

(Arthur), O'Neill; there to masticate O'Brien (C. C.), Miller (Jonathan), Sontag: the best that is enacted, thought, and said.

And yet the *New York Review* displays the world's most foul-tempered correspondence page. What makes everyone who comes near it so cross? Precisely, a nagging conviction that its pronouncements are irrelevant to anything that is really happening. Archaic as a moustache-cup, it is already—was, from the day of its founding—a synthetic ruin, the terminal moraine of a movement that commenced to pass across the world in the eighteenth century, when for the only time in human history an entire civilization was being based on naked Taste, supervised by quarrelsome experts.

Those were the years of the futile Academies, and of vast efforts at centralization, as monarchy faded but left the tradition of the Center behind it. In those years anxiety pressed Taste into guises thin, shrill, legislative, petulant. Anxiety still does; thin, shrill, legislative, petulant, these are still four good adjectives for the Snow-Leavis quarrel of 1962, a raging as it were between two extinct beasts, each affirming the other's unfitness to be Czar of the Swamp.

FOR WHAT grows increasingly irrelevant is the concept of an informed Center: a Capital, an Academy, a focus of taste and perception. It is doubtful if there will ever be such a thing again in the world. The world is too intricate; too many activities have grown too interdependent. Part of the meaning of American history is America's early intuition that a capital city is essential for mere government, but should be looked to for nothing else. America for decades, bypassing the very conception of a Center, has been constructing instead a Network, along whose strands, which unite dozens of points, hundreds of discreet perceptions pass apparently at random, so that one can no longer hope to identify a group of Tastemasters whose monitoring devices catch (as Pope's did) every tremor, and whose judgment imposes (as Johnson's* did) authorized perspectives.

It grows meaningless to speak, then,

*Sam: 1709-1784

of a decade's cultural events. The events we remember being promoted as cultural increments were nothing of the kind. They were rearguard gestures, rallies of thwarted Tastemasters, opening a playhouse or launching a magazine: merely doing such things, good things to do, but supposing that *this* playhouse, *this* magazine had at last some chance of being decisive. But nothing on the scale of the single event can hope to be decisive any more. Taste thrives on the particular; particular people cultivate it in themselves, people to whom, increasingly, wherever they live, everything that may interest them is accessible.

There will continue, of course, to be an official story of the Cultural Climb, with its pseudo-events: its new caves opened on the cliffside, at desperate expense, in the face of massive apathy. Other caves may be expected to be

abandoned, and we will be told that some hope for Culture has died. We will be told such things so long as the ambition to be a Tastemaster can feed on memories of eighteenth-century dreams: the great reviews, the courts from which civility radiated. And governments will persist in their longing to be courts, so long as Tastemasters can whisper in the ears of bureaucrats. And government activity can be expected to prolong the nuisance of a dream's long dying. There is nothing like injections of fresh green currency for keeping illusions panting past their time. (Had there been federal grants for its advocates in 1800, phrenology would still be flourishing today.) All this will continue, and will matter less and less.

Meanwhile, culture will continue to be what people are doing, such as going to plays, even at the Lincoln Center.

Questions About the New Fiction

JOAN DIDION

NOT so many years ago, what someone thought about one novel or another seemed not only a matter of intense concern but a character index; strangers at parties determined whether or not they wanted to have dinner with each other by talking about *The Invisible Man* or *Lie Down in Darkness*. Now they talk about movies. They not only talk about them but write about them, read about them, analyze them to the point of absurdity; magazines like *Cinema* carry articles titled "Theme vs. Character in Vincente Minelli's *The Sandpiper*." To talk about fiction is in fact to feel a little *démodé*, as if one had been revealed declaiming Amy Lowell's "Patterns" with gestures.

Clearly some of this is only a manifestation of the same force that moves the art market and the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture*; movies are not only more accessible than novels but somehow give the impression that they are the work of people infinitely more attractive and *au fait* than novelists tend to be. ("Writers are very boring company," a New York hostess quite accurately reported not long ago in Eugenia

Sheppard's column.) But chic is only part of the answer, and perhaps it is not the answer at all among the very young, among those who once wrote "experimental" short stories and now make "experimental" eight-minute films instead.

I wonder if their fascination with film is not symptomatic of a certain failure in fiction during the past several years, a failure to maintain the excitements of technical discipline, not only so apparent on, but so inflexibly imposed by film. It would be difficult in the extreme to "improvise" a film successfully; the mechanics preclude it. Every setup makes a statement. When someone does achieve an apparently random or improvised effect, as Jean-Luc Godard or Richard Lester or Alain Resnais sometimes does, the effect has actually been contrived with great care, and no film-maker (with the possible exception of Shirley Clarke) has yet suggested that contrivance is by definition mendacious. Skill at contrivance is the excitement of the exercise, and it is the absence of exactly this excitement which seems so marked in so many new novels.

