rural life in the contemporary Carolinas (with side excursions to other parts of the South). Smith focuses her sharp eye on the manners, mores and morals of people one has known all one’s life. No towering tragic figures like Thomas Sutpen for Smith, but rather housewives, adolescents, salesclerks and an occasional dotty—but lovable—character. A sensitivity to the dramas of seemingly banal lives infuses these stories; Smith understands what James Jones once advised a creative-writing class: “Show me the sympathetic insurance man.” One does not need to stoop to television soap operas to know that housewives and salesclerks hurt, and that they wrestle with the vicissitudes of life in an effort to bring order, beauty and meaning to their lives. Lee Smith examines this world skillfully, but if one wants to see a supreme artist at work on this material one goes to Eudora Welty. Why drink domestic brandy when one can have Courvoisier at the same price?

In an essay in the October 1981 Texas Observer Larry McMurtry provoked the ire of Texas chauvinists by arguing that the state’s writers had yet to produce a novel of commanding stature. The problem, wrote McMurtry, lay in the refusal of Texans to realize that their homeland has more to offer than longhorn steers, Gary Cooperish Texas Rangers and laconic cowboys. Where is the novelist who can capture the blend of raw energy and urban sophistication found in the cities that now dominate the state? Perhaps McMurtry’s animadversions stemmed from personal frustration; he has himself tried unsuccessfully to write the novel of the new Texas cities. For whatever reason, McMurtry struck a truth: Texans—those peculiar creatures, half-Southern and half-Western—have imprisoned themselves in the tried-and-true themes of the past as surely as has a wholly Southern writer like Willie Morris. Cowboys can tyrannize the imagination as much as decadent aristocrats or downtrodden black sharecroppers. Texas novelists must come to terms with Houston just as Flannery O’Connor’s
dheirs need to penetrate the glass towers of Atlanta.

McMurtry excluded from his ruminations those novelists who have immigrated to Texas; Beverly Lowry, author of Daddy’s Girl, a novel set in contemporary Houston, thus will not fit McMurtry’s bill: she was born in Memphis and raised in Mississippi. Still, Lowry enables one to see what Southern writers can do with the urban experience, a mode of life remote and alien to those who propelled Southern fiction to the forefront of American letters. Writers of the older South shied away from the cities that had already begun to burgeon in the 1920’s. They stuck to rural and small-town folk, people whose lives had a rhythm and a timeless upon which the novelist could play out his tale, secure in the knowledge that he trod firm and familiar ground. The rural and small-town world of eccentric maiden aunts, black domestics, sharp-tongued gossips, overalled rednecks and yearning adolescents supplied the novelist with ready material. The quirks, foibles and thinly veiled—but rigorously enforced—hypocrisies of these people presented a rich and seemingly inexhaustible vein of ore. When the city appeared at all, it generally hovered on the fringes without intruding directly into the world of Southern fiction. The city has now intruded, both in practice and, as Miss Lowry illustrates, in the imagination as well.

If Daddy’s Girl is a fair sample of what this turn of events signifies, the sight is not a pretty one. Coherence and order have given way to disorder and dissolution: random individuals bounce about in the urban arena, cut loose from the supports once supplied by the land, kin, religion and a common past. The women of Lowry’s world have been liberated—No More Pedestals!—but the best they can do with their new-found freedom is to waste it on empty fomication. Perhaps Lowry’s protagonist says it best about the new Southern woman, who becomes a frequently prone participant in the sexual revolution: “Other people hide a sordid past. I put the lid on propriety.” Her last words are: “Turn up the music. I plan to dance.” So the new Southerner dances. But who will pay the fiddler?

Dependent Literacy

Writers at Work; Edited by George Plimpton; Penguin Books; New York.

Geoffrey Bocca: Best Seller; Wyndham Books; New York.

by Gordon M. Pradl

Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, our educational institutions are as much involved in socializing youth as they are in passing on information, skills and knowledge. This fact in itself should not alarm us; rather, our concern ought to be directed at the frightening discrepancy between the processes of schooling and its hoped-for outcomes. Consider, for instance, our schools’ organizational patterns of mindless obedience and dependency, and how this conflicts with our recognition that the genius of America as a cultural/political entity is based on the qualities of initiative and self-assertiveness—in short, independence in the face of all those agents that would have us get back in step, conform to the dominant drummer. The tension between the individual and the bonding power of the group will, of course, never go away; we have succeeded as a civilization precisely because of our special creative harnessing of this tension, because of our mediation of these opposing forces. Today the manipulating power of other-directed controls appears to be swamp-

