, a somewhat coarser commodity, Personality.

It is hard for us to understand the effect of Scott's novels on his contemporaries. They were commonly compared to Shakespeare, for their variety and their broad human sympathy. "A great mind unequalled anywhere who naturally produces the most extraordinary effects upon the whole world of readers," was Goethe's judgment. But Croce, in his *European Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, places his finger on the radical, the fatal defect of the Waverley novels: "There are too many of them." He has much also to say about the monotony of Scott's style and the "mechanical method" with which he constructed his characters. But quantity is the point. "[He was] an industrial producer, intent upon supplying the market with objects for which the demand was as keen as the want was legitimate. . . . Is it not healthy to demand images of virtue, of courage, of generous feelings, and . . . to seek also to obtain instruction as to historical customs and events? Scott had the genius to carry out the commercial enterprise which supplied this want. . . . One has the impression, when reading his biography, that one is reading about a hero of industry." And indeed the chief interest is his enormous productivity, his big earnings, his baronial style of life, his heroic struggle to pay off his creditors after

bankruptcy. "Nothing is said as to his inner life, his loves, his religion, his ideas; less than nothing about his spiritual struggles and development," Croce continues. Any more than such topics would occur to the biographers of Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller or the present head of the U.S. Steel Corp.

For one has the impression, in reading even the greatest of the nineteenth-century popular novelists, that the demands of the market pushed them too hard. So Dickens, so Balzac, so Mark Twain. Today the pressure for production comes under the head of physics rather than of aesthetics. In the 1955-1956 season, a long-forgotten TV program called "Matinée" put on five original one-hour plays a week every week, or 260 a year; it took 100 writers, 20 directors and 4,000 actors to keep these Molochian fires stoked. The rate at which TV uses up comic talent was described by Fred Allen, a notable victim; one has merely to see a TV comedy show to realize how tragically right he was. A big publishing house like Doubleday must have hundreds of titles a year to keep its presses busy; the overhead goes on, the more books produced the cheaper to produce each one, and the fear that wakes publishers in the night is that the presses may for a moment stop. When birth control is exercised it is usually at the expense of original and distinguished manuscripts. Anything that is sufficiently banal is sure of a kinder hearing, on the assumption that a bad book *may* sell whereas a good one definitely *won't*. The vast amount of unprofitable junk the publishers issue every year might be expected to cause some misgivings about this notion—if mere banality were a guarantee of success, every Hollywood movie would make money—but somehow the lesson is never learned. Perhaps one should investigate the publishers' own tastes.*

* Another possibility is that every editor and publisher is daily buried under such an avalanche of nonsense that he loses his bearings. As any one who has ever taught a course in "creative writing" knows, it is a democratic right of every freeborn American to be a "writer." The obliteration

Byron was as romantic and almost as industrious as Scott but otherwise there were few similarities. His life was as disorderly as Scott's was respectable, his personality as rebellious as Scott's was conventional. It was this personality that won him his mass following: he was the first bohemian, the first avant-gardist, the first beatnik. If Scott was the artist as entrepreneur, Byron was the artist as rebel, and there was less difference between these extremes, from the standpoint of Masscult, than one might have thought. For Byron was a formidable competitor. Scott began as a romantic poet, but when Byron began to publish, Scott made a strategic retreat to prose and began to write the Waverley novels. It was a shrewd decision. *Marmion* and *The Lady of the Lake*, while accomplished exercises in the romantic-historical genre, quite lacked the personal note; readers could hardly "identify with" Roderick Dhu, while Childe Harold and Manfred were not only identifiable but also seemed to express their author's even more identifiable personality.

Byron's reputation was different from that of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden and Pope because it was based on the man—or what the public conceived to be the man—rather than on his work. His poems were taken not as artistic objects in themselves but as expressions of their creator's personality. Similarly, Clark Gable acted himself rather than any specific role; his opposite number is Laurence Olivier, who can actually impersonate, with style and passion, all kinds of other people, from Henry V to the seedy song-and-dance man of *The Entertainer*. Of course it wasn't really Byron himself but a contrived *persona* which fitted into the contemporary public's idea of a poet. Goethe was as obtuse on Byron as he was

of standards in the Masscult world is nowhere shown more clearly than in this innocent conviction. In the year 1956, for example, the *Ladies Home Journal* received 21,822 unsolicited manuscripts, of which it accepted sixteen. And even the sixteen lucky hits might not be considered worth the ink and paper by some critics.

on Scott; he praised him as a great poet but added the well-known proviso: "When he thinks, he is a child." The reverse was the truth: as a "great poet" Byron was banal—who reads his "serious" poetry now?—but when he thought, he was not at all childish; that is, when he (one senses with some relief) dropped the pretense of romantic passion and let his realistic eighteenth-century temperament play around, as in his diaries and letters and in *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. There were two Byrons, the public swash-buckler of *The Corsair* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the private mocker of the same romantic attitudes, and this split between the two was to become characteristic. One thinks of Mark Twain, with his public pose as the genial homespun philosopher and his private hell of nihilist despair.

VII

Or of John Barrymore, whose profile and sexual-romantic prowess were as famous as Byron's and whose Masscult *persona* bound him to the wheel of endless portrayals of The Great Lover and repressed his real talents, which were a beautiful diction and a distinguished stage presence (as in his *Hamlet*), sensitivity as an actor (as in the movie of *A Bill of Divorcement*), and a gift for light comedy (curiously analogous to Byron's flair for burlesque) which glittered in a few scenes of sardonic, graceful mugging in such movie farces as *The Man From Blankley's* and *Twentieth Century*.

Since in a mass society people are related not to each other but to some abstract organizing principle, they are often in a state of exhaustion, for this lack of contact is unnatural. So Masscult attempts to provide distraction for the tired businessman—or the tired proletarian. This kind of art is necessarily at a distance from the individual since it is specifically designed to affect not what differentiates him from everybody else—that is what is of liveliest inter-

est to *him*—but rather to work on the reflexes he shares with everybody else. So he is at a distance.

But people feel a need to be related to other people. The simplest way of bridging this distance, or rather of pretending to bridge it, is by emphasizing the personality of the artist; the individual buried in the mass audience can relate himself to the individual in the artist, since they are, after all, both persons. So while Masscult is in one sense extremely impersonal, in another it is extremely personal. The artist is thus charismatic and his works become the expression of this charisma rather than, as in the past, objective creations.

In his alcoholic last years, John Barrymore gave an extreme illustration of this principle.

Six months ago [ran a story in *Time* of November 6, 1939] a ham show opened in Chicago. Last week it was still running there. It had become a civic institution. It had played to 150,000 people and grossed over \$250,000. The theater was sold out three weeks in advance. . . .

The answer was . . . that the leading man [was] the great John Barrymore—sometimes ill, sometimes tight, but always a trouper. . . . "Yep," says the doorman, "he arrives every night, dead or alive." . . . He says anything that comes into his head. When he is well wound up, *My Dear Children* may bumble on till after midnight. Once a fire engine sounded in the street. Sang out Barrymore: "I hope they get to the fire in time." Once he saw Ned Sparks in the audience. Walking to the footlights, Barrymore shouted: "There's that old bastard Ned Sparks." Once he couldn't hear the prompter in the wings, yelled: "Give those cues louder!" [etc.] Once, unable to stand up, he played the whole show sitting down. Another time, when he couldn't even issue from the dressing room to stage, he said: "Get me a wheel chair—I'll play Lionel."

Audiences eat it up. They complain to the box office only on those rare occasions when Barrymore plays his part straight.

Barrymore was not, by this time, exploiting his romantic personality; he was not even burlesquing it, since the *ad libs*—except for the crack about Lionel—were not funny. He was living on his capital, selling his gilt-edge bonds (his romantic reputation) and when he had liquidated them all (when the public began to think of him not as “the great John Barrymore” of the past but as the drunken cut-up of the present) he would have been bankrupt. Luckily, he died before that happened.

For their part, the mass public liked him in this final stage of disintegration precisely because it showed them he was no better than they were, in fact he was a good deal worse. In the “genius” act of the Masscult period, there is a strange ambivalence. The masses put an absurdly high value on the personal genius, the charisma, of the performer, but they also demand a secret rebate: he must play the game—their game—must distort his personality to suit their taste. Bryon did it when he wore an open collar and made sure that his hyacinthine locks were properly disordered. Robert Frost did it when he called a press conference, not so long ago, on moving into his office at the Library of Congress as Consultant on Poetry, and told the assembled reporters that his job might be called “Poet in Waiting” and further confided that he wanted some good paintings to hang in his office: “I want to get the place out of the small-potatoes class.” Even the staid *New York Times* was stimulated to headline its story: POET IN WAITING BIDS FOR A RATING. That Frost is a fine poet isn’t relevant here; he is also a natural showman, and the relevant question is why our most distinguished poet feels it desirable to indulge this minor talent, clowning around like another Carl Sandburg. Bernard Shaw is the most interesting case of all, combining arrogance and subservience in the most dazzling way, as in the postcards he wrote to his admirers explaining why he couldn’t possibly be bothered to reply.

In Masscult (and in its bastard, Midcult) everything becomes a commodity, to be mined for \$\$\$\$, used for something it is not, from Davy Crockett to Picasso. Once a writer becomes a Name, that is, once he writes a book that for good or bad reasons catches on, the Masscult (or Midcult) mechanism begins to “build him up,” to package him into something that can be sold in identical units in quantity. He can coast along the rest of his life on momentum; publishers will pay him big advances just to get his Name on their list; his charisma becomes such that people will pay him \$250 and up to address them (really just to *see* him); editors will reward him handsomely for articles on subjects he knows nothing about. Artists and writers have always had a tendency to repeat themselves, but Masscult (and Midcult) make it highly profitable to do so and in fact penalize those who don’t. Some years ago, I’m told, a leading abstract artist complained to a friend that he was tired of the genre that had made him famous and wanted to try something else; but his gallery insisted such a shift would be commercially disastrous and, since he had children to send through college, he felt obliged to comply. Or compare the careers of James T. Farrell and Norman Mailer. The former made a reputation with the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy in the early ’thirties and his many books since then have gone on repeating the mixture as before; although his later books have won small critical esteem, he is still considered a major American writer and still gathers all the perquisites and emoluments thereof; Farrell is a standard and marketable commodity, like Jello. Although Mailer is still a Name, with plenty of p. and e., he has crossed up his public and his publishers by refusing to repeat himself. His reputation was made with his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, in 1948, but he has insisted on developing, or at least changing, since then, and his three subsequent books have little in common, in either style or content, with his first great

success. From the Masscult (or Midcult) point of view, he has jeopardized a sound investment in order to gratify his personal interests. "When a writer gets hold of a sure thing," Somerset Maugham, who should know, once observed, "you may expect him to hang on to it for a lifetime, like a dog worrying a bone." This is not at all to imply that James T. Farrell is deliberately hanging on to his bone for profit or prestige, or that Norman Mailer changes his bones for idealistic reasons. The truth probably is that the former really enjoys mumbling the same old bone while the latter, perhaps because he is more volatile and talented, has wanted to try something new. But the result is that Farrell has got a lot of mileage out of very little gas, while Mailer is still a real problem to his publishers.

