

LITERATURE AND MASS MEDIA

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THERE SEEM TO BE SO MANY happy jointures possible between literature and the mass media: style, content, modalities, audiences. The pen meets technology; the poet meets the mob. Perhaps, indeed, relations are so far advanced that mass media and literature are not just brushing lips but are old marrieds. Or the apparent contacts may be illusions, not even glances.

Mass-media is such a fat word, stuffed with boss dee jays at one end and ye olde global village at the other, that it is difficult to find the bone. It seems to me that, essentially, mass media transmit messages to which the great majority of the population expose themselves, often individually, nearly always voluntarily, and among Canadian adults any way for about six hours per day per person.¹ In North America mass media win over any single occupation, pursuit or recreation; they take more time than work, are more faithful than love, more persistent than allergy.

Most of us need reminding that exposure to mass media is usually voluntary. The only way, therefore, for a medium to become a mass medium is to attract and hold a large audience without the benefit of sanctions, elected power, authority or the fear of God. Mass media do it by providing individuals with “protection” against the terrors, threats, and insecurity of reality. It is not possible to understand mass media without understanding this; the form of the media, in comparison, is nugatory.

Mass media provide this protection by presenting, in simplified form, frequently and intensively, demonstrations of all the techniques by which man has attempted to neutralize and control the irrationality and cruelty of reality.

In a world which, in reality, is bloody and tyrannical the endless streams of reports on its activities — in page after newspaper page, on the hour, half hour, ten minutes before the hour, and so on — show that man can face it. The

announcer does not turn to stone. The newspaper is unsinged. The audience lives. In fact the purpose of the news is not only to show that man can face it but that he can apparently make sense of it, too.

In a world where, in reality, the best man often loses, the contests which mass media arrange are so fairly regulated, so equitably balanced, so ruthless against cheating that the best man wins — or at least the winner is the best man. Evidence that reality can be put in order by man for man.

In a world of dreadful chance, where disease, ugliness, stupidity, misfortune, poverty, disfigurement, friendlessness are *not deserved*, mass media redress the balance through projection. Helped by the many possibilities for projection which mass media provide — covered with acne she can seduce Apollo, fired today he has tenure this evening, tied to Wawa all their lives they can go around the world this morning and snuggle between the sheets in Buckingham Palace tonight. Mass media help to straighten out reality.

Even mass media's music has the same appeal. In a world of errant, minatory noise the kind of music mass media provide offers symmetry, regularity, and the comfort of easy resolutions. Once again man is in control.

And finally, when the scandal of human existence, in reality, becomes so gross that one would willingly lose one's senses and one's conscience, mass media like the carousel, fast cars, drugs, alcohol, rock, give a taste of both without seriously harming us. The kick in the eye of film, the punch-up on TV, the fires on the front pages of newspapers lure us, safely. Too much and the entire audience may turn on the gas: hence the omission of suicide stories in newspapers, the refusal of the CBC to show *Warrendale*. But, generally speaking, mass media help us to take leave, without actually shutting the door on us; in fact always bringing us back for more.

Mass media, in short, are society's great *psychic regulator*. They shape up reality. Around the clock. And the majority depend on them.

Surely the media publish or broadcast material which is not so relentlessly regulatory? What about *Anthology*? What about NET? What about Cyril Connolly in *The Sunday Times*, Saul Bellow in *Atlantic*? What about *Ulysses* at Loew's? But none of these gets near a mass audience. When the first words of the announcer herald *Anthology*, dials turn; when the movie house marquee shows *Ulysses*, heads turn. NET, *The Sunday Times*, *Atlantic*, cater to special audiences; they are simply not mass media.² Those who forget that exposure to mass media is voluntary are sure that if Lawrence Welk were forced to play Berio or *Reader's Digest* obliged to serialize *A la recherche du temps perdu* there

would be a rub off. But it's turn-off. The majority come to mass media for services they need. If a medium does not provide this service at all, or insufficiently, it cannot expect to attract a mass audience.

IS LITERATURE a part of this?

NASA has made us all so etymological and McLuhan so morphological that many people would probably define literature as anything written, and would not flinch from including washroom signs, the wrapping around Panchromatic-X, and the text on a dollar bill. But taking all words back to their roots and always defining content as its form is not always useful.

Any reasonable definition of literature it seems to me, like *Canadian Literature's* itself, has to be much more restrictive, denoting what is written to last, with a serious purpose, and involving an imaginative reordering. Literature, then, is an art, and *belles lettres* is another way of putting it.

What society expects from art is, in fact, that it should be the *psychic unregulator*. The artist is charged by society to extend the area of man's psychic security by disorienting him, by threatening him, and by constantly changing pace. This does not mean the artist does not provide pleasure but it is pleasure with a penalty. Thus all the rewards which mass society seeks, the artist denies. Instead of helping to control reality, he flings it at us. Instead of solutions he gives problems, and instead of resolution, suspension.