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striking vitality to every cultural opposi-

tion. In part, literacy is feeling hard times
because it has been successfully usurped
by the utilitarian crowd—those who see
filling out a job application or reading a
driving manual as the upper boundaries of
"functional literacy." But this is the
literacy of control, of fitting in with written
directives from above. True literacy
has something to do with the mysteries of
meaning-making, with the paradoxical
relationship between writers who write to
capture and interpret lived and imag-
inized experience and the reading public
that enters into critical dialogue with
these images and judgments. Thus
evoked, literacy is fundamental to the
relationship between writers who write to
make from among competing alterna-
tives, characterize tentative progress
toward civilized coherence. As we struggle
with the options in life, with the divided loyalties between self and others,
as we seek to mediate the tension be-

 tween individual fulfillment and institutional constraint, as we rest balanced be-
tween convention and innovation, our
inherent need to see representations of
actual and potential events of our lives
propels us forward in search of a meaning
which corresponds to our sense of justice
and discretion, of liberty and sanity. The
resulting explanatory fictions define our
identities. They are finally our integrity.
They make independence possible.
Believing in these truths, we naturally
advocate approaches to the teaching of
literacy which develop the powers of a
student/citizen to appropriate the liter-
ary work for himself, to raise in the distinc-
tion between pronouncement and judgment. The current scene, how-
ever, provides overwhelming evidence
that we have failed to create independent
readers. Consequently, we are hard-
pressed to expose much of what passes for
wisdom in today's publishing circles.

Since our countervailing intelligence is
undermined, some relish the orgiastic,
collectivist howl that is called contem-
porary literature. Such readers have been
so conditioned to look to the pronounce-
ments of others for the latest trends that
they are unable to recognize exploita-


tion, even when they are deluged by the
latest hypocritical assault on their unsus-
pecting sensibilities. Yet the problem
goes deeper than the erosion of critical
faculties. The reader has lost dominion
over his response; the marketplace has
become oppressive.
But why have powers of discernment
atrophied so severely? An attentive
reading of Writers at Work and Best
Seller begins to suggest reasons for the
current dependent state of literacy in
America.

Writers at Work is the fifth in the
series of Paris Review interviews with
contemporary writers begun in 1953. As
with earlier volumes, a reader can gain
significant insights into the craft of writ-

In the Mail

Anyone for Insomnia? by Richard Armour; Woodbridge Press; Santa Barbara, CA. An amusing
little book about sleep; particularly the lack of it and how to get it.

Prioritizing the Public Sector: How to Shrink Government by E.S. Savas; Chatham House;
Chatham, NJ. Commissioned by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, this book shows
how governments become bloated and how to reduce them via the private sector.

Hoover Essays; The Hoover Institution; Stanford, CA. Press clippings of stories by Hoover
fellows, staff, and authors that appeared in magazines and newspapers.

"Cocedetermination in the West: The Case of Germany," The Heritage Lectures No. 10 by Steve
Pejovich; The Heritage Foundation; Washington, D.C. Codetermination—labor participation
in management—is shown to be a potent enemy of capitalism.

"Cutting the Government: How is Reagan Doing?" The Heritage Lectures No. 11 by Donald
Lambro; The Heritage Foundation; Washington, D.C. This address explains how government
spending—the Reagan Administration's efforts notwithstanding—is still freely flowing.

"The Political Future of American Trade Unions," The Heritage Lectures No. 12 by John Bur-
ton; The Heritage Foundation; Washington, D.C. Possible paths for American unions are ex-
amed, based on those of their British brethren.
ing—how writers work, how they define the purposes of their genre, what sources of inspiration have been of particular importance—as well as a tidal wave of literary gossip. The interview format, although conducive to spontaneity and informality (an unveiling of the personality behind the myths), risks elevating the witty and charming remark above the more prosaic extended argument. And, finally, the quality of the insight depends on the stature of the individual author, which, of course, may nullify the whole enterprise. Here, for instance, among the fifteen writers interviewed, only Archibald MacLeish, Pablo Neruda and Isaac Bashevis Singer are noteworthy. And they must keep company with the likes of Kingsley Amis and Irwin Shaw. Female representation is limited to Joan Didion and Joyce Carol Oates.

MacLeish sets the standard against which our society’s fall from grace (in terms of literacy) must be judged:

I began to understand then, by teaching a course in which I tried to find out for myself what poetry is, what it really is. I began to understand that it is a part of a process which extends beyond poetry but which is most apparent in poetry, of trying to see human experience, trying to see the world. "The world" being what a man feels about the world. Now if you realize this—what the purpose of your art is—you come to see that you are laboring at your art not only to make works of art but to make sense of your life—those dark and bewildering moments of experience. And to make sense of it not only for yourself... [Poems] are steps in an attempt to stop time in terms of time so that it may be seen. To stop time, but to stop it on its own terms. Let man see it. Make it visible to men. Therefore, whatever you leave behind you exists in terms of those others who have read it, who are aware of it, who were moved by it.

A writer’s attempts at this clarity of vision are frustrated in countless ways. The cult of personality, for one, overwhelms the intentions of the artistic dialogue between writer and reader, as MacLeish suggests:

The tragedy—and it is a tragedy—of Hemingway’s fame is that his life and his dramatization of himself have been built up, not by him, or let me say, not altogether by him, to such a point that the myth of the man is more important than the achievement—the work.

Much evidence of this depressing self-puffery exists on the very pages of Writers at Work. One recoils, for example, at the posturing of James Dickey with his tastelessly meairstepined tough-guy manner.