VIII

Let us, finally, consider Masscult first from the standpoint of consumption and then from that of production.

As a marketable commodity, Masscult has two great advantages over High Culture. One has already been considered: the post-1750 public, lacking the taste and knowledge of the old patron class, is not only satisfied with shoddy mass-produced goods but in general feels more at home with them (though on unpredictable occasions, they will respond to the real thing, as with Dickens' novels and the movies of Chaplin and Griffith). This is because such goods are standardized and so are easier to consume since one knows what's coming next—imagine a Western in which the hero loses the climactic gun fight or an office romance in which the mousy stenographer loses out to the predatory blonde. But standardization has a subtler aspect, which might be called The Built-In Reaction. As Clement Greenberg noted in "Avant-garde and *Kitsch*" many years ago in *Partisan Review*, the special aesthetic quality of *Kitsch*—a term which includes both Masscult and Midcult

—is that it "predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasures of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in the genuine art" because it includes the spectator's reactions in the work itself instead of forcing him to make his own responses. That standby of provincial weddings, "I Love You Truly," is far more "romantic" than the most beautiful of Schubert's songs because its wallowing, yearning tremolos and glissandos make it clear to the most unmusical listener that something very tender indeed is going on. It does his feeling for him; or, as T. W. Adorno has observed of popular music, "The composition hears for the listener." Thus Liberace is a much more "musical" pianist than Serkin, whose piano is not adorned with antique candelabra and whose stance at it is as business-like as Liberace's is "artistic." So, too, our Collegiate Gothic, which may be seen in its most resolutely picturesque (and expensive) phase at Yale, is more relentlessly Gothic than Chartres, whose builders didn't even know they *were* Gothic and so missed many chances for quaint effects.* And so, too, Boca Raton, the millionaires' suburb that Addison Mizener designed in Palm Beach during the Great Bull Market of the 'twenties, is so aggressively Spanish Mission that a former American ambassador to Spain is said to have murmured in awe, "It's more Spanish than anything I ever saw in Madrid." The same Law of the Built-In Reaction also insures that a smoothly air-brushed pin-up girl by Petty is more "sexy" than a real naked

* When I lived in Harkness Memorial Quadrangle some thirty years ago, I noticed a number of cracks in the tiny-paned windows of my room that had been patched with picturesquely wavy strips of lead. Since the place had just been built, I thought this peculiar. Later I found that after the windows had been installed, a special gang of artisans had visited them; one craftsman had delicately cracked every tenth or twentieth pane with a little hammer and another had then repaired the cracks. In a few days, the windows of Harkness had gone through an evolution that in backward places like Oxford had taken centuries. I wonder what they do in Harkness when a window is broken by accident.

woman, the emphasis of breasts and thighs corresponding to the pornographically exaggerated Gothic details of Harkness. More *sexy* but not more *sexual*, the relation between the terms being similar to that of *sentimentality* to *sentiment* or *modernistic* to *modern*, or *arty* to *art*.

The production of Masscult is a subtler business than one might think. We have already seen in the case of Poe that a serious writer will produce art even when he is trying to function as a hack, simply because he cannot help putting himself into his work. The unhappy hero of James's story, "The Next Time," tried again and again to prostitute his talents and write a best seller to support his family, but each time he created another unprofitable masterpiece; with the best will in the world, he was simply unable to achieve a low enough standard. The reverse is also true: a hack will turn out hack stuff even when he tries to be serious. Most of these examples will come later under Midcult, but Masscult also has its little tragedies. When I was in Hollywood recently, I was told by one of the most intelligent younger directors, Stanley Kubrick: "The reason movies are often so bad out here isn't because the people who make them are cynical money hacks. Most of them are doing the very best they can; they really want to make good movies. The trouble is with their heads, not their hearts." This was borne out by the film I was there to write about, a mawkish travesty of Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* that was written and produced by Dore Schary with the noblest intentions.

There seem to be two main conditions for the successful production of *Kitsch*. One is that the producer must believe in what he is doing. A good example is Norman Rockwell, who since 1916 has painted over three hundred covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*. When a fellow illustrator remarked that their craft was just a way to make a living—"You do your job. you get your check, and no-

body thinks it's art"—Rockwell was horrified. "Oh no no no. How can you say that? No man with a conscience can just bat out illustrations. He's got to put all of his talent, all of his feelings into them." Having just seen a most interesting exhibition of Rockwell's techniques at a local bank, I think he was telling the truth. He makes dozens of careful, highly competent pencil sketches, plus oil renderings of details, for just one *Post* cover; if genius were really "an infinite capacity for taking pains," Norman Rockwell would be a genius. The trouble is that the final result of all this painstaking craftsmanship is just—a *Post* cover, as slick and cliché in execution as in content. "There's this magazine cover," says the comedian Mort Sahl, "and it shows this kid getting his first haircut you know and a dog is licking his hand and his mother is crying and it's Saturday night in the old home town and people are dancing outside in the streets and the Liberty Bell is ringing and, uh, did I miss anything?" But Rockwell is sincere, so much so that he constantly wonders whether he is living up to his talents. In the 'twenties, according to a profile in the *Post*, he went through a crisis as comic as it was pathetic:

Professional friends, dabbling in modernism, told him he ought to learn something about dynamic symmetry, and their arguments worried him. . . . Rockwell packed up and went to Paris. He attended lectures and bought Picassos to hang in his studio for inspiration. On his return he set about applying what he had learned to *Post* covers. When editor George Horace Lorimer examined the first new Rockwell offerings, he laid them aside and gave the artist a paternal lecture on the value of being one's self, pointing out in passing that it was conceivably better to have one's work displayed on the *Post's* covers than embalmed in art museums. Chastened, Rockwell agreed and went back to being himself. He now refers to his temporary aberration as "my James-Joyce-Gertrude-Stein period."

Lorimer's missionary work was completed by a Stanford girl Rockwell married a few years later, a nice, sensible young bride who in good American fashion "helped get him back on the beam and keep him there." In this not exactly Herculean task, she appears to have succeeded. He was positively defiant some years ago when he was being interviewed for a *New Yorker* profile:

My creed is that painting pictures of any kind is a definite form of expression and that illustration is the principal pictorial form of conveying ideas and telling funny stories. The critics say that any proper picture should be primarily a series of technical problems of light, shadow, proportion, color and voids. I say that if you can tell a story in a picture and if a reasonable number of people like your work, it is art. Maybe it isn't the highest form of art, but it's art nevertheless and it's what I love to do. I feel that I am doing something when I paint a picture that appeals to most people. This is a democracy, isn't it?

To which last the reply is, in terms of Rockwell's covers, "Yep, sure is." Yet, despite this credo, which every popular artist should have printed in red and black and hung over his drawing board alongside Kipling's "If," Rockwell still keeps worrying. He had another crisis a couple of years ago, at sixty-five, when he again wondered what he might have done "if I hadn't gone commercial" and again began to talk of Picasso as "the greatest"; he took a year off to do some Serious painting (except for a mere six *Post* covers), with results unknown to me. He also wrote his autobiography. It is being serialized in the *Post*.

The other condition for success in Masscult is that the writer, artist, editor, director or entertainer must have a good deal of the mass man in himself, as was the case with Zane Grey, Howard Chandler Christy, Mr. Lorimer of the *Post*, Cecil B. DeMille, and Elvis Presley. This is closely related to sincerity—how can he take his work seriously if he doesn't have this instinctive, this built-in vulgar

touch? Like Rockwell, he may know that art is good and honorable and worthy of respect, and he may pay tribute to it. But knowing it is one thing and feeling it is another. A journalistic entrepreneur like Henry Luce—by no means the worst—has the same kind of idle curiosity about the Facts and the same kind of gee-whiz excitement about rather elementary ideas (see *Life* editorials passim) as his millions of readers have. When I worked for him on *Fortune* in the early 'thirties, I was struck by three qualities he had as an editor: his shrewdness as to what was and what was not "a story," his high dedication to his task, and his limited cultural background despite, or perhaps because of, his having attended Yale College. All three are closely interrelated in his success: a more sophisticated editor would have gotten out of step with his millions of readers, a less idealistic one would have lacked the moral oomph to attract them, and he knew a "story" when he saw one because what interested them interested him.*

* An episode in my six years at *Fortune* is to the point here. In 1931-1932 I was active on a literary magazine (along with two friends who in 1938 were to become, with me, editors of *Partisan Review*: F. W. Dupee and George L. K. Morris) which had a circulation of about 600. Thinking Luce would be pleased, and interested, by this evidence of cultural enterprise on the part of one of his writers, I sent him up an issue of *The Miscellany*, as it was dismally called. His reaction was that I had betrayed Time, Inc. "But Henry," I said—in those days, long before *Sports Illustrated* or even *Life*, manners were still pastorally simple at Time, Inc., and Luce was merely *primus inter pares*—"But Henry, you can't expect *Fortune* to be my only interest. I give it a good day's work from nine to five, that's what you pay me for, and it's my business what I do in my spare time." This argument affected Luce much as his cynical colleague's did Norman Rockwell. With his usual earnestness—he was and I'm sure is a decent and honorable man, not at all the ogre the liberal press portrays—Luce expounded quite a different philosophy: *Fortune* was not just a job, it was a vocation worthy of a man's whole effort, and pay and time schedules weren't the point at all. "Why, the very name *Fortune* was thought up by so-and-so [one of my fellow editors] late one night on the West Side subway between the Seventy-second and the Seventy-ninth street stations [Luce was a *Time* man always]. This is a twenty-four-hour profession, you never know when you may get an idea for us, and if you're all the time thinking about some damn little magazine . . ." "But Henry . . ." It was an impasse, since I looked on *Fortune* as a means and he as an end, nor had it been resolved when I left the magazine four years later.

IX

As I have already noted in this essay, the separation of Folk Art and High Culture in fairly watertight compartments corresponded to the sharp line once drawn between the common people and the aristocracy. The blurring of this line, however desirable politically, has had unfortunate results culturally. Folk Art had its own authentic quality, but Masscult is at best a vulgarized reflection of High Culture and at worst a cultural nightmare, a *Kulturkatzenjammer*. And while High Culture could formerly address itself only to the *cognoscenti*, now it must take the *ignoscenti* into account even when it turns its back on them. For Masscult is not merely a parallel formation to High Culture, as Folk Art was; it is a competitor. The problem is especially acute in this country because class lines are especially weak here. If there were a clearly defined cultural elite here, then the masses could have their *Kitsch* and the classes could have their High Culture, with everybody happy. But a significant part of our population is chronically confronted with a choice between looking at TV or old masters, between reading Tolstoy or a detective story; i.e., the pattern of their cultural lives is "open" to the point of being porous. For a lucky few, this openness of choice is stimulating. But for most, it is confusing and leads at best to that middlebrow compromise called Midcult.

