

Dear John.

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Bellow, S.
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Here, compressed, is the
statement we discussed ^{MAY} 1951.
It contains the essentials of
my position. I hope you
will find it useful.

best

Sam.

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The great issue in fiction is that of the stature of characters. It starts with something like the psalmist's question, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?", and the responses range from "a little lower than the angels" to "a poor naked forked creature". The struggle of the novelist has been to establish a measure, a view of human nature and usually, though not always, as large a view as belief and imagination could wring from observable facts. The artist tries, Nietzsche once wrote, to exaggerate the value of human personality. This is a secular notion, for on the assumption that God exists a religious writer would deny that exaggeration was possible. But novelists have been largely secular men in secular, doubting times. If we consider the humanistic art of the Renaissance which Nietzsche probably had in mind, and its near-divine creatures, we can agree with him. It made the human image very great. But even then there were doubts about the unaccommodated poor naked forked creature, and since then the value of man has depreciated. We see the doubt in Don Quijote. Are nobility and great virtue delusions? Can there ever be a time when ecstasy will be the daily spirit and men and things be set in diamonds? Cervantes investigates what it means to will the highest and to insist on a superior reality. This contrast of a superior reality with daily fact is the peculiar field of the novel.

In the 19th century heroes appear as revolutionaries, great natures, born aristocrats, but the original humanistic doubt has made terrible progress. The great Russian novelists insisted on the Christian measure; even so, Dostoevsky created the anti-hero of Notes from the Underground as well as Prince Myshkin and Alyosha Karamazov. As the external social fact grows larger, more powerful and tyrannical, man appears in the novel reduced in will, strength

freedom and scope. Until, in Flaubert's Sentimental Education, the hero is not even an anti-hero like Dostoevsky's, great by reason of his ressentiment, but merely a man of no importance, a ridiculous social creature. And if man is of no importance, how is the novel, how, for that matter, is any human activity justified?

Now we have an anarchy of views in a "free" field. At one end Celine, denunciatory, and at the other someone like Bernanos asserting, but unable to prove concretely, that there are saints still. As for American writers, a good many of them hold before us a decent but exceedingly limited ideal, forbearing, stoical but of no great capacity, not very passionate, not very strong in thought. He is rather abstract, he exhibits collective rather than personal traits (I am thinking now of a Steinbeck hero), and he shows what is wanted more than what is seen, heard, known. It is almost as though many American writers felt that to confront actuality might be dangerous to our social sympathies and they do not let the facts gather freely about their superior reality, such as it is.

Many writers have sought justification in the art of writing itself, following Flaubert. For him experience pressed hard against an heroic conception of literature which he felt bound to try to save. Henry James in his criticism of him ideally states the problem for all modern writers. Is one obliged to treat what James calls the "middling" as Flaubert, angry and disappointed, treats it? Because Flaubert, hating common life, displaced his enormous energy from subject matter to style. If literature was an heroic enterprise it had to be so in spite of the degeneration of life. His aim was an esthetic one, the creation of beauty as a reply to the punishment and pain of degraded existence. Thus for him, and for those who followed him, mastery over language comes to represent mastery over human difficulties,

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and method in fiction ~~stands for~~ a symbolic triumph of sense, order and harmony over them. In this way, value is supposed to be kept.

James complained that if Flaubert "imagined nothing better for his purpose than such a heroine" (Emma) "and such a hero," (Moreau) "both such limited reflectors and registers, we are forced to believe it to have been a defect of his mind." ("The greater intellect one has," says Pascal, "the more originality one finds in men"). James understood this difficulty so well because he himself suffered from it, and carved out for his work a reality that he controlled too absolutely. It was superior, but unchecked; it existed by fiat. The way in which ~~he~~ he "wrapped" characters was despotic. This despotism brought with it its own kind of mercy, the despot's mercy toward his subject. But the system was hermetic, closed to the great disturbances with which Flaubert tried to cope. Nevertheless, I have a great deal of sympathy for James's objection to the "limited reflectors". Why not have, in art, the largest mind available? Indeed, why have any other? Why be middling with the middling subject? Flaubert was not, but he armored himself too greatly in his art to act freely. James shunned it, and the largest mind cannot be hermetic to reality.

But what kind of category is "middling experience", and what kind of reality does it denote? In de Tocqueville we read that "Nothing conceivable is so ^{petty} ~~paltry~~, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in one word so antipoetic, as the life of a man in the United States."

I feel, before a statement like this, that the first thing to be said is that ~~the~~ "the life of a man in the United States" is, ~~first~~ to begin with, "the life of a man". It is not so hard to understand the

dislike, even dread, that de Tocqueville must have felt before an immense, uncertain new development in human life. Yes, there is pettiness, paltriness, insipidity, there is crime, too, and the characterization of the life of man in a democracy has not even begun, with these terms. The truth is deeper, more mysterious and in some ways perhaps even more terrible than he conceived it. The 19th century knew Homais but did not yet know Himmler. But how different can human life become?

This is the problem at the point where the modern novelist must enter it, in a present which is as fearful, and as marvelous as presents have always been. The idea that we are at the degenerate dwarf end of history is one that he must reject as he rejects his own childishness. Writers have a conservative tendency, in the literal meaning of it, and are hostile toward the future. The future may destroy, or ignore, their premises, their beliefs, their assumptions, all that they have received from the past. There is a justified hate of the petty, insipid, paltry, but there is this element too, to be taken into account, the conservative one.

The task of a novelist now, as I see it, is still to attempt to fix a scale of importance, and to rescue from styles, languages, forms, abstractions, as well as from the assault and distraction of manifold social facts, an original human value. I do not believe in a hierarchy of feelings descending in a line from aristocracy to mass civilization. Let the aristocratic dead bury their dead, and the democratic dead, ^{their dead,} too. I believe in feeling, simply, in vividness. Where feeling is synthetic, ideals of greatness are merely dismal. Feeling only brings us to conceptions of superior reality.

A point of view like mine is not conducive to popular success. I believe with Coleridge that some writers must gradually create

their own audience. This is, in the short run, an unrewarding process. The commercial organization of society resists it and, let us face it, there is a widespread disgust, weariness, staleness, resistance, unwillingness to feel the sharp edge of life, boredom.

We have for hundreds of years had an idolatry of the human image, in the lesser form of the self and in the greater form of the State. So when we think we are tired of Man, it is that ^{image} we are tired of. Man is forced to lead a secret life, and it is in that life that the writer must go to find him. He must bring value, restore proportion; he must also give pleasure. If he does not do these things he remains sterile himself.

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