

Studies in English

Volume 6

Article 12

1965

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Recommended Citation

Cowley, Malcolm (1965) "The Literary Situation, 1965," *Studies in English*: Vol. 6 , Article 12.
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol6/iss1/12

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THE LITERARY SITUATION, 1965

by Malcolm Cowley

[Editor's Note: The following is a transcript of a seminar which Mr. Cowley conducted at the Southern Literary Festival on the campus of the University of Mississippi, April 23, 1965. Mr. Cowley answered some questions from the audience and some from a questionnaire which had been handed to him before the seminar began. The transcript has been submitted to Mr. Cowley, and he has made minor editorial changes.]

Q: Mr. Cowley, in *The Literary Situation* you wrote a section devoted to the literary stock exchange, and to the fluctuation, rise and fall, of literary reputations. Would you care to comment on some of the literary reputations today?

A: One of the things in which there has been a bull market for the last ten years is literary scholarship. Indeed, that particular market has been so active and I am continually amazed at finding how confined the subjects of dissertations are. Ten years ago the candidate for a doctorate had to write on Herman Melville unless he wrote on T. S. Eliot. There was a law about that, and people lost good jobs in universities by not obeying it. At least there was a traffic regulation, and one calculated to produce a traffic jam. Then came the Hawthorne period and the Henry James period. The Faulkner period began, and we are still in the midst of it. But remember the only law of fashion: anything that is in fashion today will be out of fashion tomorrow. At the present time there is a sort of crisis in the dissertation field. Candidates for the doctorate in English aren't quite sure whom to write their dissertations about, and some of them even try new authors. On the literary stock exchange, although the value of Melville is unquestioned, and the value of T. S. Eliot is only barely questioned, nevertheless those stocks are in an uncertain position, and we are aware of a hidden amount of short selling.

Perhaps I'd better explain, since not all of you have read *The Literary Situation*. I said that, as distinguished from the worth of writers, their reputations are likely to be subject to the wildest

sort of fluctuations. For forty years *Moby Dick* was out of print in this country and only obtainable in England. That the reputation of Melville had sunk so low was one explanation of the fact that when the stock rebounded, it went to the peaks.

The stock-market quotations on Emerson and Thoreau are very low at present; perhaps these two are the most underrated among our little band of classical authors. I gave a seminar on Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman at Stanford, and only ten students applied for it. If the seminar had been on Hawthorne and Melville, there would have been fifty applications. And yet at the present time there is more that a critic of the new generation can find that hasn't been said about Emerson and Thoreau than he can find about Hawthorne and Melville. As for Whitman, the quotations on him have been rising lately, for special reasons. People are discovering that Whitman wasn't merely the prophet of democracy but was also a poet.

Let us pass to the American naturalists—Norris, London, Dreiser, and their less naturalistic contemporaries like Edith Wharton and Sherwood Anderson. The Norris market hasn't quite collapsed, but it's falling quite low. The Dreiser market is curiously steady. In fact, it has shown until this year a somewhat rising tendency that may be halted by the new biography of Dreiser which is to appear next week—one of the most depressing biographies I have ever read. Jack London—low, low quotations and no sign of a rise. Edith Wharton—steadily rising quotations. Sherwood Anderson—fairly steady. Hemingway—some fall in stock-market values on account of the Paris book, *A Moveable Feast*. Fitzgerald—it's miraculous how the quotations on Fitzgerald have stayed high. A man was telling me last night—a man who came from Washington, D. C.—that in the cemetery there where Fitzgerald is buried veiled women in black come at midnight and lay flowers on his grave.

I was asked about the writers of the 1930's—Steinbeck, O'Hara, Dos Passos, Farrell. There are different answers in each case. The sale of *The Grapes of Wrath* has held up marvelously over the years. It is taught in many colleges now, and—this time, I'll interject a personal note into the Wall-Street-reporter air that I've been assuming until now—I think it has been on the whole underestimated. There is marvelous writing in *The Grapes of Wrath*. There are also sentimental chapters, and on account of these most of the critics have been rather down on the book. Its stock-market value

is low but steady, with some tendency to rise. O'Hara quotations are falling at present. He's too popular, and the critics don't like him. Dos Passos—low and steady. The fact of the matter is that Dos Passos hasn't published a book that ranks as a contribution to serious American writing since *U. S. A.*, the trilogy of the 1930's. But *U. S. A.* and *Manhattan Transfer*, his first two big novels—one big novel and a trilogy—stand up very well over the years, and they are beginning to be taught in schools again. Farrell quotations—they rose too high during the 1930's and have been declining ever since.