The turning point in our culture was the Civil War, whose aftermath destroyed the New England tradition almost as completely as the October Revolution broke the continuity of Russian culture. (Certain disturbing similarities between present-day American and Soviet Russian culture and society may be partly due to these seismic breaks, much more drastic than anything in European history, including the French Revolution.) The New England culture was simply pushed aside by history, dwindling to

provincial gentility, and there was no other to take its place; it was smothered by the growth of mass industry, by westward expansion, and above all by the massive immigration from non-English-speaking countries. The great metaphor of the period was the melting pot; the tragedy was that it melted so thoroughly. A pluralistic culture might have developed, enriched by the contributions of Poles, Italians, Serbs, Greeks, Jews, Finns, Croats, Germans, Swedes, Hungarians, and all the other peoples that came here from 1870 to 1910. It is with mixed feelings one reads Emma Lazarus' curiously condescending inscription on the Statue of Liberty:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

For indeed these *were* the poor and tempest-tossed, the bottom-dogs of Europe, and for just this reason they were all too eager to give up their old-world languages and customs, which they regarded as marks of inferiority. Uprooted from their own traditions, offered the dirtiest jobs at the lowest pay, the masses from Europe were made to feel that their only hope of rising was to become "Americanized," which meant being assimilated at the lowest cultural (as well as economic) level. They were ready-made consumers of *Kitsch*. A half-century ago, when the issue was still in the balance, Randolph Bourne wrote:

What we emphatically do not want is that these distinctive qualities should be washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity. Already we have far too much of this insipidity—masses of people who are half-breeds. . . . Our cities are filled with these half-breeds who retain their foreign names but have lost the foreign savor. This does not mean that . . . they have been really Americanized. It means that, letting slip from them whatever native culture they had, they have sub-

stituted for it only the most rudimentary American—the American culture of the cheap newspaper, the movies, the popular song, the ubiquitous automobile. . . .

Just so surely as we tend to disintegrate these nuclei of nationalistic culture do we tend to create hordes of men and women without a spiritual country, cultural outlaws without taste, without standards but those of the mob. We sentence them to live on the most rudimentary planes of American life.*

Bourne's fears were realized. The very nature of mass industry and of its offshoot, Masscult, made a pluralistic culture impossible. The melting pot produced merely "the tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity." This much can be said for the dominant Anglo-Saxon Americans: they didn't ask the immigrants to accept anything they themselves were unwilling to accept. One recalls Matthew Josephson's vignette of Henry Clay Frick sitting on a Renaissance chair under a Rembrandt reading the *Saturday Evening Post*. They were preoccupied with building railroads, settling the West, expanding industry, perfecting monopolies and other practical affairs. Pioneers, O Pioneers! And the tired pioneer preferred Harold Bell Wright to Henry James.

x

We are now in a more sophisticated period. The West has been won, the immigrants melted down, the factories and railroads built to such effect that since 1929 the problem has been consumption rather than production. The

* From "Trans-National America." Of course the immigrants were not all "huddled masses." Many, especially the Jews, were quite aware of the inferior quality of American cultural life. In *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), Hutchins Hapgood quotes a Jewish immigrant: "In Russia, a few men, really cultivated and intellectual, give the tone and everybody follows them. But in America the public gives the tone and the literary man simply expresses the public. So that really intellectual Americans do not express as good ideas as less intellectual Russians. The Russians all imitate the best. The Americans imitate what the mass of the people want." A succinct definition of Masscult.

work week has shrunk, real wages have risen, and never in history have so many people attained such a high standard of living as in this country since 1945. College enrollment is now well over four million, three times what it was in 1929. Money, leisure and knowledge, the prerequisites for culture, are more plentiful and more evenly distributed than ever before.

In these more advanced times, the danger to High Culture is not so much from Masscult as from a peculiar hybrid bred from the latter's unnatural intercourse with the former. A whole middle culture has come into existence and it threatens to absorb both its parents. This intermediate form—let us call it Midcult—has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf. In Masscult the trick is plain—to please the crowd by any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.*

The enemy outside the walls is easy to distinguish. It is its ambiguity that makes Midcult alarming. For it presents itself as part of High Culture. Not that coterie stuff, not those snobbish inbred so-called intellectuals who are only talking to themselves. Rather the great vital mainstream, wide and clear though perhaps not so deep. You, too, can wade in it for a mere \$16.70 pay nothing now just fill in the coupon and receive a full year six hard-cover lavishly illustrated issues of *Horizon: A Magazine of the Arts*, "probably the most beautiful magazine in the world . . .

* It's not done, of course, as consciously as this suggests. The editors of the *Saturday Review* or *Harper's* or the *Atlantic* would be honestly indignant at this description of their activities, as would John Steinbeck, J. P. Marquand, Pearl Buck, Irwin Shaw, Herman Wouk, John Hersey and others of that remarkably large group of Midcult novelists we have developed. One of the nice things about Zane Grey was that it seems never to have occurred to him that his books had anything to do with literature.

seeks to serve as guide to the long cultural advance of modern man, to explore the many mansions of the philosopher, the painter, the historian, the architect, the sculptor, the satirist, the poet . . . to build bridges between the world of scholars and the world of intelligent readers. It's a good buy. Use the coupon *now*." *Horizon* has some 160,000 subscribers, which is more than the combined circulations, after many years of effort, of *Kenyon*, *Hudson*, *Sewanee*, *Partisan*, *Art News*, *Arts*, *American Scholar*, *Dissent*, *Commentary*, and half a dozen of our other leading cultural-critical magazines.

Midcult is not, as might appear at first, a raising of the level of *Masscult*. It is rather a corruption of High Culture which has the enormous advantage over *Masscult* that while also in fact "totally subjected to the spectator," in Malraux's phrase, it is able to pass itself off as the real thing. Midcult is the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, put out several years ago under the aegis of the Yale Divinity School, that destroys our greatest monument of English prose, the King James Version, in order to make the text "clear and meaningful to people today," which is like taking apart Westminster Abbey to make Disneyland out of the fragments. Midcult is the Museum of Modern Art's film department paying tribute to Samuel Goldwyn because his movies are alleged to be (slightly) better than those of other Hollywood producers—though why they are called "producers" when their function is to prevent the production of art (cf., the fate in Hollywood of Griffith, Chaplin, von Stroheim, Eisenstein and Orson Welles) is a semantic puzzle. Midcult is the venerable and once venerated *Atlantic*—which in the last century printed Emerson, Lowell, Howells, James, and Mark Twain—putting on the cover of a recent issue a huge photograph of Dore Schary, who has lately transferred his high-minded sentimentality from Hollywood to Broadway and who is represented in the issue by a homily, "To A Young Actor," which synthesizes Jeffer-

son, Polonius and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, concluding: "Behave as citizens not only of your profession but of the full world in which you live. Be indignant with injustice, be gracious with success, be courageous with failure, be patient with opportunity, and be resolute with faith and honor." Midcult is the Book-of-the-Month Club, which since 1926 has been supplying its members with reading matter of which the best that can be said is that it could be worse, i.e., they get John Hersey instead of Gene Stratton Porter. Midcult is the transition from Rodgers and Hart to Rodgers and Hammerstein, from the gay tough lyrics of *Pal Joey*, a spontaneous expression of a real place called Broadway, to the folk-fakery of *Oklahoma!* and the orotund sentimentalities of *South Pacific*.^{*} Midcult is or was, "Omnibus," subsidized by a great foundation to raise the level of television, which began its labors by announcing it would "be aimed straight at the average American audience, neither highbrow nor lowbrow, the audience that made the *Reader's Digest*, *Life*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the audience which is the solid backbone of any

* An interesting Midcult document is the editorial the *New York Times* ran August 24, 1960, the day after the death of Oscar Hammerstein 2nd: . . . The theatre has lost a man who stood for all that is decent in life. . . . The concern for racial respect in *South Pacific*, the sympathy and respect for a difficult though aspiring monarch in *The King and I*, the indomitable faith that runs through *Carousel* were not clever bits of showmanship. They represented Mr. Hammerstein's faith in human beings and their destiny. . . .

Since he was at heart a serious man, his lyrics were rarely clever. Instead of turning facetious phrases he made a studious attempt to write idiomatically in the popular tradition of the musical theatre, for he was a dedicated craftsman. But the style that was apparently so artless has brought glimpses of glory into our lives. "There's a bright, golden haze on the meadow," sings Curly in *Oklahoma!* and the gritty streets of a slatternly city look fresher. "June is bustin' out all over," sing Carrie and Nettie in *Carousel* and the harshness of our winter vanishes. . . . To us it is gratifying that he had the character to use his genius with faith and scruple.

The contrast of faith (good) with cleverness (bad) is typical of Midcult, as is the acceptance of liberalistic moralizing as a satisfactory substitute for talent. Indeed, talent makes the midbrow uneasy: "Since he was a serious man, his lyrics were rarely clever." The death of Mr. Hart did not stimulate the *Times* to editorial elegy.

business as it is of America itself" and which then proved its good faith by programming Gertrude Stein and Jack Benny, Chekhov and football strategy, Beethoven and champion ice skaters. "Omnibus" failed. The level of television, however, was not raised, for some reason.

XI

But perhaps the best way to define Midcult is to analyze certain typical products. The four I have chosen are Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* and Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body*. They have all been Midcult successes: each has won the Pulitzer Prize, has been praised by critics who should know better, and has been popular not so much with the masses as with the educated classes. Technically, they are advanced enough to impress the midbrows without worrying them. In content, they are "central" and "universal," in that line of hollowly portentous art which the French call *pompier* after the glittering, golden beplumed helmets of their firemen. Mr. Wilder, the cleverest of the four, has actually managed to be at once ultra-simple and grandiose. "Now there are some things we all know, but we don't take 'em out and look at 'em very often," says his stage manager, sucking ruminatively on his pipe. "We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars. . . . Everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being." The last sentence is an eleven-word summary, in form and content, of Midcult. I agree with everything Mr. Wilder says but I will fight to the death against his right to say it in this way.

The Old Man and the Sea was (appropriately) first published in *Life* in 1952. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and it helped Hemingway win the Nobel Prize in 1954 (the judges cited its "style-forming mastery of the art of modern narration"). It is written in that fake-biblical prose Pearl Buck used in *The Good Earth*, a style which seems to have a malign fascination for the midbrows—Miss Buck also got a Nobel Prize out of it. There are only two characters, who are not individualized because that would take away from the Universal Significance. In fact they are not even named, they are simply "the old man" and "the boy"—I think it was a slip to identify the fish as a marlin though, to be fair, it is usually referred to as "the great fish." The dialogue is at once quaint (democracy) and dignified (literature). "Sleep well, old man," quoths The Boy; or, alternatively, "Wake up, old man." It is also very poetic, as The Boy's speech: "I can remember the tail slapping and banging . . . and the noise of you clubbing him like chopping a tree down and the sweet blood smell all over me." (Even the Old Man is startled by this cadenza. "Can you really remember that?" he asks.) In the celebrated baseball dialogues we have a fusion of Literature & Democracy:

"The great DiMaggio is himself again. I think of Dick Sisler and those great drives in the old park. . . . The Yankees cannot lose."

