

since "the immanent laws of state capitalism drive towards not only total dominion over capital, but also total enslavement of the working class."

R. I. then continues:

"It thus follows that the state under capitalism is not only no longer the organ of a specific class of capitalist society, but even ceases to defend and strengthen the specific interests of that class. It is precisely this fact which explains why the state has become independent of society, relatively autonomous, above society. But it also shows the weakness of its foundations..."

"Shilin," says R. I. "rejects the opinion of those who assert that important changes have taken place in the role and economic function of the state, that the stratum of technocrats plays an important and independent role in social and economic life, that there have been shifts in the class structure... Shilin refuses to speak of a revolution of the economic functions of the state in the sense that from a 'nightwatchman' it became the leading and organizing factor of economic development....."

These passages are interesting enough in their own right to require no immediate comment. But one cannot help wondering: could a writer as astute as R. I. fail to notice that his description of "state capitalism" (italicized above) fits exactly the social system of Russia today? And if this has occurred to R. I., has it not perhaps occurred to other Russian intellectuals?

L. C.

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Miscellany

Reflections on Literature as a Minor Art

Paul Goodman

I AM SETTING down the following melancholy reflections not with any hope of a remedy, but because the matter is important and nobody else seems to be saying it.

In many ways literature has, in this century, become a minor art, more important than pottery or weaving, perhaps less important than block-printing or other graphics. Firstly, it is no longer an art of either the mass-audience or an élite audience. Cinema and radio-television, journalistic photography and series of illustrations, and persistently architecture and a kind of music: these are arts of the great public in a way that books, even best-sellers, have ceased to be. For the élite, the policy-making, audience there is no particular art as such; in its artistic taste and needs this group does not distinguish itself from the rest of the people. (To be sure, rich people collect *objects* of paintings and sculpture and thereby support artists, but these artists do not produce their works for the collectors any more than poets write for them.)

To the extent that in metropolitan centers the stage is still a popular art, it is not a literary stage, the emphasis being rather on the stars, the spectacle and music, and the production.

The diminution of letters is especially evident to those of us who write very seriously, who try for the classical literary functions of subtle ideas and accurate distinctions, ingenious and cogent reasoning, distilled learning, poetic expression. These functions are not easily or often adapted to the major modern media, to cinema, photography, or television, for in the adaptation they are blurred, blunted, curtailed, and lost. We are not then deceived, like other writers, by the illusion of finding ourselves in the swim; we cannot be made use of; we practice a minor art and occupy a minor place. The comparison to pottery and

weaving is apt, for what we are doing is analogous to individual handicraft, no doubt rare and beautiful, compared to the major media of the present which tend to be produced by teams with a standard technique, not unlike machine-production.

These are, I suppose, the first decades in the western tradition that letters have not been a major art. It is a situation so peculiar that it is not noticed. Now the shift to other media is not necessarily a cultural misfortune. It happens that, on the whole, cinema and television, etc. have so far produced pathetically inferior works that cannot pretend to compare with the masterpieces of book and stage over 2500 years; but it is not inconceivable that the new media will get hold of themselves (I do not say "mature" since, in cinema at least, the works of a generation ago were much more promising than those today). Naturally, for men of letters our new status is personally unfortunate. We were trained in a tradition where letters had a quite different ambition and scope; our adolescent fantasies of becoming major artists are doomed to be fantasies; and ironically, just because we are too good for the current scene—for we draw on a tradition better than the current scene, but that tradition is irrelevant—we find it hard to adjust to the realities. Also, when, as often, we are called on to teach our English and our Literature, we find ourselves like curators in a museum; the average student (like the average editor and publisher) no longer reads English like a native. This is lonely-making. But as Trotsky said, "History fells the dead wood and the chips fly off."

II

A second way in which literature has diminished is that it is no longer the source of ideas important for social policy and moral behavior. Such ideas as now get influentially abroad—I am not often impressed by their wisdom or brilliance—originate among economists, social scientists, administrators and businessmen, and technologists. Now this lapse of letters from a major position is not a new thing. When Shelley spoke of poets as "unacknowledged legislators," he should have meant not merely that they were unoffi-

cial but also, by his time, unaccepted. By the 19th century, compared to the preceding 500 years, although men of letters still had respectable positions in the homes and palaces of the policy-making élite, they certainly had ceased to function as important first sources of ideas that would eventually shape practice. The exceptions stand out and illustrate my point: the social-revolutionary ideas of the Russian writers that brought nearly every major Russian man of letters to jail or exile, or the moral ideas of the European and American writers that at once awakened the censorship. These writers were thinking up ideas not for the makers of policy, but against the makers of policy.

