

Chit Chat Club

The Relationship between the Popular and Sophisticated Arts: An Inquiry

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When I was serving as Allston Burr Senior Tutor at Eliot House at Harvard the fall of 1969 to the spring of 1973, I had the pleasure of living next door to University Professor and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Walter Jackson Bate, a specialist in late 18th and early 19th century English literature. Towards 5:30 on a dark and wintry evening, I would make my way from Eliot House K-11 to Eliot House J-11 at least once a week to enjoy a glass or two of 'bourb' (Jack liked abbreviations; or rather, he liked 'abreves') and conversation before the dinner hour in the Eliot House dining room.

Jack Bate was from Indiana. He came to Harvard in the 1930s as a scholarship student and stayed there for the rest of his life as an eminent professor. Jack's father was a school principal and regional school superintendent. He grew up in an Indiana boyhood out of Booth Tarkington's novel Seventeen, which is to say an American culture ranging back into the late 19th century. Jack had a few bugbears and they emerged in his conversation across the four years of our neighborly cocktail hour. Jack's conversation, after the bourbon flowed for a while, was similar to the way he played the great theatrical organ he had installed in his house on his farm in New Hampshire, where I also visited him. Jack would set a musical theme – appropriate at some point to one or another silent films of his boyhood – then do variations on this theme, a look of bliss on his face, as he pulled the stops of his Wurlitzer.

One of his most recurrent bugbears was what he considered the pseudo-distinction between the popular and the sophisticated arts, to use Jack's terms. Another way of saying it would be: highbrow versus lowbrow, to which we can add Dwight McDonald's third and fourth categories, middlebrow and upper-middlebrow. Culture was culture, Jack would argue. From this perspective, in times past, popular folklore could be as weighty in its subject matter as high literature. Shakespeare's greatest tragedies involved scenes directed at groundlings in the theater, and Shakespeare himself had quite a reputation as a comic actor.

With the rise of the middle classes in the 18th century, moreover, the popular novel – and here Jack would make reference to Vathek, the Castle Ontranto, Moll Flanders, Tom Jones, Clarissa, Tristan Shandy –

works which we today consider classics, which are the subjects of innumerable PhD theses, were not highbrow or lowbrow because there was only one brow: a brow created by middleclass writers for a middleclass audience. Thus in the 19th century, Charles Dickens – second only to Shakespeare himself in the opinion of many critics in the rankings of English literature – wrote for middlebrow magazines, as Dwight McDonald might characterize them, and audiences as large as possible. The same is true of Honore de Balzac, who published many of his classic novels in installments in Parisian newspapers, and Emile Zola, one of whose first novels was about a new institution, the department store. A major composer of the importance of Hector Berlioz, Jack would continue, played the guitar and not the piano and wrote ambitious music scored for trombones. Over on the American side, popular novelists such as Hawthorne

and Melville wrote for as wide an audience as possible, and the depths of what they wrote – their imaginative and intellectual resonance, their depth of psychology – only emerged into the full light of day when later generations reread these works as classics. Writers such as Sinclair Lewis, Booth Tarkington, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser all aimed at becoming popular entertainers. It is also an open question whether or not Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald ever realized how successfully they bridged, in Jack's terms, the abyss between popular and sophisticated arts.

I recall these conversations with Jack Bate so many years ago because they will serve as my introduction, my buffer, my defense even as I review this evening in your company my own formation by the popular culture of my age group.

One of the benefits of growing older is the ability better to understand the forces that shaped one's intellectual and imaginative life. I'm talking here about social or psychological forces, as fundamental as they are, but more of the intellectual and imaginative milieu in which one was formed in one's earliest years of intellectual and imaginative growth. In short, I am talking about the culture in which one came of age.

Each generation, of course, has its own experience of these formative influences, which stay with us for a lifetime. I know the lyrics for innumerable songs from the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s but tend to go blank after Carly Simon's "Your So Vain." All my life, being in and around academic circles I have been asking myself why, despite the increasingly radicalized environments in which I have lived and worked, I remain

so square, so upper middle-brow, so resistant of the notion that I somehow had the drop on American culture and society.

One of my favorite books, in fact – Whitehall (1989) by Professor Peter Hennessy of Queen Mary, London University, recently elevated to the House of Lords – is an exploration of the British Civil Service, whose upper managers, the permanent secretaries, hold their primary loyalty to the Realm, not the party in power, and showed themselves totally capable in 1945-46 to administer the state one day for Winston Churchill and the Coalition government and the next day administer that same government on behalf of Clement Atlee and a Reformist Labor Party agenda.