Southern writers—I was asked about them on this questionnaire. That suggests the grand old question: Why is it that this state of Mississippi, which on a scale of economic values probably ranks—is it fiftieth among the states or has it climbed dizzily over South Carolina?—and as regards the educational level of its population also ranks far down; it probably has to reach up to touch Arkansas, doesn't it?—and which has other troubles to which a polite visitor should not advert—nevertheless has produced a whole congeries of highly talented novelists, and one novelist who is justly regarded, I think, as the greatest of the twentieth century. Now why is *that*? You know, we yankees all stand around and worry and wonder about that. What are they doing down there in Mississippi? I'll give you, not all the answers; I can just give you one answer. In a word, Southern culture is verbal. People talk more down here, and a great deal more of the talk takes the form of stories. I have heard it said, "He tells stories like he came from Mississippi." And in spite of the critics' attacks at various times, and in spite of many novelists' attacks on plain story telling, it is still the center of the art of fiction.

So, many people from Mississippi who moved into the art of fiction, moved from a sound background of telling stories on the porch, won't you agree? If anything threatens Southern literature, it is TV. And why? Why should television be more of a threat to literature here in the South—I'm speaking about the production of writing—why should it be more of a threat to the South than to the North? The answer is that the verbal and story-telling characteristics of Southern culture came about because in the old-fashioned country districts there wasn't anything else to do except go fishing. You went fishing, or hunting, or you told stories. Isn't that true? And now maybe the new generation—not you sitting here but those younger than this audience—instead

of telling stories on the porch will go inside and look at TV. If that actually happens, then Southern fiction will be seriously weakened.

But I'm talking now about stock-exchange quotations, and the quotations in general have remained high, including the quotations of some new Southern writers.

This questionnaire that I'm trying to answer went on to recent writers—Mailer, Jones, Styron, Cozzens, Bellow, Updike, Roth, Baldwin, Heller, and the writers of Black Humor. That's an awful lot of stock quotations for this market specialist to give you on a hot afternoon in University, Mississippi. Mailer first. He's in a curious situation. Everybody keeps saying his books are terrible. (I think that his last book *An American Dream* is probably so terrible that I am not going to read it.) At the same time Everybody keeps discussing him as a writer of considerable stature. How this contradiction is going to be resolved finally I don't know. I admired *The Deer Park*, and a lot of the stuff in *Advertisements for Myself* is vigorous and true. When Mailer starts writing about other novelists, he speaks so candidly that, telling the truth, he shames *all* the devils. But still, for a novelist, what he wrote in *An American Dream* seems pretty terrible.

Jones—well, his writing must be good: he got \$900,000 for it—for his *future* books. And I don't know; to ascertain the stock-exchange quotation on Jones is very difficult. For example, Mailer thinks that Jones is good. I've heard several writing teachers whose opinion I highly respect say that *The Thin Red Line* was really an achievement. I feel very little curiosity about him, though, not enough curiosity to make me sit down and read *The Thin Red Line*. I'm getting so ancient now that I don't read books because I think I must read them to keep up with the swim. Let the swimmers go on downstream! I'll catch up with them at the second bend of the river.

Styron—he has written one excellent short book, called *The Long March*. I thought his first book—what was it? (From the audience, "Lie Down . . .") *Lie Down in Darkness*—don't you get the Faulkner influence there: *As I Lay Down in Darkness Dying*? And there was a considerable Faulkner influence in the text of a vigorous but somewhat overwritten first novel. *The Long March* was excellent. It was a very, very short novel about the hard march of some Marine retreads, done with absolute competence,

feeling, candor—every quality you ought to have in a short novel. But it was not a great one because the theme wasn't great. His last book, *Set This House on Fire*, had a lot of awfully good things in it, but no control. At the end it went off in a burst of pyrotechnics that seemed to be hidden from me by clouds.

Cozzens is better than the critics think he is. He's probably the best architect in contemporary fiction. He can build a novel just as soundly, to use a Pennsylvania Dutch phrase, as the little brick smokehouse on the corner, one brick laid on another, the whole thing tight, everything tied together, the whole action confined to seventy hours: an enormously complicated, skillful construction. His novel *Guard of Honor* was, as a work of craftsmanship, the best novel that came out of World War II. But the critics do not like Cozzens.

Saul Bellow at the present time is about at the top of the heap. And I think he'll solidly stay there. He has less brilliance than some of the others, but you feel a great deal of integrity in everything he writes, and every book he writes is a new start. Think of how different each of these books has been from every other in the series. As far as his stock quotation goes, *Herzog* sold 10,000 copies last week in the thirtieth week since publication. That is pretty fantastic. The book has led the best-seller list all that time, and yet it's almost the only book on the best-seller list that is a serious work of fiction.