Consequently whether we wish it or not, whether it saddens us or not, whether it irks art-promoters or offends liberals the truth is that, among the sane at least, art can claim only those who have enough psychic security to risk art's assault. And this is a small minority. For it must be evident now that those of us in education or art-promotion who might be best equipped to expand that minority, do not know how to do it without tearing society apart and starting all over again. All one can do is simply to expose. However reluctant we may be to recognize it or however distasteful it is to write it (for it is a desperate truism) even the majority of college graduates in North America — after maybe 14-20 years of education — are still corralled between the fences of consumer magazines, Sears pictures, popular musicals, and Johnny Carson.³ If this seems overdrawn, look around the plane next time you fly (where the proportion of college graduates is usually very high, judging from the rings). Indeed look at the next reader of *Reader's Digest*; according to the magazine it is read by nearly half of all college-educated Americans.⁴

Only the visual arts today seem able to move outside their catch basin. Often perhaps their appeal is misleading or meretricious but no matter if they manage to catch the eye. It is here where art and mass media can and do marry.

It is very difficult to see how this can possibly happen with literature. It must be evident even to those who have been litterateurs from infancy (if indeed there is any other kind) that literature has worked itself out of all but a highly specialized audience. This is not because electronic media suddenly gave man back his integrity, for the death of literature as a potentially demotic force seems to have long antedated radio and TV. Maybe the American and French revolutions coincided, in the West any way, with the rejection of literature as a possible instrument for general public use and its consignment to the aristocrat's attic. To the unlettered the written word cannot often have been friendly and hence was without much support in the new dispensation.

Alternatively others would say that the common man's instinct warned him that literary men tended to be *inhuman* and therefore not to be emulated. George Steiner points out that some of the men who devised and administered Auschwitz "had been trained to read Shakespeare or Goethe, and continued to do so." He wonders whether there is not "between the tenor of moral intelligence developed in the study of literature and that required in social and political choice, a wide gap or contrariety." Steiner may be voicing the unspoken suspicion of non-literary man.

At any rate, literature has been shelved, and one limb has been decaying after another: as a form with a potentially public appeal poetry dropped off long ago; drama as literature is insupportable; only porno and Judaism keep the novel breathing.

All this is not solely because of a sociological shift. We have to recognize that literature's need to petrify what is inherently fluid — language — makes it go out of date much more readily than the other arts. I wonder if we realize not only how difficult, but how incomprehensible *centuries* of literature are to those who are not cognoscenti. Indeed by a reverse of the geometric progression in which we glory I dare say that today 25 years is the maximum period requiring no major readjustment by the ordinary reader of English. For consider this passage written just outside the limit, published 27 years ago. Many critics would consider this writer's style preeminently limpid and unvarnished. But read him now not as a critic but as an ordinary reader, in 1970:

I had a naturally ingenious and constructive mind and the taste of writing. I was youthfully zealous of good fame. There seemed few ways of which a writer need not be ashamed by which he could make a decent living. To produce something

saleable in large quantities to the public, which had absolutely nothing of myself in it; to sell something for which the kind of people I liked and respected would have a use; that was what I sought and detective stories fulfilled the purpose.⁶

They don't talk like that any more. Maybe they don't because of mass media, which brings us back to the beginning. Certainly there are points of contact between literature and mass media, but they are very tenuous: quirks of style, un-easy satire. Contact can never be more adhesive, for literature and mass media are antipathetic in function and in form and we do not know how to make them friends.⁷

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ This composite figure is a very rough amalgamation of BBM and CDNPA figures and data from various broadcast listening and viewing surveys published in *Marketing* over the past two years. However since the bases of the various studies are dissimilar the extent of weighting needed to yield a composite figure affects the reliability. The latest composite U.S. figure, no doubt cobbled together from different studies in the same way, is reported in the statement on Violence in Television Entertainment Programmes issued by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence on September 23, 1969 as follows: "a typical middle-income American male devotes a total of about five hours a day to the mass media."
- ² *The Sunday Times* has a fair sized "quality" audience but the *News of the World's* circulation is four times bigger and the latter indeed claims to reach 41 per cent of all the adults in Britain (British Rates and Data, December 1968). *The Atlantic* shows a circulation of 325,167 (in *Standard Rates and Data*, December 27, 1969 where it is listed as a 'class publication') but *Readers Digest* shows 17,585,611 circulation in the same issue.
- ³ *Readers Digest* claims a readership of 40 million adults, 12.1 million of whom are "college-educated" representing "42.6% of all people who have gone to college" in the United States. (*Advertising Age*, January 5, 1970. page 34).
- ⁴ Even if it can be argued that "literature" is delicately geared to the hierarchical range of man so that what the naive reader takes from *True Romance* may be identical with what a more mature reader takes from *Anna Karenina*, that Arthur Hailey and Robert Lowell provide the same insights but to different classes, the hierarchy and the classes remain.
- ⁵ Steiner, George, *Language and Silence*. 1967.
- ⁶ Waugh, Evelyn, *Work Suspended*, first published 1943.
- ⁷ It's impossible not to disagree with John R. Seeley (*Time's Future in Our Time*); "Let us be clear that at least one course will not be open to us. We will not be able to afford, because it will be unworkable, a society whose 'cultural' divisions run as deep, and whose cultural discrepancies rise as high, as do the present discrepancies and divisions in wealth and income." But it cuts no ice to state it. The only solution is to let literature, at least, go hang.