"But I fear the Indians of Cleveland."

"Have faith in the Yankees, my son. Think of the great DiMaggio."

And this by the man who practically invented realistic dialogue.

It is depressing to compare this story with "The Undefeated," a bullfighting story Hemingway wrote in the 'twenties when, as he would say, he was knocking them out of the park. Both have the same theme: an old-timer, scorned as a has-been, gets one last chance; he loses (the

fish is eaten by sharks, the bullfighter is gored) but his defeat is a moral victory, for he has shown that his will and courage are still intact. The contrast begins with the opening paragraphs:

Manuel Garcia climbed the stairs to Don Miguel Retana's office. He set down his suitcase and knocked on the door. There was no answer. Manuel, standing in the hallway, felt there was some one in the room. He felt it through the door.

He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the coiled lines or the gaff and the harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

The contrast continues—disciplined, businesslike understatement v. the drone of the pastiche parable, wordy and sentimental (“the flag of permanent defeat” fairly nudges us to sympathize). And all those “ands.”

“Undeclared” is 57 pages long, as against *Old Man's* 140, but not only does much more happen in it but also one feels that more has happened than is expressed, so to speak, while *Old Man* gives the opposite impression. “Undeclared” has four people in it, each with a name and each defined through his words and actions; *Old Man* has no people, just two Eternal, Universal types. Indeed, for three-fourths it has one only one, since The Boy doesn't go along on the fishing trip. Perhaps a Kafka could have made something out of it, but in Hemingway's realistic manner it is

monotonous. “Then he began to pity the great fish”—that sort of thing. At times the author, rather desperate one imagines, has him talk to the fish and to the birds. He also talks to his hand: “How does it go, hand?” In “Undeclared,” the emotion arises naturally out of the dialogue and action, but in *Old Man*, since there's little of either, the author has to spell it out. Sometimes he reports the fisherman's improbable musings: “He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought. . . . Thank God, they are not as intelligent as we who kill them, although they are more noble and more able.” Sometimes the author tips us off: “He was too simple to wonder when he had attained humility. But he knew he had attained it.” (A humble man who knows he has attained humility seems to me a contradiction in terms.) This constant editorializing—an elementary sin against which I used to warn my Creative Writing class at Northwestern University—contrasts oddly with the stripped, no-comment method that made the young Hemingway famous. “I am a strange old man,” the hero tells The Boy. Prove it, old man, don't say it.

OUR TOWN is an extraordinarily skillful bit of craftsmanship. I think it is practically actor-proof, which is why it is so often given by local dramatic societies. With that literary sensibility which has enabled him to fabricate each of his books in a different mode, a miracle of imitative versatility, Mr. Wilder has here made the final statement of the midbrows' nostalgia for small-town life, as Norman Rockwell has done it for the lowbrows in his *Post* covers. *Our Town's* combination of quaintness, earthiness, humor, pathos and sublimity (all mild) is precisely Rockwell's, and the situations are curiously alike: puppy lovers at the soda fountain, wives gossiping over the back fence, decent little funerals under the pines, country editor, family doctor, high-school baseball hero, all running in their well-worn grooves. What gives the play class, raising it into Midcult,

are the imaginary props and sets and the interlocutory stage manager, devices Mr. Wilder got from the Chinese theater (he always gets them from somewhere). Brecht used similar devices to get his "alienation effect," to keep the audience from being hypnotized by the stage illusion—an original and hence shocking idea. But Mr. Wilder has nothing artistically subversive in mind; on the contrary, *Our Town* is as hypnotic, in the usual theatrical sense, as *East Lynne*. The stage manager is its heart, and he is such a nice, pipe-puffing, cracker-barrel philosopher—pungent yet broad-minded—that only a highbrow can resist his spell (or, of course, a lowbrow). He comments on the local cemetery:

This is certainly an important part of Grover's Corners. It's on a hilltop—a windy hilltop—lots of sky, lots of clouds—often lots of sun and moon and stars. . . . Yes, beautiful spot up here. Mountain laurel and li-lacks. . . . Over there are the old stones—1670, 1680. Strong-minded people that come a long way to be independent. Summer people walk around there laughing at the funny words on the tombstones. It don't do any harm. . . . Over there are some Civil War veterans. Iron flags on their graves. New Hampshire boys . . . had a notion that the Union ought to be kept together, though they'd never seen more than fifty miles of it. All they knew was the name, folks—the United States of America. And they went and died about it. . . . Yes, an awful lot of sorrow has sort of quieted down up here.

Guess there just hasn't been anybody around for years as plumb mellow nor as straight-thinking neither, as Mr. Wilder's stage manager. Nope. 'Cept mebbe for Eddie Guest out Detroit way.

J.B. resembles *Our Town* in its staging—no sets, symbolic action accompanied by commentary—but in little else. Its language is high-falutin' where the other's is homespun, the comment is delivered by no village sage but by God and Satan in person, and its theme is nothing less

than the relationship of man to God. It is Profound and Soul-Searching, it deals with the Agony of Modern Man, and it has been widely discussed, often by the author, in the Midcult magazines.* Mr. MacLeish mixes advanced staging with advanced poetry ("Death is a bone that stammers.") with family stuff ("J.B., forking wishbone on Rebecca's plate: 'That's my girl!' ") with tough stuff ("Four kids in a car. They're dead. / Two were yours.") with melodrama ("No! Don't touch me!") with a Message of the grandest inconclusiveness. The question of God and man is chivvied about for two hours, no decision, and is then dropped in the last scene and a new toy is offered the audience, one they are familiar with from other Broadway plays, namely Love:

Blow on the coal of the heart.
The candles in the churches are out.
The lights have gone out in the sky.
Blow on the coal of the heart
And we'll see by and by. . . .

Robert Brustein in *The New Republic* and Gore Vidal in *Partisan Review* have lately had some good things to say about the tendency of our playwrights to bring in love as a *deus ex machina* to magically resolve the problems raised by the preceding two hours of conspicuously loveless drama-turgy, so I merely note the fact here. The Boylston Pro-

* The Midcult mind aspires toward Universality above all. A good example was that "Family of Man" show of photographs Edward Steichen put on several years ago at the Museum of Modern Art to great applause. (The following summer it was the hit of the American exhibition in Moscow, showing that a touch of Midcult makes the whole world kin.) The title was typical—actually, it should have been called Photorama. There were many excellent photographs, but they were arranged under the most pretentious and idiotic titles—each section had a wall caption from Whitman, Emerson, Carl Sandburg or some other sage—and the whole effect was of a specially pompous issue of *Life* ("Life on Life"). The editorializing was insistent—the Midcult audience always wants to be Told—and the photographs were marshaled to demonstrate that although there are real Problems (death, for instance), it's a pretty good old world after all.

fessor of Rhetoric at Harvard made many mistakes in *J.B.*, but one was fatal—intermingling with his own versification some actual passages from the Book of Job. It is true that Elia Kazan, who directed the play with appropriate vulgarity, reduced the effects of these passages considerably by having them delivered over a loudspeaker in an orotund voice reminiscent of the fruitiest manner of Westbrook Van Voorhees on the March of Time. Even so, the contrast was painful between the somber and passionate elevation of the Book of Job and Mr. MacLeish's forcible-feeble style. It's really too much to go from:

*Hast thou given the horse strength?
Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder!
He saith among the trumpets, Ha, Ha!*

to:

*Job won't take it! Job won't touch it!
Job will fling it in God's face
With half his guts to make it spatter!*

The clever author of *Our Town* would never have made such a gaffe.

FINALLY, Mr. Benét's 377-page orgy of Americana, much admired in its day and still widely used in the schools as combining History and Literature. The opening Invocation strikes at once the right note, patriotic yet sophisticated:

*American muse, whose strong and diverse heart
So many men have tried to understand
But only made it smaller with their art . . .
And I have seen and heard you in the dry
Close-huddled furnace of the city street
Where the parched moon was planted in the sky
And the limp air hung dead against the heat.*

Eliot echoes in the last four lines as Homer does in the section on Pickett's charge:

*So they came on in strength, light-footed, stepping like
deer,
So they died or were taken. So the iron entered their flesh*

Even Kipling's ballad manner:

*Thirteen sisters beside the sea
Built a house called Liberty
And locked the doors with a stately key.
None should enter it but the free.
(Have a care, my son.)*

Nor are humbler poetic models spurned:

*She was the white heart of the birch . . .
Her sharp clear breasts
Were two young victories in the hollow darkness
And when she stretched her hands above her head
And let the spun fleece ripple to her loins,
Her body glowed like deep springs under the sun.*

Mr. Benét is a master of the built-in reaction; it is impossible not to identify the emotion he wants to arouse. Sometimes solemn, sometimes gay, always straining to put it across, like a night-club violinist. Play, gypsy, play! One is never puzzled by the unexpected. The Wingates are Southern aristocrats and they are proud and generous and they live in a big white house with pillars. Abe Lincoln is gaunt, sad, kindly and "tough as a hickory rail." John Brown is strong, simple, fanatical—and "he knew how to die." Robert E. Lee does present a problem since no national cliché has been evolved for him. Mr. Benét begins cautiously: "He was a man, and as a man he knew / Love, separation, sorrow, joy and death." Safe enough. But he still hasn't found his footing by the end: "He wanted something. That must be enough. / Now he rides Traveller back into the west." A puzzling figure.

The final judgment on the United States is ambiguous: "the monster and the sleeping queen." For Mr. Benét on the one hand doesn't want to sell America short but on the other he doesn't want to make a fool of himself—the Mid-

cult writer is always worried about those superior, sneering intellectuals, however he pretends to despise them. The ambivalence becomes a little frantic in the closing lines: "So when the crowd gives tongue / And prophets old and young / Bawl out their strange despair / Or fall in worship there, / Let them applaud the image or condemn, / But keep your distance and your soul from them. . . . / If you at last must have a word to say, / Say neither, in their way, / 'It is a deadly magic and accursed' / Nor 'It is blest' but only 'It is here.'" The American fear of ideas (bawling prophets) and in fact of consciousness (If you *must* have a word to say) has seldom been more naïvely expressed. Or the American device for evading these terrors: Let's stick to the *facts*; or, Say only "It is here." For ideas might lead to conclusions.

XII

The Enemy is clear. J.B.'s three comforters are men of ideas—Freudian, Marxist, theological—and each is presented as a repulsive bigot. (In the 'thirties, Mr. MacLeish would have given the Marxist better lines.) Mr. Wilder does it more suavely:

Belligerent man at back of auditorium: Is there no one in town aware of social injustice and industrial inequality?

Mr. Webb (editor of the Grover's Corners Sentinel): Oh yes, everybody is—somethin' terrible. Seems like they spend most of their time talking about who's rich and who's poor.

Belligerent man: Then why don't they do something about it?

Mr. Webb: Well, I dunno. I guess we're all hunting like everybody else for a way the diligent and sensible can rise to the top and the lazy and quarrelsome can sink to the bottom. But it ain't easy to find. . . . Are there any other questions?