(In general, through the ages we can estimate the importance of letters as sources of policy by the negative test of the censorship of letters. Where books are heavily censored, books are important for social policy and moral behavior; and throughout the high middle ages and in modern times there was always a heavy censorship. But through the 19th century, except in Russia, this decreased, and in our own days it is trivial. Of course in America it is not from the government that we would expect the important censorship of ideas or expression, but from those who control the capital-means of communication, the owners of radio stations, publishers, theatrical producers. Let me then suggest the following possibility: since what these persons do diffuse is not important, policy-making literature, if there exists any important literature at all, it must be in what they refuse to diffuse, what they censor. It is possible that that exists. Note that in our times the question of the *quantity* of diffusion of ideas is essential. Since there is little legal censorship, it is possible for nearly any idea to get itself printed; but our country is swamped with printed matter—more than twenty books a day are printed in large editions and literally tons of newsprint and magazines—and there is no difficulty in muffling any idea at all by refusing to spread it widely. Indeed, we have the interesting paradox of precisely the overworking of printing-presses being a possible cause of the reduction of literature to a minor art.)

So far as the subtle, learned, reasoned, and persuasive treatment of ideas is a

function of letters, our present shift to other major media, and literature becoming a minor art, is socially unfortunate. Cinematic and pictorial arts do not treat ideas adequately; that is a verbal business, it is specifically literary. Moving pictures can powerfully determine norms of behavior and style of life. The picture-coverage of an event in an illustrated magazine can powerfully direct what people feel about it. But subtle and learned explanation, the application of history and experience, the play of thought and hypothesis, the effort toward the truth under the surface that does not leap to the eye, everything that Matthew Arnold meant by "criticism of life," these things are not skilfully accomplished without letters and training in letters and a high expectation from letters. In the earlier and hotter days of thought, Socrates complained that a book was a poor thing compared to a man because you couldn't question it and reason with it; he would have taken a dim view of audio-visual education.

III

In one important respect, however, literature cannot become a minor art, for it is the art of language. In every generation, the art of letters renovates and codifies the style of speech, assimilating what has sprung up new, inventing new things itself. This is far-reaching, for the style of speech is our interpersonal attitudes, which are largely patterns of rhetoric and syntax; and also the style of speech is a good part of our philosophy of life, for a point of view proves itself viable and gets abroad by being able to tell a real story in a new way. (So the plastic arts, drawing and painting and sculpture, cannot become minor arts for they demonstrate perception, how people can see and are to see; and so a people's music is its kind of feelings.)

Speech is not going to stop changing, and so men of letters, marking down the speech, relating it to character, and developing the characters, are always indispensable. And the strong and subtle writers are fulfilling this function as always. But the mass of speakers are faced with the dilemma: on one horn they must get their style from the writers; on the other they have ceased to follow writing,

or expose themselves to it, as major artistic experience. The result is that the ever-new speech is not strongly characterized and explored into its poetry and ideas and assimilated with a great humane tradition; people get their speech, in low-grade letters, as a caricature and a stereotype, with the conformism and thin conversation that we hear.

Letter from Italy: The Experiment Ends

Mario Diacono

"FASCISM RETURNS in Europe; generals in France, bishops in Italy." So, a few days before May 25, the radical and anti-clerical weekly *L'Espresso* summarized the mood which characterized the last week of the election campaign.

The election results confirmed this forecast. By increasing from 10 to 12 millions the votes cast for the Christian Democrats, who have for the last ten years practically monopolized the government, the Italian middle class has shown it wants to live quietly and securely, all but giving the Catholic party *carte blanche* to carry on a cautiously conservative policy.

This is, in effect, a situation analogous to that of 1948. On April 18th of that year the Christian Democrats, exploiting the fear of a Communist regime, were able to obtain an absolute majority of seats in Parliament. In the following elections on June 7, 1953, the people balked at exchanging a fascist regime for a clerical one within a few years' time. They failed to give the majority party the number of votes it wanted to free it of dependence on other parliamentary groups. The Christian Democratic party did need the support of other political groups in order to govern; at first these were the Republicans, the Liberals, and the Democratic Socialists, later only the Liberals and the Democratic Socialists, and finally, by benevolent abstention, the Monarchists and Socialists.

IN ORDER to maintain an equal distance between the left and the right, the Christian Democrats have for many years pursued an "immobilistic" line, a policy which increasingly tended to postpone,