The writers of these novels would

object, even if they were to admit that film now seems to many more exciting than fiction. They would insist that this erosion of technique in fiction is deliberate, the new note, the only authentic way to convey "a vision so contemporary it makes your nose bleed." (Actually that is what Thomas Pynchon's vision does to Bruce Jay Friedman, but it might well be what Bruce Jay Friedman's vision does to Kurt Vonnegut, or what Kurt Vonnegut's vision does to—never mind, but they all make each other's noses bleed.) When Bruce Jay Friedman draws a distinction between "storytellers in the old tradition" and "others who will tell you to take your plot machinery and stick it in your ear," between writers "who know exactly what they are doing and others who do not have the faintest idea and are finding out in rather brilliant fashion as they go along," there is no mistaking where he thinks the action is; "plot machinery" gives the game away even before we skid into "stick it in your ear," instantly recognizable as another example of that *joie de physique* diction employed by these writers to denote approval of one another. Similarly, Ihab Hassan writes admiringly of those (he is talking about Joseph Heller, Thomas Berger, J. P. Donleavy, and Thomas Pynchon) who are "relearning the old art of improvisation in fiction. . . they are repelled by the neat formulations of style or structure that formalist critics once pressed so hard."

None of this sounds quite right. Improvisation is no art but a stunt, and there would seem to be a vast expanse of possibilities between the academically "correct" and totally vacuous novels endemic to the fifties and the sloppily picaresque but just as vacuous novels of the sixties, between those "neat formulations" and *Catch-22*. (The author of *Catch-22*, not exactly incidentally, is quite often discussed in print by members of his coterie simply as "Joe Heller," "Joseph" presumably being too neat a formulation.) But no. One suspects that *Madame Bovary* would be a hoax perpetrated upon us by formalist critics; all artifice repels equally. For these writers it is always dawn on the barricades, and the town is to be stormed in Brooks and Warren. "Knowing how outrageous facts

can be," Mr. Hassan notes, "they do not pretend to subdue them with a flourish and a symbol."

THIS OUTRAGEOUS-world-we-live-in is a persistent motif, as is the insistence that any attempt to subdue it, to control it, is pretense. Philip Roth sounded the cry when he complained in *Commentary* a few years ago of the American writer's difficulty in "trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. . . . Who, for example, could have invented Charles Van Doren? Roy Cohn and David Schine? Sherman Adams and Bernard Goldfine? Dwight David Eisenhower?" Everyone quotes that passage, and everyone agrees, as Norman Podhoretz does: "We do so often seem to be inhabiting a gigantic insane asylum, a world that, as Roth puts it, alternately stupefies, sickens, and infuriates." And so, according to Bruce Jay Friedman, "a group of novelists . . . have decided that the novel is the proper place to open every door, to follow every labyrinthine corridor to its source, to ask the final questions, turn over the last rock, to take a preposterous world by its throat [there we go again] and say okay, be preposterous, but also make damned sure you explain yourself."

This is all very well (and not very remarkable, its embattled tone notwithstanding), except that in point of fact very few of these writers are opening any doors at all, preferring instead to jump up and down outside shrieking imprecations at the locksmith. They slip in and out of voice, interrupt a series of one-line gags to exhort the reader on some point or other, shoot wooden ducks, unwittingly improvise themselves into cul-de-sacs where actual moral questions lurk, and then lose their nerve, go soft. The real vacuity of *Catch-22*, as several writers pointed out, lay in Mr. Heller's disinclination to go all the way with anything, his insistence upon having it both ways, all ways, any way his fancy led; for four hundred pages of *Catch-22*,

World War II was a fraud and the only virtue survival, while in the last few pages we learned that the war was worth fighting but some of the officers were maniacs, a rather different proposition.

In fact the hallmark of this kind of fiction is its refusal to follow or think out the consequences, let alone take them; it is content to throw up its hands, cry that outrage surrounds us. This absence of moral toughness



seems to me to determine the style and the structure of the novels, or rather the lack of it. To throw a picaresque character into a series of improvised situations is to stay as clear of a consistent point of view as one possibly can; all the old structural conventions automatically confer upon the novelist, whether he wants it or not, a point of view, a stance, a statement—just as the mechanical tensions of film do.

Of course this is a difficult problem. Everyone wants to tell the truth, and everyone recognizes that to juxtapose even two sentences is necessarily to tell a lie, to tell less than one knows, to distort the situation, cut off its ambiguities and so its possibilities. To write with style is to fight lying all the way. Nonetheless, this is what must be done or we end up maundering. We tell nothing. To tell something, really tell it, takes a certain kind of moral hardness; Norman Mailer has it, John Hawkes has it, and Bernard Malamud and Flannery O'Connor, and I think sometimes Vladimir Nabokov and John Cheever and Katherine Anne Porter, and Saul Bellow had it in *Seize the Day* but not in *Herzog*. Of course there are a few others who have it; of course each of them is writing to a very different point. But

each in his way has that hardness.