Lady in a box: Oh, Mr. Webb? Mr. Webb, is there any culture or love of beauty in Grover's Corners?

Mr. Webb: Well, ma'am, there ain't much—not in the sense you mean. . . . But maybe this is the place to tell you that

we've got a lot of pleasures of a kind here: we like the sun comin' up over the mountain in the morning, and we all notice a good deal about the birds. [etc.] But those other things, you're right, ma'am, there ain't much. *Robinson Crusoe* and the Bible; and Handel's *Largo*, we all know that; and Whistler's *Mother*—those are just about as far as we go.

And this is just about as far as the play goes. Those who question the values of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, 1901, are presented as grotesques while Editor Webb is presented as the norm. This might be justified as historical realism—although small-town editors fifty years ago were often crusaders and idealists—but of course Mr. Wilder is not interested in the actual 1901 Grover's Corners. "*Our Town* is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire Village," he wrote in the preface to the 1957 edition, "or as a speculation about the conditions of life after death (that element I merely took from Dante's *Purgatory*). [The "merely" is a master touch.—D. M.] It is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life." This is a half truth, which means it is mostly false. Not that Mr. Wilder is in any way insincere. Had he been, he could no more have written a Midcult masterpiece like *Our Town* than Norman Rockwell could have painted all those *Post* covers. But if one compares with *Our Town* a similar attempt to find a value "for the smallest events in our everyday lives," namely Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, one sees the difference between a work of art and a sincere bit of *Kitsch*. What Mr. Wilder is really doing is nothing either so personal or so universal as he thinks it is. He is constructing a social myth, a picture of a golden age that is a paradigm for today. He has the best of both tenses—the past is veiled by the nostalgic feelings of the present, while the present is softened by being conveyed in terms of a safely remote past. But what a myth and what a golden age! Here one does get a little impatient with the talented Mr. Wilder.

The stage manager is its demiurge. He is the perfect American pragmatist, folksy and relaxed because that's just the way things are and if anybuddy hankers to change 'em that's their right only (pause, business of drawing reflectively on pipe) chances are 't won't make a sight of difference (pipe business again) things don't change much in Grover's Corners. There is no issue too trivial for him not to take a stand on. "That's the end of the first act, friends," he tells the audience. "You can go smoke now"—adding with a touch of genius, "those that smoke." Don't do any harm, really, one way or t'other.

XIII

The special threat of *Midcult* is that it exploits the discoveries of the *avant-garde*. This is something new. *Midcult's* historical predecessor, Academicism, resembled it in being *Kitsch* for the elite, outwardly High Culture but really as much a manufactured article as the cheaper cultural goods produced for the masses. The difference is that Academicism was intransigently opposed to the *avant-garde*. It included painters like Bouguereau, Alma-Tadema, and Rosa Bonheur; critics like Edmund Gosse and Edmund Clarence Stedman; composers like Sir Edward Elgar; poets like Alfred Austin and Stephen Phillips; writers like Rostand, Stevenson, Cabell, and Joseph Hergesheimer.* Academicism in its own dreary way was at least resisting *Masscult*. It had standards, the old ones, and it educated

* A typical Academic victory over the *avant-garde* was that by the "Beaux Arts" school of architecture, led by McKim, Mead & White, over the Chicago school, led by Louis Sullivan and including Frank Lloyd Wright, at the turn of the century. A stroll down Park Avenue illustrates the three styles. Academic: The Italian loggia of the Racquet & Tennis Club, the Corinthian extravagances of Whitney Warren's Grand Central Building. *Avant-garde*: the Seagram Building, by Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, and the Lever Building, by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. *Midcult*: the glass boxes—imitating as cheaply as possible the Lever and Seagram buildings—that are going up as fast as the old Academic-Renaissance apartment houses can be pulled down. One can hardly regret the destruction of the latter on either aesthetic or antiquarian grounds, but they did have a mild kind of "character" which their *Midcult* successors lack.

the *nouveaux riches*, some of whom became so well educated that they graduated to an appreciation of the *avant-garde*, realizing that it was carrying on the spirit of the tradition which the Academics were killing. It is possible to see Academicism as the growing pains of High Culture, the restrictive chrysalis from which something new might emerge. That it was always destroyed after a few decades carries out the simile—who looks at Alma-Tadema today, who reads Hergesheimer?

Midcult is a more dangerous opponent of High Culture because it incorporates so much of the *avant-garde*. The four works noticed above were more advanced and sophisticated, for their time, than were the novels of John Galsworthy. They are, so to speak, the products of lapsed *avant-gardists* who know how to use the modern idiom in the service of the banal. Their authors were all expatriates in the 'twenties—even Mr. Benét, who dates his Americanesque epic "*Neuilly-sur-Seine*, 1928." That they are not conscious of any shifting of gears, that they still think of themselves as *avant-gardists* is just what makes their later works so attractive in a *Midcult* sense. "Toward the end of the 'twenties I began to lose pleasure in going to the theater," Mr. Wilder begins the preface to the 1957 edition of *Three Plays*. He explains that, while Joyce, Proust and Mann still compelled his belief, the theater didn't, and he continues: "I began to feel that the theater was not only inadequate, it was evasive; it did not wish to draw on its deeper potentialities. . . . It aimed to be *soothing*. The tragic had no heat; the comic had no bite; the social criticism failed to indict us with responsibility. I began to search for the point where the theater had run off the track, where it had . . . become a minor art and an inconsequential diversion." That point, he found, was "the box-set stage," with its realistic sets and props and its proscenium dividing the actors from the audience. He fixed that, all right, but the plays he mounted on his advanced

stage were evasive, soothing, without tragic heat or comic bite and spectacularly without social criticism. *The Skin of Our Teeth*, for instance, is as vast in theme as *Our Town* is modest, dealing with the whole history of the human race, but its spirit and its dialogue are equally folksy, and its point, hammered home by the maid, Sabina, is identical: life goes on and, to lapse into the idiom of Sabina's opposite number in *Our Town*, there ain't a thing you can do about it. "This is where you came in," she says at the final curtain. "We have to go on for ages and ages yet. You go home. The end of this play isn't written yet. Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they're as confident as the first day they began." A soft impeachment—but Midcult specializes in soft impeachments. Its cakes are forever eaten, forever intact.

The Skin of Our Teeth was first produced in 1942, at the low point of the war; its message—the adaptability and tenacity of the human race through the most catastrophic events—was a welcome one and was well received. "I think it mostly comes alive under conditions of crisis," writes the author. "It has often been charged with being a bookish fantasia about history, full of rather bloodless schoolmasterish jokes. But to have seen it in Germany soon after the war, in the shattered churches and beerhalls that were serving as theaters, with audiences whose price of admission meant the loss of a meal . . . it was an experience that was not so cool. I am very proud that this year [1957] it has received a first and overwhelming reception in Warsaw. The play is deeply indebted to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*." Personally, its bookish quality is one of the things I like about the play, and its jokes are often good; in fact, as entertainment *The Skin of Our Teeth* is excellent, full of charm and ingenuity; its only defect is that whenever it tries to be serious, which is quite often, it is pretentious and embarrassing. I quite believe the author's statement about its reception in postwar Germany—he enjoys a much

greater reputation abroad than here—and I agree that the audiences responded to it because it seemed to speak to them of the historical cataclysm they had just been through. I find this fact, while not unexpected, depressing. The bow to *Finnegans Wake* is a graceful retrieve of a foul ball batted up in the *Saturday Review* fifteen years earlier by Messrs. Campbell and Robinson, the authors of *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*. They hinted at plagiarism, but I think one should rather admire the author's ability to transmute into Midcult such an impenetrably avant-garde work. There seems to be no limit to this kind of alchemy in reverse, given a certain amount of brass.

XIV

Since 1900 American culture has moved, culturally, in a direction that on the whole appears to be up. Ella Wheeler Wilcox yields to Stephen Vincent Benét. Maxfield Parrish's *Day Dreams* is replaced on the living-room wall by Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, or even a Picasso print. Billy Sunday's Bible-shouting acrobatics are toned down to Billy Graham's more civilized approach, though with what gain to religious feeling has yet to be seen. In literary criticism, the artless enthusiasm of a William Lyon Phelps has modulated into the more restrained yea-saying of a Clifton Fadiman or a Granville Hicks. The late Arthur Brisbane used to speculate in short, punchy paragraphs separated by asterisks (they have been compared to the pauses a barroom philosopher makes to spit reflectively into the sawdust) on such topics as whether a gorilla could beat up a heavyweight champion in fair fight; but he would hardly go over as a columnist today, not even in that Hearst press whose circulation he swelled fifty years ago. He has been superseded by types like Dr. Max Lerner of the *New York Post*, who can bring Freudian theory to bear on the sex life of Elizabeth Taylor and Eddie Fisher. Dr. Lerner was once managing editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*; more

recently he compiled a Midcult classic titled *America as a Civilization* in which he amassed 1,036 pages of data and interpretations without offending any religious, racial, political or social group. It is a solemn thought what he would do with Brisbane's man v. gorilla problem; as I recall, Brisbane finally concluded the gorilla would win; Dr. Lerner would probably take a more rounded viewpoint; his humanistic frame of reference would incline him to favor the heavyweight, but he would be careful to explain that no intrinsic inferiority was involved; just a matter of social environment. Gorillas are people too.

A tepid ooze of Midcult is spreading everywhere. Psychoanalysis is expounded sympathetically and superficially in popular magazines. Institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the American Civil Liberties Union, once avant-garde and tiny, are now flourishing and respectable; but something seems to have been mislaid in the process, perhaps their *raison d'être*. Hollywood movies aren't as terrible as they once were, but they aren't as good either; the general level of taste and craftsmanship has risen but there are no more great exceptions like Griffith, von Stroheim, Chaplin, Keaton; Orson Welles was the last, and *Citizen Kane* is twenty years old. An enterprising journalist, Vance Packard, has manufactured two best sellers by summarizing the more sensational findings of the academic sociologists, garnishing the results with solemn moralizings, and serving it up under catchy titles: *The Hidden Persuaders*, *The Status Seekers*. Bauhaus modernism has seeped down, in a vulgarized form, into the design of our vacuum cleaners, pop-up toasters, supermarkets and cafeterias.

The question, of course, is whether all this is merely growing pains—or, in more formal language, an expression of social mobility. Don't rising social classes always go through a *nouveau riche* phase in which they imitate the forms of culture without understanding its essence? And won't these classes in time be assimilated into High Cul-

ture? It is true that this has usually happened in the past. But I think there is a difference now. Before the last century, the standards were generally agreed on and the rising new classes tried to conform to them. By now, however, because of the disintegrative effects of Masscult I described in the first part of this essay, the standards are by no means generally accepted. The danger is that the values of Midcult, instead of being transitional—"the price of progress"—may now themselves become a debased, permanent standard.