If I had to isolate two shaping forces from my adolescence and early youth that made me so square, so

non-hip, so flexible in my politics, a fusion of left and center-right, I would name cite the following: middle-brow and upper middle-brow literature and the influence of the American Scene movement.

The term American Scene, of course, amorphously refers to that fusion of documentarian impulse, left-liberal sentiment on behalf of the people, and a crypto-syndicalist economic agenda, the passion for public works, and a heavy reliance on photography as an art form. If I could handle AV properly, I show now play something by Woodie Guthrie and Aaron Copeland's Fanfare for the Common Man, show film clips from John Ford's The Grapes of Wrath, the photographs of Horace Bristol and Margaret Bourke-White in the newly establish Life magazine, and film footage of the construction of Hoover Dam, the Golden Gate and San Francisco-Bay

bridges. Energized by and expressive of the Great Depression, this movement was recycled during the Second World War through innumerable American Scene-inspired posters, new folk heroes such as Rosie the Riveter, and the more obscure forces of patriotism and social assent that kept the nation attentive to a two-ocean war that would cost more than 660,000 young American lives.

The postwar heir to this American Scene sensibility was, I believe, most vividly illustrated in a kind of Golden Age of the American magazine, which lasted through the 1950s. I'm referring here, obviously, to Life, Look, Colliers, Reader's Digest, Holiday, Saturday Evening Post, for which Norman Rockwell produced so many mesmerizing covers animated by American Scene sentiment. To this day, I can recall the power of those

magazines in my young life: the photographs in Life, for example, which were carrying on the 1930s obsession with documenting the nation. Although inclusive in its range, this was not celebrity-oriented photo-journalism, yet celebrities were given their due, especially on the covers. Within the book, however, as we magazine editors used to say, everyone else got covered as well; and young people absorbing these photographs, as I did, were given a pre-television opportunity to encounter the nation, the American Scene, in its power and variety and, by implication, to project oneself imaginatively into that larger environment. I knew that I wanted to get a PhD, for example, when sometime around 1954 or 1955, I saw pictures in Life of graduate students at one or another Ivy League institution sitting in Gothic Revival rooms piled high with books.

The illustrations for the short stories in Colliers and the Saturday Evening Post, meanwhile – like the photographs on LP the newly issued albums – drawings illustrating short stories by John O’Hara, John P. Marquand, Eugene Rhodes, John Hersey, Martha Gellhorn, James Gould Cossens, and other upper middle-brow authors – were perhaps commercialized or slick by high-brow standards, but they were late-American Scene in their efforts to illustrate, in the case of most of these stories, American life.

American popular fiction, meanwhile, thanks in part to book clubs, were entering a golden age of connection with the American reader and were also assuming, via the popular historical novel, an important instructional role in the era before everybody went to college. I am thinking here of authors such as Kenneth Roberts,

Thomas B. Costain, Samuel Shellabarger, Frank Yerby, and of course James Michener. During the high point of the American Scene in the 1930s, John Steinbeck, Pearl Buck, James T. Farrell, and Margaret Mitchell brilliantly bridged the gap between popular writing and Literature with a capital L. Readers of my age and gender, among others, soaked ourselves in Steinbeck in our high school years. To this day, despite the Nobel Prize received in 1962, academic critics withhold high honors from Steinbeck for being, in their opinion, too clumsy, too earnest, too self-consciously mythic, too lacking in irony and ambiguity. Yet for a generation, Steinbeck stood as the entrance portal to Literature to young readers, leading in many instances to a reading of the much more complex Studs Lonergan trilogy, which critics have now given its proper due, namely, an edition in the Library of America series. Neither Pearl Buck nor Margaret Mitchell

has of yet received such recognition, although Pearl Buck, a Nobel Prize winner like Steinbeck, is now the subject of a recent biography by Stacy Schiff, China's Daughter (2010), which, building upon earlier studies is reasserting Buck into respectability. Gone With the Wind, alas, has proven just too popular, too accessible, too proto-cinematic to receive its proper due as a work very much approaching the great American novel, certainly, entertainment in the school of Tolstoy's War and Peace, fused with the woman's novel as written by Kathleen Norris in the same era, but mesmerizing nonetheless, as it was for me when I read it in the summer following the eighth grade and leading to a reading of War and Peace the following summer.