These new writers do not have it and do not seem to see its value; to cry foul seems to them to be enough, and to cry it in their own controlled voices. Recently Bruce Jay Friedman, trying to illustrate for readers of the *New York Herald Tribune* the absurdity of it all and the impossibility of making sense of it all, described a day spent by a friend of his: "He kicked it off with a visit from his ex-wife, who brought over a bunch of poetry from her new lover for some literary criticism. Did it have something or was he wasting his time? Next came a date

with the only homely model in New York, followed by an evening trip to a mental institution to see his new girl, freshly committed, participate in a dance for well-behaved catatonics."

This aggrieved, done-to note is typical. If the world played fair, ex-wives would keep both their chastity and their distance; "dates" would not offend with their homeliness; and girls would not go mad on one. The absurdity is in the telling, and I wonder if it does not suggest a failure not only of the imagination and the intelligence but of the maturation process.

The Development of Economic Thought

HENRY HAZLITT

IT WOULD be impossible for any one person to review and appraise, except in an impressionistic sense, the economic literature of the last ten years. In that period, literally thousands of books (not to speak of pamphlets and articles), technical and popular, general and specialized, have appeared on economic subjects. No one person could read them all; and even if he could, it is improbable that he could understand them all.

Yet certain generalizations about the economic literature of the last ten years seem reasonably safe:

1. It has been greater in bulk than in any previous decade in history.

2. The technical and mathematical part of this literature has been more technical and mathematical than in any previous decade. This means that "pure" economics is becoming more and more difficult for the nonspecialist or the nonmathematician to follow. There has been a similar unparalleled multiplication of statistical compilations and esoteric statistical methods. But how much has all this technical, mathematical, and statistical advance really added to our basic economic understanding? What is odd, and perhaps significant, is that the increasing technical virtuosity has coincided with an increasing absence of common sense, not to speak of an increasing disregard for elementary economic principles, in dealing with the practical problems of policy.

3. Most of the literature of econo-

mic policy is more Leftist, collectivist, and statist than ever before.

4. There are nevertheless definite signs of a retreat, in academic thinking, from Keynesianism.

5. Yet, in the realm of governmental policy and in the press, Keynesian assumptions and Keynesian solutions are more dominant than ever.

Before discussing the last two trends in more detail, I should like to refer to some of the outstanding economic books of the decade 1955-1965.

The most important general economic text since Ludwig von Mises's *Human Action* (1949) was Murray N. Rothbard's two-volume *Man, Economy, and State* (1962). Modestly declaring that his work would mainly attempt to "fill in the interstices and spell out the detailed implications . . . of the Misesian structure," Rothbard actually helped to unify and extend economic analysis further. This is especially the case in the treatment of rent, of the time-preference theory of interest—in fact, of the omnipresent role of time in all economic activity, and in a quite new theory of monopoly, in which he argues that there can be no monopoly price on a free market. Rothbard's short book, *America's Great Depression* (1963), was also a notable contribution. Mises himself produced three short new volumes—*The Anti-Capitalist Mentality* (1956), *Theory and History* (1957) and *The Ultimate*

Foundations of Economic Science (1962). In addition, two earlier books were translated—*Epistemological Problems of Economics* (1960) and *The Free and Prosperous Commonwealth* (1962). A new edition of *Human Action* appeared in 1963.

Among other books that reflected a libertarian point of view, I must mention even in this brief survey: Israel M. Kirzner's *The Economic Point of View* (1960) and *Market Theory and the Price System* (1963), Milton Friedman's book of essays, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and his monumental *Monetary History of the United States* (with Anna J. Schwartz, 1963). Two outstanding statistical works were *Capital in the American Economy*, by Simon Kuznets (1961) and *The Growth of Industrial Production in the Soviet Union*, by G. Warren Nutter (1962).

Books on particular aspects of economics that deserve notice are: Sylvester Petro's *Labor Policy of a Free Society* (1957), Martin Anderson's *The Federal Bulldozer* (1964), John Chamberlain's business history of the United States, *The Enterprising Americans* (1963), and John Davenport's *The U.S. Economy* (1964).

One truly great work that appeared in the decade was F. A. Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960). This is not primarily a treatise on economics; it deals rather with the legal, political, and moral framework of all economic activity. It explores, with unsurpassed thoroughness, scholarship, and rigor of reasoning, the philosophical foundations of freedom, the proper scope of governmental power, and the requirements and limits of economic policy. Except within a regrettably narrow circle, its importance has not yet begun to be realized.

SHORTLY after the appearance of John Maynard Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* in 1936, the doctrines enunciated in it conquered the academic world and have dominated it ever since. But in the decade beginning in 1955 a frontal counterattack was launched. In 1959 the present writer published *The Failure of the "New Economics,"* with the subtitle, *An Analysis of the Keynesian Fallacies*; a year later I brought together in an anthology *The Critics of Keynesian Economics* articles written by some twenty distinguished economists over the pre-

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