I see no reason Midcult may not be stabilized as the norm of our culture. Why struggle with real poetry when the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric can give you its effects in capsule form—works twice as fast and has a "Blow on the coal of the heart" ending? Why read the sociologists when Mr. Packard gives you their gist painlessly?

xv

This whole line of argument may be objected to as undemocratic. But such an objection is beside the point. As T. S. Eliot writes in *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*:

Here are what I believe to be essential conditions for the growth and for the survival of culture. If they conflict with any passionate faith of the reader—if, for instance, he finds it shocking that culture and equalitarianism should conflict, if it seems monstrous to him that anyone should have "advantages of birth"—I do not ask him to change his faith. I merely ask him to stop paying lip-service to culture. If the reader says: "The state of affairs which I wish to bring about is *right* (or is *just*, or is *inevitable*); and if this must lead to further deterioration of culture, we must accept that deterioration"—then I can have no quarrel with him. I might even, in some circumstances, feel obliged to support him. The effect of such a wave of honesty would be that the word *culture* would cease to be absurd.

That the word now is absurd—priggish, unctuous, worn slick with abuse—shows how mass-ified we have become. The great cultures of the past have all been elite affairs, centering in small upper-class communities which had certain standards in common and which both encouraged creativity by (informed) enthusiasm and disciplined it by (informed) criticism.

The old avant-garde of 1870-1930, from Rimbaud to Picasso, demonstrated this with special clarity because it was based not on wealth or birth but on common tastes. "Common" didn't mean uniform—there were the liveliest, most painful clashes—but rather a shared respect for certain standards and an agreement that living art often runs counter to generally accepted ideas. The attitude of the old avant-garde, in short, was a peculiar mixture of conservatism and revolutionism that had nothing in common with the tepid agreeableness of Masscult. It was an elite community, a rather snobbish one, but anyone could join who cared enough about such odd things. Its significance was that it simply refused to compete in the established cultural marketplaces. It made a desperate effort to fence off some area within which the serious artist could still function, to erect again the barriers between the *cognoscenti* and the *ignoscenti* that had been breached by the rise of Masscult. The attempt was against the whole movement of history; and our cultural sociologists, had they been anachronistically consulted by Yeats or Stravinsky, could have proved to them with irrefutable tables and research studies that it could not possibly come to anything. For it was, sociologically speaking, absurd. Nevertheless, the attempt did in fact succeed, perhaps because artists, writers and musicians are not very good at statistics—and to it we owe most of the major creations of the last seventy years.

The old avant-garde has passed and left no successors. We continue to live off its capital but the community has broken up and the standards are no longer respected. The

crisis in America is especially severe. Our creators are too isolated or too integrated. Most of them merge gracefully into Midcult, feeling they must be part of "the life of our time," whatever that means (I should think it would be ambitious enough to try to be part of one's own life), and fearful of being accused of snobbishness, cliqueism, negativism or, worst of all, practicing "art for art's sake" (though for what better sake?). Some revolt, but their work tends toward eccentricity since it lacks contact with the past and doesn't get support from a broad enough intelligentsia in the present. The two currently most prominent groups, the "action painters" and the beatnik academy of letters, differ from the old avant-garde in two interesting ways. They are cut off from tradition: the works of Joyce and Picasso, for instance, show an extraordinary knowledge of (and feeling for) the achievements of the past, while those of the beats and the actionists, for instance, do not. And they have had too much publicity too soon; the more they try to shock the Midcult's audience, the more they are written up in the Lucepapers; they are "different," that potent advertising word whose charm reveals how monotonous the landscape of Midcult has become.

The beatnik's pad is the modern equivalent of the poet's garret in every way except the creation of poetry. Our well-oiled machinery of cultural exploitation provides those who are Different with lecture dates, interviews, fellowships, write-ups, and fans of both sexes (the word's derivation from "fanatics" is clearer in these circles than among the more restrained enthusiasts of baseball, possibly because the latter have a technical knowledge rarely found among the former). The machinery tempts them to extremes since the more fantastic their efforts, the more delighted are their Midcult admirers. "*Pour épater les bourgeois*" was the defiant slogan of the nineteenth-century avant-gardists but now the bourgeoisie have developed a passion for being shocked. "If possible," Kerouac advises

young authors, "write without 'consciousness' in a semi-trance," while a prominent advanced composer has written a piece for Twelve Radios that is performed by turning each to a different station, a sculptor has exhibited a dozen large beach pebbles dumped loosely on a board, a painter has displayed an all-black canvas only to be topped by another who showed simply—a canvas. At last, one hears the respectful murmurs, *The Real Thing!* The avant-garde of the heroic period generally drew the line between experiment and absurdity—Gertrude Stein was the chief exception. Efforts like the above were limited to the Dadaists, who used them to satirize the respectable Academic culture of their day. But the spoofs of Dada have now become the serious offerings of what one might call the lumpen-avant-garde.

XVI

At this point, a question may be asked, and in fact should be asked, about the remarkable cultural change that has taken place since 1945. Statistically, a very good case can be made out that in the last fifteen years or so there has been a more widely diffused interest in High Culture than ever before in our history. The cause is the same as that for the development of Midcult, namely, the accelerating increase in wealth, leisure and college education. All three have been growing at an extraordinary rate since 1945, especially the last. Although the population between eighteen and twenty-one has increased only 2 per cent in the last ten years, college enrollment has almost doubled. There are now as many postgraduate students as there were undergraduates when I went to college in the late 'twenties. This enormous college population—one must add in several hundred thousand teachers—is the most important fact about our cultural situation today. It is far bigger, absolutely and relatively, than that of any other country. Some of its potentialities are being realized, but the most im-

portant—the creation and support of a living culture on a high level—is as yet hardly embryonic and perhaps never will come to birth. For this would mean drawing that line between Masscult and High Culture which the rise of Midcult has blurred. And there is something damnably American about Midcult.

Let us begin with the positive statistics. Since 1945 we have seen the following. The rise of the "quality" paperback, retailing at 95¢ up and presenting, at a third or less the cost of the original hard-cover edition, everything from Greek myths to the best contemporary scholars, critics and creative writers. The sales of classical records, now about a fourth of total record sales and actually equal in dollar volume to Rock 'n Roll. The proliferation throughout the country of symphony orchestras (there are now 1,100, double the 1949 number, and every city of 50,000 has one), local art museums (2,500 as against 600 in 1930), and opera-producing groups (there are now 500, a seven-fold increase since 1940). The extraordinary success of Noah Greenberg's Pro Musica Antiqua group, which specializes in medieval and Early Renaissance music, is a case in point. The increase in "art" movie theaters, from 12 in 1945 to over 600 in 1962. The existence today of some 5,000 community theatres and the development, in the last ten years, of a vigorous off-Broadway theatre. Finally, the beginnings, only recently, of what might be called an off-Hollywood cinema—low-budget serious films made and financed outside the industry, such as *Shadows*, *Pull My Daisy*, *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, *The Savage Eye*, and the film version of *The Connection*.

This is all very well and indeed extremely well. For this is not Midcult but for the most part the unadulterated article.* The books are the complete texts, the music is

* Although the two are often confused, it is one thing to bring High Culture to a wider audience without change; and another to "popularize" it by sales talk in the manner of Clifton Fadiman or Mortimer J. Adler, or by pastiches like *J.B.* and *John Brown's Body*, or by hoking it up as in

uncut and well performed, the art works the best going, the movies usually interesting (though there is an admixture of Brigitte Bardot, you gotta live), the off-Broadway plays usually serious and the community-theatre ones often so.

Nor is this all that can be said. It is probably no easier today to make a living in the marketplace by serious writing or painting or composing than it ever was, but since 1945 there have come into existence a whole new category of what the trade unionist calls "fringe benefits." Institutional support of the poet, writer, artist, composer now goes far beyond teaching jobs to (1) foundation grants, (2) prizes and awards by all kinds of arts-and-letters groups, (3) lecture fees (one wonders how some people ever get any work done at all), (4) luxury junkets to East-West, North-South, Up-Down cultural gatherings all over the world, (5) Fulbright and other fellowships, (6) fees for advising literary aspirants at what are misnamed "writers' conferences." As Wallace Markfield put it in the *New Leader* of March 18, 1957: "No other generation . . . has pursued the Good Job quite so wisely and so well. This is not to say that they have consigned themselves to the gas chambers of Madison Avenue or Luceland. Far from it: their desks are more likely to be littered with *Kenyon Review* than with *Printer's Ink*. To their lot fall the foundation plums, the berths with the better magazines and book-houses, the research sinecures. They are almost never unemployed; they are only between grants." Similarly, Greenwich Village bohemians now make a comfortable living selling leather sandals and silver jewelry to the tourists, just like the Indians in New Mexico. Nowadays everybody lives on the reservation.

Stokowski's lifelong struggle to assimilate Bach to Tchaikowsky or those Stratford, Connecticut, productions of Shakespeare, which surpass those of Stratford, England in showmanship as much as they fall short of them in style and intelligence.

So much for the positive side of our current boom in culture. The chief negative aspect is that so far our Renaissance, unlike the original one, has been passive, a matter of consuming rather than creating, a catching up on our reading on a continental scale. The quality paperbacks sell mostly the Big Names already established in hard covers. The records and the 1,100 orchestras play Mozart and Stravinsky rather than Elliott Carter. The art museums show mostly old masters or new masters like Matisse, with a Jackson Pollock if they are very daring. The new theatres present almost entirely old plays: off-Broadway has done well by Chekhov, Shaw, Ibsen, O'Neill, Brecht, Beckett, and Shakespeare, but except for some examples of the Theatre of the Absurd, it has had almost nothing of significance by hitherto-unknown playwrights. We have, in short, become skilled at consuming High Culture when it has been stamped PRIME QUALITY by the proper authorities, but we lack the kind of sophisticated audience that supported the achievements of the classic avant-garde, an audience that can appreciate and discriminate on its own.

For this more difficult enterprise, we shall need what we very well may not get for all our four million college population: a cultural community. The term is pompous but I can think of no more accurate one. It is strange how many brain-workers we have and how few intellectuals, how many specialists whose knowledge and interest are confined to their own "field" and how few generalists whose interests are broad and nonprofessional. A century ago Lord Melbourne, himself a strikingly nonspecialized and indeed rather ignorant intellectual, observed: "A man may be master of the ancient and modern languages and yet his manners shall not be in the least degree softened or harmonized. The elegance, grace and feeling which he is continually contemplating cannot mix with his thoughts or insinuate themselves into their expression—he remains as coarse, as rude and awkward, and often more so, than

the illiterate and the ill-instructed." One of Melbourne's favorite quotations was Jaques's remark, in *As You Like It*, when the rustic clown quotes Ovid: "O knowledge ill-inhabited—worse than Jove in a thatched house!" One might also cite Ortega y Gasset's observation, apropos of "the barbarization of specialization": "Today, when there are more scientists than ever, there are fewer cultured men than, for example, in 1750." A comparison of Diderot's *Encyclopaedia* with the post-1920 American editions of the *Britannica* would be interesting—although, of course, Gasset's contention can never be proved (or disproved) if only because "a cultured man" is not a scientific category. Like all the important categories.

