Relevance Without Meaning

This is the moment of crisis we are constantly being told—the crack-up of the Western World, of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, of the American success story. In such a moment, what are we doing here—on this—or any other—literary occasion? Are we—to use the sacred word—relevant?

When I first entered the library of Congress in 1944, I didn't come in feeling relevant. A couple of years earlier, in that time of crisis, I had offered my services to the United States Navy, and they had politely declined the offer. Defective vision, they said. So as time passed I got irrelevanter and irrelevanter until I reached the nadir of relevance—which was being the Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress.

But one morning my phone rang and a Captain X introduced himself and asked if I was the Consultant in Poetry. Yes, I said. Well, he said, General Y was writing the lyric for a song to inspirit our boys—that was the word he used, "inspirit"—and the General wanted to consult the Consultant in Poetry on a matter of meter. So at one end of the line the General read his lyric and tapped out the meter, and at my end, while he read, I tapped it out with my finger. We did this several times, and I told him it was fine meter. Meanwhile I had memorized most of his lyric, but now all I can remember is two lines:

We are the boys who don't like to brag,
But we sure are proud of our grand old flag.

The episode was a great comfort to me. If, in the middle of World War II, a general could be writing a poem, then maybe I was not so irrelevant after all. Maybe the general was doing more for victory by writing a poem than he would be by commanding an army. At least, he might be doing less harm. By applying the same logic to my own condition, I decided that I might be relevant in what I called a negative way. I have clung to this concept ever since—negative relevance. In moments of vanity I even entertain the possibility that if my concept were more widely accepted, the world might be a better place to live in. There are a lot of people who would make better citizens if they were content to be just negatively relevant.

But, in general, this brand of comfort isn't quite comforting enough. The awareness of crisis has penetrated to the furthest reaches of society. The most illiterate and pot-ridden of drop-outs mumble about their identity crises, along with the poets. Stick-up men on heroin plead alienation. Time was when the bad news of Spengler's Decline of the West was restricted to the more romantic alumni of the University of Heidelberg, the heavy-thinkers of Greenwich Village, and disillusioned graduate students, but now an erstwhile humor magazine spreads the glad tidings of great
gloom according to Charles Reich and Lewis Mumford among suburban housewives on the cocktail circuit and investment bankers grieving because their children are apathetic toward hard money and the Republican (or Democratic) Party.

I am not implying that Reich and Mumford are overestimating the gravity of our crisis—pollution, war, race, the cities, bad schools, irresponsible leadership, and all the rest. In fact, I am inclined to think they are underestimating the gravity, in that their diagnosis is not radical enough and their proposed solutions overlook some important aspects of our relation to technology, and at times are not far from old-time revivalism and snake-oil remedies. In brief, they seem to neglect the nature of the human animal—what we used to refer to as Original Sin. In other words, the need for “relevance” is greater than even the prophets of doom, the Black Panthers, Billy Graham, Martha Mitchell, and the Students for a Democratic Society, imagine. But what is relevance?

The most obvious question concerning literature is: What subject matter is appropriate for our time? Almost a hundred and fifty years ago, the young Nathaniel Hawthorne sat in an upper room, totally withdrawn from the real world, and wrote stories. No doubt writing stories was bad enough, but his stories were about the distant past. Later on, still brooding over the past, Hawthorne moved to Concord. But there he had a neighbor who was really relevant. The neighbor certainly didn’t write stories, he told people how to live, and he took a very dim view of the past. He was a prophet with a crystal ball and his crystal ball did, as a matter of fact, show some important things about the future. It seems only natural that Hawthorne did not think very highly of his prophet neighbor, any more than the neighbor did of him. Hawthorne and Emerson met on the wood paths of Concord, and passed on, Emerson with his head full of bright futurities and relevances, Hawthorne with his head full of the irrelevant past. As Henry James was to say of them: “Emerson, as a sort of spiritual sun-worshipper, could have attached but a moderate value to Hawthorne’s cat-like faculty of seeing in the dark.”

We revere Emerson, the prophet whose prophecies came true. But having once come true, those prophecies began to come untrue. More and more Emerson recedes grandly into history, as the future he predicted becomes a past. And what the cat’s eye of Hawthorne saw gave him the future—and relevance. He died more than a century ago, but we find in his work a complex, tangled, and revolutionary vision of the soul, which we recognize as our own. Emerson spoke nobly about relevance but Hawthorne was relevant.

The moral is that it is hard to tell at any given moment what is relevant. The thing so advertised is likely to be as unrelated to reality as the skirt length is to the construction of the female anatomy. To be relevant, to change our metaphor, merely to a symptom and not to the disease. The question is not that of the topicality of a subject. It is that of the writer’s own grounding in his time, the relation of his sensibility to his time, and paradoxically enough, of his resistance to his time. For there must be resistance, and the good work is always the drama of the writer’s identity with, and struggle against, his time. John Milton was in the profoundest way a man of the 17th century, but writing Paradise Lost, under the reign of Charles II, was he in tune with his time?

The relation of topicality to relevance is fascinating. Will The Naked Lunch or Portnoy’s Complaint, really turn out to be the Aeneid of our new Rome? But let’s push on to the more radical question: Is poetry per se—taking that as the inclusive term for imaginative literature—relevant in our time?

One could simply state that poetry is unavoidable in any age, that people inevitably demand poetry of one kind or another, and then argue about what kind of poetry would make sense now. And indeed, if we take poetry at its broadest meaning of emotive language, there has never been so much poetry as in our age of mass communication. The air waves are full of it, it is heard on the hustings, a million albums of so-called folk-ballads (being sung by some famous voice) are sold every year. Without poetry the advertising copy writer’s typing fingers would be paralyzed and the tongue of the P.R. man would cleave to the roof of the mouth. The Congressional Record would, in fact, shrink to the translucent thinness of a dragon fly’s wing in bright sunlight.