In the early 1900s, Winston Churchill of New Hampshire, the novelist, not the prime minister, got the

popular American historical novel going in a big way, and Kenneth Roberts sustained that momentum in the 1930s and 1940s and 1950s with such tour d'forces as Arundel (1929), The Lively Lady (1931), Rabble in Arms (1933), Captain Caution (1934), Northwest Passage (1937), Oliver Wiswell (1940), Lydia Bailey (1947), and Boon Island (1955). These are, by and large, great popular novels that in some cases made wonderful movies (think Spencer Tracy in Northwest Passage) but they also presented a well-researched narrative of American history on the Atlantic Coast and the Caribbean in the 18th and 19th centuries. In Oliver Wiswell (1940) Roberts went so far as to write a novel presenting the Loyalists perspective on the American Revolution, with Benedict Arnold depicted sympathetically. The novels of F. Van Wyck Mason – this Harvard graduate wrote almost a hundred of them across a forty year career – have

been praised for their accuracy and straightforward narrative. Like CS Forrester, Mason concentrated on naval matters, especially during the Civil War, which accounts for the few of his novels I read in the 1950s.

As far as European history is concerned, an African American writer, Frank Yerby electrified me with The Saracen Blade (1952) a novel set in thirteenth century Sicily of the agnostic Emperor Frederick II. From the Canadian writer Thomas B. Costain I encountered in The Silver Chalice (1952) the world of first-century Christianity : a novel incidentally that inspired Paul Newman's first film and is today correctly considered to be perhaps the worst movie ever made. Through the novels of Costain, moreover, I first encountered medieval Asia in The Black Rose (1945), 14th century France in The

Money Man (1947), and 18th century France The Tontine (1955).

In his spare time, Princeton history professor Samuel Shellabarger wrote even more ambitious historical novels – Captain from Castile (1946), Prince of Foxes (1947), and Lord Vanity (1953) – which engendered superb Hollywood films, which I also enjoyed. I recently, in fact, watched Prince of Foxes and Captain from Castile and marveled at their historical ambition, Prince of Foxes, especially, in which Orson Welles steals the show as Cesare Borgia, but barely outdistancing the performance of Everett Sloane as a bravo.

It was OK to read these books, we were told by Clifton Fadiman and Bennett Cerf: Clifton Fadiman especially, the noted middle-brow critic of this era. After all, they constituted an important form of popular

education. John O'Hara, John P. Marquand, and James Gould Cossens, meanwhile, were exploring contemporary American life in the mode of realism as pioneered by William Dean Howells with equal vividness and literal detail, comparable to the photographs in Life magazine. Go back to these novels – which I read as they appeared and re-read recently – and you have vivid “films,” to use William Dean Howells term, of American life in these years: all this in accessible, narrative-driven dialogue and prose. To my regret, I missed out on Edna Ferber, but enjoyed the MGM musicals.

Speaking personally, while I did get an extensive exposure to the avant garde through what we used to then call “foreign films,” and while as a graduate student at Harvard reading Prescott, Bancroft, Parkman, and Irving, I did experience a level of history that made the

popular novels of the 1950s fade into mere precursors to the real thing, and although reading James Fenimore Cooper pushed my point of departure back to him rather than Frank Yerby, and although I later replaced Clifton Fadiman with Edmund Wilson, whose complete works I have read and collected in first editions, and although I find the later Steinbeck ponderous and near unreadable, and although I try now to read The Atlantic and The New Yorker dutifully, even now and then The New York Review of Books, I believe that the early reading that I've tried to suggest to you this afternoon – reading experienced in a crucial time of life (I'll spare you the details) – has had a lasting influence on me. I revere clarity, narrative, drama, and color: although I am aware that reality frequently demands a more complex presentation. I remain, despite my desire to fit in with the in-crowd, an incorrigible square, but not, I hope, an

incorrigible philistine, although I am sometimes tempted in that direction. It's not easy being a square, especially a square who is out of date, way out of date, as far as contemporary popular culture is concerned. And yet I am aware that this very same contemporary popular culture might one day turn out to be the Squaresville of the generation now experiencing it. Popular culture in the 1950s, I remind myself, was keyed to the Depression and the World War II generation and was celebratory as well of the American Scene. But it was also overlooking many American problems, seething somewhat beneath the surface in those years and becoming the political preoccupations of the last half-century. The American Scene, it can be argued, transferred its flag to politics in the 1960s, to personal liberation in the 1970s, to the accumulation of wealth in the 1980s, and conflicts regarding the proper role of the public sector and the

inequities in wealth preoccupying all of us the past few years.

Perhaps, however, a great big Square awaits us, a renewed American Scene, where we can all, once again, speak clearly to each other, in middle-brow discourse: all of us together, Walt Whitman's America, and like, Walt Whitman, hearing America singing, which brings us to the popular music of that era, another topic entirely.