XVII

In England, cultural lines are still drawn with some clarity. The B.B.C., for instance, offers three distinct programs: the Light (Masscult), the Home (Midcult) and the tactfully named Third (High Culture). It is true that the daily papers are divided about like ours: three good ones (*Times*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*) with relatively small circulations and many bad ones with big circulations. The popular papers are not only much bigger than ours—the *Mirror* and the *Express* have about five million each, twice the circulation of the *New York Daily News*, our biggest—but also much worse. One must go to London to see how trivial and mindless the popular press can become. But if the masses have their dailies, the classes have a type of periodical for which there is no American analogue, and I think the vulgarity of the mass press and the high quality of the class press are both the result of the sharper definition of cultural lines there.

This is a magazine-reading country. When one comes back from abroad, the two displays of American abundance that dazzle one are the supermarkets and the newsstands. There are no British equivalents of our Midcult magazines

like the *Atlantic* and the *Saturday Review*, or of our mass magazines like *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Look*, or of our betwixt-&-between magazines like *Esquire* and the *New Yorker* (which also encroach on the Little Magazine area). There are, however, several big-circulation women's magazines, I suppose because the women's magazine is such an ancient and essential form of journalism that even the English dig it.

The one kind of magazine we haven't had over here since the liberal weeklies stubbed their toes on the Moscow Trials is the serious, widely read weekly. The English have at least seven: the *Spectator*, the *New Statesman*, the *Economist*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Listener*, the *Observer* and the *Sunday Times*. The first four have circulations between 40,000 and 90,000. The *Listener* has, I believe, over 200,000; it is published by the B.B.C. and is made up almost wholly of broadcast material—how long would it take to accumulate a similar issue from our own radio and television? Months? Years? The *Observer* and the *Sunday Times* (no connection with the daily *Times*, which doesn't come out on Sunday) are really Sunday magazines in a newspaper format; their special articles and their extensive review sections are on the level of the other weeklies; and they have circulations of over 700,000 and 1,000,000 respectively. (They are postwar phenomena, analogous to our boom in quality paperbacks.) These British weeklies have large enough circulations to be self-supporting and to pay their contributors a living wage. Their nearest parallels here, in quality, are our Little Magazines, which come out either quarterly or bimonthly, have small circulations (5,000 is par, 15,000 prodigious), run at a chronic deficit and pay contributors and editors meagerly.

What must be done here marginally, with help from "angels" either personal or institutional, can be done there as a normal part of journalism. Although a much smaller percentage of the English population goes to college, they

have a larger and more cohesive cultural community than we do. The sale of a serious nonfiction book by a writer who is not a Name, for instance, is often larger there than here despite our three or four times larger population. Here a book tends to be either a best seller or nothing, as a writer is either a Success or a Failure; there is no middle ground because there is no intellectual class. This may also be the reason more titles are published there; in 1958 it was 16,700 there, 11,000 here; it is the difference between handicraft and mass production, between a number of articulated publics and one great amorphous mass market.

England still has something of a functioning class system, culturally speaking. The angry young men are angry about it. I can't think why. An American living in London is delighted by the wide interest in art and letters, the liveliness of the intellectual atmosphere, the sense he gets constantly from the press and from conversations of a general interest in what he is interested in. It is, of course, general only to perhaps 5 per cent of the population, but in America it isn't even this much general; it is something shared only with friends and professional acquaintances. But in London one meets stockbrokers who go to concerts, politicians who have read Proust.*

* Actually, I can think why the young men are angry. The Enemy looks very different from there than from here. From there, it is too little democracy; from here, too much. They see cultural lines as relics of a snobbish past, I see them as dikes against the corruption of Masscult and Midcult. They see standards as inhibiting. I see them as defining. They see tradition as deadening, I see it as nourishing. It may be that, as an American, I idealize the British situation. But I hope not as absurdly as they idealize ours. In 1959 I gave a talk on mass culture at a *Universities & Left Review* forum in London. I expected the audience, which was much younger than I, to object to my lack of enthusiasm for socialism, though it was distressing to find them still talking about capitalism and the working class in the simplistic terms I hadn't heard since I left the Trotskyists; the problems we thought about in the 'thirties seem to be just coming up now in England; the illusions we were forced to abandon seem still current there. But what I was not prepared for was the reaction to my attacks on our mass culture. These were resented in the name of democracy. Hollywood to me was an instance of the exploitation rather than the satisfying of popular tastes. But to some of those who took the floor after my talk,

The English amateur scholar—"just a hobby, really"—is a species little known over here. Most educated Englishmen seem to take an interest in cultural matters as a matter of course, and many of them have a personal, nonprofessional knowledge of one or two fields—a disinterested interest, so to speak—which is quite impressive. Our college graduates are not apt to "keep up" with such things unless they teach them. Their hobbies are less likely to be Jacobean madrigals than home workshops equipped with the latest in power tools and their equivalent of the British weekly is likely to be *Time* or *Newsweek*. In only one field do we match their amateur scholarship. The sports pages are our equivalent of the *Times Literary Supplement*; in each case, experts write for a sizable audience that is assumed to understand the fine points. Perhaps our closest approach to a living tradition is in sports. The recent centenaries of Poe and Melville passed without undue excitement in the press, but *Sports Illustrated* devoted four pages to the fiftieth anniversary of Fred ("Bonehead") Merkle's failure to touch second base in a World Series game.

XVIII

It is indicative of the disorganized quality of our intellectual life that, for all the remarkable increase in the consumption of High Culture since 1945, not one new intellectual weekly has been produced. There have been a number of new "little" magazines, such as *New World Writing*, the *Evergreen Review*, *Contact*, the *Second Coming*, the *Dial* and the *Noble Savage*—they should perhaps be called big-little magazines since they aspire to the broader circulation of the quality paperback—but, like the

Hollywood was a genuine expression of the masses. They seemed to think it snobbish of me to criticize our movies and television from a serious viewpoint. Since I had been criticizing Hollywood for some thirty years, and always with the good conscience one has when one is attacking from the Left, this proletarian defense of our peculiar institution left me rather dazed.

old ones, they are essentially anthologies. They print the best current fiction, poetry, essays and criticism—or at least what the editors think is the best—but, if only because they are quarterlies, they cannot form a center of consciousness as the English weeklies do, since this requires (1) at least monthly topical comment, and preferably weekly; and (2) a regular interchange between writers and editors and readers such as is provided in the correspondence columns of the English weeklies. (The extraordinary development of the latter is one more evidence of a cultural community; the most recondite topic may set off a spate of letters from clubs and manses, bars and offices that is finally dammed only by the editor's ritual *This correspondence must now cease*.) The nearest approach to a "center of consciousness" in our magazines is in the Midcult ones like *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, the *Reporter* and the *Saturday Review*, and the trouble with these is that the editors consistently—one might almost say on principle—underestimate the intelligence of the readers.

A great abstract force governing our present journalism is a conceptualized picture of the reader. [Mary McCarthy wrote several years ago in a prospectus for a monthly of political, social and cultural comment which never materialized because we couldn't get enough backing.] The reader, in this view, is a person stupider than the editor whom the editor both fears and patronizes. He plays the same role the child plays in the American home and school, the role of an inferior being who must nevertheless be propitiated. *What our readers will take* is the watchword. . . . When an article today is adulterated, this is not done out of respect for the editor's prejudices (which might at least give us an individualistic and eccentric journalism) but in deference to the reader's averageness and supposed stupidity. The fear of giving offense to some hypothetical dolt and the fear of creating a misunderstanding have replaced the fear of advertisers' reprisals.

The new magazine's editors do not accept this picture of the reader; they make no distinction between the reader and

themselves. And in fact they insist on this as a cardinal democratic premise; the only premise on which free communication between human beings can be carried on. They do not look upon *Critic* as a permanent philanthropic enterprise. They believe there are 100,000 people in a country of 150,000,000 who will buy it regularly, once they have been made aware of its existence.

As I say, the money was not raised and *Critic* did not appear. But I don't think Mary McCarthy's estimate of the possible circulation was unrealistic; a masochistic underestimation of the audience for good work in every field, even the movies, even television, is typical of the American cultural entrepreneur. Some good movies have made money, after all, and many bad ones, though concocted according to the most reliable formulae, have failed to. Nobody really knows and it seems to me more democratic, as Miss McCarthy observes, to assume that one's audience is on one's own level than that they are the "hypothetical dolts" which both the businessmen of Hollywood and the revolutionaries of the *Universities & Left Review* [now *New Left Review*] assume they are.

Recently a friend had a manuscript rejected by a prominent Midcult magazine. "It's full of speculative *aperçus*," wrote the editor, "but it's just not a 'journalistic' piece of the kind we need. What I mean is, it is *too* speculative. I find the speculations fascinating [they always do] but they simply go beyond the pragmatics of the problems, which are necessarily crucial to us." This attitude, of course, is neither new nor limited to this country. One recalls the report that Edward Garnett wrote in 1916 for the London firm of Duckworth, which was considering a manuscript by an obscure Irish writer:

[It] wants going through carefully from start to finish. There are many 'longueurs.' Passages which, though the publisher's reader may find them entertaining, will be tedious to the ordinary man among the reading public. That public will

call the book, as it stands at present, realistic, unprepossessing, unattractive. We call it ably written. The picture is 'curious,' it arouses interest and attention. But the . . . point of view will be voted 'a little sordid.' . . . Unless the author will use restraint and proportion, he will not gain readers.

The book was *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Mr. Garnett was one of a celebrated English literary family, and the episode (see Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce*, 416-419) shows the limitations of my Anglophilia, if the point needs demonstrating. For the first edition of the *Portrait* was finally published by an American, B. W. Huebsch.

In some ways the closest parallel we have to the British weeklies is the *New Yorker*, which has always been edited with the assumption that the readers have the same tastes as the editors and so need not be in any way appeased or placated; the reader is the forgotten man around the *New Yorker*, whose editors insist on making their own mistakes, a formula that has worked for thirty years of successful publishing, perhaps because it has crystallized around the magazine a cultural community of its own. "The pragmatics of the problem" are not "crucial" to the *New Yorker*, a Midcult magazine but one with a difference. It, too, has its formula, monotonous and restrictive, but the formula reflects the tastes of the editors and not their fear of the readers. And, because it is more personally edited, there are more extra-formula happy accidents than one finds in its Midcult brethren.*

* This essay, in an abbreviated form, was originally written for the *Saturday Evening Post* as one of its "Adventures of the Mind" series. (The introduction of this series into the *Post* two years ago—it has included Randall Jarrell, C. P. Snow and Clement Greenberg—is an interesting symptom of the post-1945 renaissance. George Horace Lorimer never thought his magazine needed a highbrow look.) The last three sentences above about the *New Yorker*, which appear exactly as they did in the final version I submitted to the *Post*, were responsible for the article's rejection.