John Updike—very highly esteemed except for his style. (Laughter)

Philip Roth—he won and deserved to win the National Book Award for his first book, a collection of stories. His second book was a novel; he called it *Letting Go*. What he was doing in it was letting go with everything but the kitchen sink, and you could find that in one corner. But he simply decided he'd put *everything* he had into one novel, and the result was that this novel, which was full of good things from page to page and episode to episode, had other episodes that became either tiresome or excruciating. On the whole it seemed to be a little monstrous—but . . . good in a curious fashion. I have enormous faith in Roth for what he will do next.

James Baldwin—he's one of our best essayists. I don't know . . . he writes essays that are disguised as novels, but I don't think they are as good as his straight essays.

Heller and *Catch 22*—it's all right. It's one of these novels that go on with more and more Black Humor. You know, here's the poor man in the aviation squadron in which every flyer was supposed to have *twenty* sorties before he was sent home for a furlough. It's one of those squadrons where half the planes are shot down on every mission; and the survivors are always hoping that they'll be relieved from duty. The crazy C. O. of the outfit keeps raising the requirement from twenty-five flights to thirty flights to thirty-five flights to fifty flights, and everything gets more and more absurd and crazy in a Black way, as the book goes on. You laugh. "But," you say, "isn't there any development from chapter to chapter?" It seems to me now, in looking back on *Catch 22*, that you could take the chapters, put them together, throw them all up in the air and shuffle them in almost any order. Except for the last chapter, in which the hero deserts, there doesn't seem to be any development in the course of the novel; it's purely episodic. It has also been a great success.

I don't know about Terry Southern. He is an enormously gifted writer, but most of his books I can't take. He starts off with a passage that's wonderful, and then his Black Humor begins to get more and more absurd and painful. But I think *Dr. Strangelove*, for which he wrote the scenario, was a marvelous thing. As far as *Candy* goes, it's one of our better children's books.

I think I'll stop here in this survey of the literary situation, without taking up two more questions that were asked in regard to stock-exchange values, that is, about the standing of foreign authors in this country, and about the situation in poetry. Let those questions hang in the air. We'll answer them next year, or the year after.

Q: Would you discuss the major influences that affect the rise and fall of any novelist, the role of professional critical comment for example, in influencing the rise and fall of literary reputations in this country?

A. The effect of critical comment is a difficult thing to describe. Perhaps it is clearest in the case of James Gould Cozzens. This won't answer your question, but it's such an interesting situation that I want to tell you about it anyway.

Everybody wonders why Cozzens' book *By Love Possessed* was so universally praised by the first critics who reviewed it. The reason was a reviewer's bad conscience, which was almost

universal among the daily and weekly reviewers. They had all been thinking over the question for a long time: they had all decided that Cozzens hadn't had a square shake, that *Guard of Honor* was a much more important book than they had thought it was at the time, and that earlier books of his like *The Just and the Unjust* were important, too, and hadn't been adequately recognized. So for any market analyst like your speaker this afternoon, it was easy to predict that the critics would try to atone for past errors in regard to Cozzens by reviewing his next book favorably. That was what almost all of them did.

Then *Time* magazine sent down a very sympathetic young man to interview Cozzens—sent him up to Massachusetts—and Cozzens and the interviewer had a lot of drinks together. When the interviewer got back to New York, he said, "Well, I got an awful lot of stuff from Cozzens, but it's not stuff we can print." But there was a snide editor at *Time*, and he not only used the mean stuff that Cozzens had said between drinks, but he made it even worse. Cozzens had made a couple of cracks that sounded anti-semitic. This was a very important point for its effect on later comments about the book. Cozzens has a Jewish wife to whom he has always been devoted. When the *Time* editor got done with rewriting the interview, it sounded as though Cozzens was being anti-semitic even about his wife.

Well, one could guess from that moment that some magazine was going to come out with the discovery that Cozzens' novel was beneath contempt. One could also guess that Dwight MacDonald would be the critic to make that discovery, since he is certain to accuse any novel that has sold more than 250,000 copies of being corrupted by the false standards of mass culture. Dwight MacDonald did his destructive job. Then Irving Howe did a destructive job. And these two jobs were so effective that now it is worth the reputation of any critic to say, "But Cozzens is our best architect among the novelists, and why shouldn't architecture be honored just as much as we honor other qualities: for example, meanings on different levels?"

So that is one effect of criticism now. There are in-groups in criticism, and we have seen them operate. There are out-groups. There are—at present there are—very keen weekly reviewers or fortnightly reviewers for the *New York Review of Books*—something we didn't have before because the criticism in the *New York Times Book Review* has seldom been distinguished for the

quality of probing deeply. But at present there is a lot of deep probing, and most of it comes to negative conclusions. People of tender dispositions, easily hurt by the slings and arrows of public opinion, are hereby advised by me not to undertake the task of writing serious novels at the present time. Before writing serious novels, you had better insulate yourself; you had better acquire some practice in the art of being insulted by a past master of insult. After you get hardened to that, I might consent to your publishing a novel.