Let us meditate for a moment on the poetry sometimes to be heard in the Capitol. Marianne Moore has said that her kind of poetry deals with real toads in imaginary gardens. The kind of poetry in the Capitol might often seem very similar to hers. It
deals with real solutions to imaginary problems. Sometimes, however, it deals with imaginary solutions to real problems. When genius begins to be inflamed, it deals with imaginary solutions to imaginary problems. But occasionally it ascends beyond the pitch of mortal thought and deals with imaginary solutions to imaginary problems of imaginary people, i.e., the people who are supposed to give the poll-takers their information, creatures more ectoplasmic even than the Economic Man.

But if that kind of poetizing, like that of the Rod McKuen and such, can scarcely touch us where we live—what can? The answer is easy. Any kind that is "real," for the disease of our time is the sense of being cut off from reality. Man feels that a screen has descended between him and nature, between him and other men, between him and the self. Hence we have the hippie commune, the group grope, drug culture, et cetera.

Let us not think now of topicality and subject matter but of a thing inherent in the very nature of poetry, of imaginative literature, when it realizes its potentialities.

Any kind of poetry is "real" in which there is an awareness of the real stuff language. In our communication-numbed society we are buffeted and drowned in a flood of language, but it is a language that is debased, with the make-do word taking the place of the right word. Worse even, language is used as merely a convenient way of pointing. It becomes bleached out, not a thing expressive in itself. It is no longer a part of experience and an index of the speaker's own reality; and of the reader's or the listener's, too, as he senses the ripple of language in the throat, the deep and complex bodily response. "Rapid reading"—however useful it may be for certain practical purposes—represents the final corruption of language. Poetry—all imaginative literature of any quality—resists "rapid reading," for here, to subvert Marshall McLuhan's slogan to our purpose, of which he might not approve, the "medium" is indeed the "message," and the "massage" to boot.

For primitive man, the word was not an abstract thing, a device of pointing. If he uttered whatever sound was his word for tiger, he was not merely pointing at (literally or symbolically) some remote ancestor of the creature of our time known as Panthera tigris, but was also expressing awe, fear, admiration. Nor is William Blake merely pointing at an example of the species Panthera tigris when he exclaims:

Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night

It is true that only by specializing language, by developing it to manipulate abstraction, have we gained the vast body of knowledge that is implied, for instance, in the very label Panthera tigris, and the vast power that enables us to go purchase a high-powered rifle at Abercrombie and Fitch and fly to Nepal and, as a civilized man, free from awe, fear, admiration, or personal risk, shoot a tiger. But for these and similar advantages we have forfeited a language that would nourish the relations that we now complain of having lost—to nature, to others and to ourselves.

But can we have both languages? In so far as a writer is an artist, he creates a new language that unites the primitive density of meanings and depth of feeling with the civilized man's power of abstraction. So Blake, in the next two lines of his poem, can ask the sophisticated theological question:

What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Robert Penn Warren
In the simplest metaphor of a poem or in the most developed scenes of a fiction, we find another instance of this strange and healing union of regression and sophistication. Here, in a parallel way, we find not merely a verbal language, but a primary language of imagery (the image of metaphor or the image of scene), the pre-verbal "language" that reaches back to infancy and the primitive dark; but it still remains the naked language of our emotional life by which we envisage the object of desire, hate, or fear. At the same time, poetry not only utters itself in such a language that reminds us of our deepest being, but embodies ideas and values; and so its images are, in one dimension, a sophisticated dialectic. The poem or fiction eventuates in "meaning" — no, as "meaning."

Literally, the process of composition is, in one degree or another, a movement toward meaning. The writer (like any artist) is not a carpenter who builds the chicken-coop according to a blue-print. If the carpenter has a blue-print he knows exactly what kind of chicken-coop will be forthcoming. But the writer, no matter how clear his idea or strong his intuition of the projected work, can never know what it will "be" or "mean" until the last word is in place — for every word, every image, every rhythm participates in the "being," and the "being" is, ultimately, the "meaning." And the reader is made to share in this process.

We are bombarded all day long by abstractions, by the "truths" of the advertising man, the politician, the preacher, and suddenly we are reminded that every truth that is not lived into, not earned out of experience, either literally or imaginatively, is a lie. We are redeemed from all our would-be-redeemers — especially from those who would redeem us for their own profit or power — and reminded that we must, after all, redeem ourselves. How? By learning to respect the self and respect experience. Chastened by a keener awareness of human possibility of salvation or disaster, we may be a little more certain of the terms by which the individual fate will be determined. If our current civilization would cut us off from ourselves as well as from nature and other men, we may remember what Henri Bergson says of fiction, and what may be said of all imaginative literature: it "returns us into the presence of ourselves."

Am I offering my own version of old-fashioned revivalism and snake-oil? Not quite. I am not saying that if we read a few good books we can save the country. But I am saying that they might help wake us to the fullness of our own nature, for good and for evil. To wake us, that is, from the torpor in which we now rest — from what Blake called the "single vision and Newton's sleep."

Mr. Warren originally presented this article as an acceptance speech upon receipt of the National Book Committee's 1970 Medal for Literature.

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**SHORT REVIEWS INVITED**

In the next issue, *The Intercollegiate Review* will contain an expanded review section. Consisting of very short reviews, less than one-half page each, the section will bring new and important books to the attention of our readers. Anyone interested in contributing short reviews to future issues of the IR is urged to contact the editor for complete information.

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