In the fall of 1958, the *Post* invited me to contribute an article to the series and since they offered \$2,500 for 5,000 words and promised to let me say what I liked, I agreed. A year later—after a five-page summary had

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What is to be done? Conservatives like Ortega y Gasset and T. S. Eliot argue that since "the revolt of the masses" has led to the horrors of totalitarianism and of California roadside architecture, the only hope is to rebuild the old class walls and bring the masses once more under aristocratic control. They think of the popular as synonymous with the cheap and vulgar. Marxian radicals and liberal sociologists, on the other hand, see the masses as intrinsically healthy but as the dupes and victims of cultural exploitation—something like Rousseau's "noble savage."

been agreed on—I sent in the piece. They had perhaps a dozen editorial objections, all but one of which I accepted as either trivial or justified. The one difficulty was their suggestion that the *New Yorker* was just another Midcult magazine and that I must therefore criticize it in the same terms as the others. Since I did not agree with this opinion—and had in fact evaluated the *New Yorker* quite differently, though not without criticism, in the November, 1956, *Encounter*—I resisted. As the correspondence developed, it became clear they thought I was "going easy" on the *New Yorker* because I worked for it, a not unreasonable assumption in a police court but one that I somehow resented. The sentences above were my final attempt to "place" the magazine. It was rejected and so was the article ("otherwise eminently acceptable" wrote the sub-editor I dealt with). I finally wrote to Mr. Ben Hibbs, the editor-in-chief (how perfect a name, one of Norman Rockwell's covers come to life!) complaining that I had been promised a free hand as to opinion and that the *Post* had reneged. He was not sympathetic. "We are dealing here with facts, not opinion," he replied, adding that unless I came clean on the *New Yorker*, the piece would be "open to suspicion of insincerity." Mr. Hibbs' notion of *fact* and *opinion* seemed to me mistaken and I wrote back citing my dictionary's definition of *fact* ("a truth known by actual experience or observation") and *opinion* ("a judgment or estimate of a person or thing with respect to character, merit, etc."). He replied suggesting the correspondence be closed. I replied agreeing but could not resist a few Parthian shots, namely: (1) in future the *Post* should employ some reliable detective agency—I suggested Pinkerton's—to make an advance assessment of the moral character of contributors to their *Adventures of the Mind*; (2) if I had accepted under pressure their opinion of the *New Yorker*, this should have shaken their confidence in the honesty of my other opinions; (3) the *Post* owed me \$1,500—I had been foresighted enough to insist on \$1,000 on delivery of the manuscript, although they seemed rather shocked at such commercialism—since they had gone back on their guarantee of freedom of expression. Like other Parthian shots, these may have been harassing to Pro-Consul Hibbs—he never replied—but, also as per history, the Romans won.

If only the masses were offered good stuff instead of *Kitsch*, how they would eat it up! How the level of Masscult would rise! Both these diagnoses seem to me fallacious because they assume that Masscult is (in the conservative view) or could be (in the liberal view) an expression of *people*, like Folk Art, whereas actually it is, as I tried to show earlier in this essay, an expression of *masses*, a very different thing.

The conservative proposal to save culture by restoring the old class lines has a more solid historical basis than the liberal-cum-Marxian hope for a new democratic, classless culture. Politically, however, it is without meaning in a world dominated by the two great mass nations, the USA and the USSR, and a world that is becoming more industrialized and mass-ified all the time. The only practical thing along those lines would be to revive the spirit of the old avant-garde, that is to re-create a cultural—as against a social, political or economic—elite as a countermovement to both Masscult and Midcult. It may be possible, in a more modest and limited sense than in the past—I shall return to this point later—but it will be especially difficult in this country where the blurring of class lines, the lack of a continuous tradition and the greater facilities for the manufacturing and distribution of *Kitsch*, whether Masscult or Midcult, all work in the other direction. Unless this country goes either fascist or communist, there will continue to be islands above the flood for those determined enough to reach them and live on them; as Faulkner has shown, a writer can use Hollywood instead of being used by it, if his purpose be firm enough. But islands are not continents.

The alternative proposal is to raise the level of our culture in general. Those who advocate this start off from the assumption that there has already been a great advance in the diffusion of culture in the last two centuries—Edward Shils is sure of this, Daniel Bell thinks it is probably the case—and that the main problem is how to carry this even further; they tend to regard such critics of Masscult as

Ernest van den Haag, Leo Lowenthal or myself as either disgruntled Left romantics or reactionary dreamers or both. Perhaps the most impressive—and certainly the longest—exposition of this point of view appears in Gilbert Seldes' *The Great Audience*. Mr. Seldes blames the present sad state of our Masscult on (1) the stupidity of the Lords of *Kitsch* (who underestimate the mental age of the public), (2) the arrogance of the intellectuals (who make the same mistake and so snobbishly refuse to try to raise the level of the mass media), and (3) the passivity of the public itself (which doesn't insist on better Masscult). This diagnosis seems to me superficial because it blames everything on subjective, moral factors: stupidity (the Lords of *Kitsch*), perversity (the intellectuals), or failure of will (the public). My own notion is that—as in the case of the "responsibility" of the German (or Russian) people for the horrors of Nazism (or of Soviet Communism)—it is unjust and unrealistic to blame large social groups for such catastrophes. Burke was right when he said you cannot indict a people. Individuals are caught up in the workings of a mechanism that forces them into its own pattern; only heroes can resist, and while one can hope that everybody will be a hero, one cannot demand it.

I see Masscult—and its recent offspring, Midcult—as a reciprocating engine, and who is to say, once it has been set in motion, whether the stroke or the counterstroke is responsible for its continued action? The Lords of *Kitsch* sell culture to the masses. It is a debased, trivial culture that avoids both the deep realities (sex, death, failure, tragedy) and also the simple, spontaneous pleasures, since the realities would be too real and the pleasures too lively to induce what Mr. Seldes calls "the mood of consent": a narcotized acceptance of Masscult-Midcult and of the commodities it sells as a substitute for the unsettling and unpredictable (hence unsalable) joy, tragedy, wit, change, originality and beauty of real life. The masses—and don't

let's forget that this term includes the well-educated fans of *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Our Town*, *J.B.*, and *John Brown's Body*—who have been debauched by several generations of this sort of thing, in turn have come to demand such trivial and comfortable cultural products. Which came first, the chicken or the egg, the mass demand or its satisfaction (and further stimulation), is a question as academic as it is unanswerable. The engine is reciprocating and shows no signs of running down.

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"Our fundamental want today in the United States," Walt Whitman wrote in 1871, "is of a class and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage. . . . For know you not, dear, earnest reader, that the people of our land may all read and write, and may all possess the right to vote—and yet the main things may be entirely lacking? . . . The priest departs, the divine literatus comes."

The divine literatus is behind schedule. Masscult and Midcult have so pervaded the land that Whitman's hope for a democratic culture shaped by a sacerdotal class at once so sublime and so popular that they can swing elections—that this noble vision now seems absurd. But a more modest aspiration is still open, one adumbrated by Whitman's idea of a new cultural class and his warning that "the main things may be entirely lacking" even though everybody knows how to read, write and vote. This is to recognize that two cultures have developed in this country and that it is to the national interest to keep them separate. The conservatives are right when they say there has never been a broadly democratic culture on a high level. This is

not because the ruling class forcibly excluded the masses—this is Marxist melodrama—but quite simply because the great majority of people at any given time (including most of the ruling class for the matter) have never cared enough about such things to make them an important part of their lives. So let the masses have their Masscult, let the few who care about good writing, painting, music, architecture, philosophy, etc., have their High Culture, and don't fuzz up the distinction with Midcult.

Whitman would have rejected this proposal as undemocratic, which it is. But his own career is a case in point: he tried to be a popular bard but the masses were not interested, and his first recognition, excepting Emerson's lonely voice, came from the English pre-Raphaelites, a decadent and precious group if ever there was one. If we would create a literature "fit to cope with our occasions," the only public the writer or artist or composer or philosopher or critic or architect should consider must be that of his peers. The informed, interested minority—what Stendhal called "We Happy Few." Let the majority eavesdrop if they like, but their tastes should be firmly ignored.

There is a compromise between the conservative and liberal proposals which I think is worth considering—neither an attempt to re-create the old avant-garde nor one to raise the general level of Masscult and Midcult. It is based on the recent discovery—since 1945—that there is not One Big Audience but rather a number of smaller, more specialized audiences that may still be commercially profitable. (I take it for granted that the less differentiated the audience, the less chance there is of something original and lively creeping in, since the principle of the lowest common denominator applies.) This discovery has in fact resulted in the sale of "quality" paperbacks and recordings and the growth of "art" cinema houses, off-Broadway theatres, concert orchestras and art museums and galleries. The mass audience is divisible, we have discovered—and

the more it is divided, the better. Even television, the most senseless and routinized expression of Masscult (except for the movie newsreels), might be improved by this approach. One possibility is pay-TV, whose modest concept is that only those who subscribe could get the program, like a magazine; but, also like a magazine, the editors would decide what goes in, not the advertisers; a small gain but a real one. The networks oppose this on philanthropic grounds—they don't see why the customer should pay for what he now gets free. But perhaps one would rather pay for bread than get stones for nothing.

As long as our society is "open" in Karl Popper's sense—that is unless or until it is closed by a mass revolution stimulated by the illusion of some "total solution" such as Russian-type Communism or Hitler-type Fascism, the name doesn't really matter—there will always be happy accidents because of the stubbornness of some isolated creator. But if we are to have more than this, it will be because our new public for High Culture becomes conscious of itself and begins to show some *esprit de corps*, insisting on higher standards and setting itself off—joyously, implacably—from most of its fellow citizens, not only from the Masscult depths but also from the agreeable ooze of the Midcult swamp.

IN "The Present Age," Kierkegaard writes as follows:

In order that everything should be reduced to the same level it is first of all necessary to procure a phantom, a monstrous abstraction, an all-embracing something which is nothing, a mirage—and that phantom is the public. . . .

The public is a concept which could not have occurred in antiquity because the people *en masse in corpore* took part in any situation which arose . . . and moreover the individual was personally present and had to submit at once to applause or disapproval for his decision. Only when the sense of association in society is no longer strong enough to

give life to concrete realities is the Press able to create that abstraction, "the public," consisting of unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization—and yet are held together as a whole.

The public is a host, more numerous than all the peoples together, but it is a body which can never be reviewed; it cannot even be represented because it is an abstraction. Nevertheless, when the age is reflective [i.e., the individual sees himself only as he is reflected in a collective body] and passionless and destroys everything concrete, the public becomes everything and is supposed to include everything. And . . . the individual is thrown back upon himself. . . .

A public is neither a nation nor a generation nor a community nor a society nor these particular men, for all these are only what they are through the concrete. No single person who belongs to the public makes a real commitment; for some hours of the day, perhaps, he belongs to a real public—at moments when he is nothing else, since when he really is what he is, he does not form part of the public. Made up of such individuals, of individuals at the moment when they are nothing, a public is a kind of gigantic something, an abstract and deserted void which is everything and nothing. But on this basis, any one can arrogate to himself a public, and just as the Roman Church chimerically extended its frontiers by appointing bishops *in partibus infidelium*, so a public is something which every one can claim, and even a drunken sailor exhibiting a peep-show has dialectically the same right to a public as the greatest man. He has just as logical a right to put all those noughts *in front of* his single number.

This is the essence of what I have tried to say.