I don’t care much for Robert Frost, and have never been able to understand his reputation. He says a good thing now and then, but with a strange way of averting his eyes while saying it which may be profound and may be poppycock. If it were thought that anything I wrote was influenced by Robert Frost, I would take that particular work of mine, shred it, and flush it down the toilet, hoping not to clog the pipes.

Hyped on the image rather than the substance, the public lies in a fragmented trance which art is all too ready to reinforce rather than to counter. As John Cheever describes it:

There has been a genuine loss of serenity, not only in the reading public, but in all our lives. Patience, perhaps, or even the ability to concentrate. At one point when television first came in no one was publishing an article that couldn’t be read during a commercial.

When there is not time to do one’s own thinking, what is needed is the instant authority of pronouncement—the pre-digested format of textual response as information-processing and speed-reading, not as the reflective recursions of reading in slow motion.

The critic-turned-reviewer hardly helps the situation when he speeds along the surface of texts, sustaining easy prejudices instead of challenging them. As can be expected, the interviewed writers are uneasy with the “accomplishments” of critics.

You have to understand that a critic, in order to be a critic, always has to have his own pet theory about a writer. He has to put you in some definitive category, stuff you in a pigeonhole, and it doesn’t make much difference to him if a great deal of your work, or even most of it, belongs in another category entirely. When this happens, when what you’ve written doesn’t fall into the critic’s chosen terrain, he ignores it.

Such a prejudging approach on the part of the critic explains Joyce Carol Oates’s frustration: “Critics sometimes appear to be addressing themselves to works other than those I remember writing.” Indeed, criticism appears to be more a game of one-upmanship in which the club atmosphere reigns supreme over a serious encounter with texts. Irwin Shaw speaks of the deadening effect of his season spent reviewing drama for The New Republic:

It wore out the pleasure of going to the theater. There’s an almost unavoidable feeling of smugness, of self-satisfaction, of teacher’s pettiness, that sinks into a critic’s bones, and I was afraid of it. You see it in all our newspapers and reviews. They’ve even gone so far as to dub this the Age of Criticism, and every time one of them comes out with a book proving that Melville had a wart on his right nostril instead of on his left, as had been generally supposed up to then, all the other critics start shivering in ecstasy and murmuring ‘Saint-Behave come again.’ They’re so damned polite to each other they swallow the worst kind of piddling nonsense from each other as though it was sugar candy.

Overkill (envy?), perhaps, but unfortunately the critic is encouraged to set
Such socialization ends by discouraging the writing of serious texts. Says Vidal:

Eventually the novel will simply be an academic exercise, written by academicians to be used in classrooms in order to test the ingenuity of students. A combination of Rorschach test and anagram. Hence, the popularity of John Barth, a perfect U-novelist whose books are written to be taught, not to be read.

Under such conditions art gradually loses its intimate influence on the quality of social living, and our immunity to all forms of outrage erodes accordingly.

In all too many classrooms texts are read as part of the cycle which concludes in the testing for knowledge and facts— which are generally someone else’s answers. Seldom do texts play their proper role of allowing the student to imaginatively reconstruct and contemplate the possible range of human actions and emotions. The genuine responses of student/readers are treated as subordinate to the omniscient interpretations of the teacher/scholar/critic. Thus, these responses, whether accurate or not, go underground, only to re-emerge in the company of the best seller, a watered-down version of the literary nourishment so necessary in the shaping of our attitudes to the problems of living.

Geoffrey Bocc’a’s sophomoric (“a nostalgic celebration of the less-than-great books you have always been afraid to admit you loved”) literary excursion, Best Seller, is filled primarily with personal summaries of fifteen novels, including King Solomon’s Mines, Forever Amber, Tarzan of the Apes, The Virginian and Little Lord Fauntleroy. This book also compares film versions with texts and chats about cutey anecdotes. Yet occasionally we catch a glimpse into why a reader’s response goes underground.

Although “an unrepentant dude,” Bocca, while reading The Virginian, found himself “in a tactile wonderland in Medicine Bow, absorbing every sight, sound and smell: the canned corned beef the cowboys ate in the flyblown dining room, washed down with black coffee . . .” These vicarious lives, especially vital at the age of emerging sexual awareness, both gratify and extend perceptions. Such novels, though they make no claims to highbrow, evoke realms of experience that serve to mediate the reader’s growing consciousness of competing complex possibilities. As a result of Three Weeks Bocca suggests, “Quite suddenly a way of life of the privileged, wealthy and highborn was laid bare to England’s free lending libraries, and anyone who had a three penny piece to blow on a book.”

Yet when we deny such works serious scrutiny we lose sight of their psychological and emotional power. The reader is left at their mercy, unable to command his judgments. This in turn debases the best seller itself into mere escape. As Bocca describes the cinematic degeneration of the potential that was Tarzan: “One of the most original, daring and sexually innovative creations of modern literature had become junk-food viewing for obese housewives.” Independent literacy has no place in a somnambulant society.

However improbable it sounds, the solution to the dependent literacy problem, were we to act upon it, is simple and direct: talk. Talk which both performs the work and re-establishes the integrity of the individual’s response to a given text. William Gass, one of the Writers at Work, emphasizes the notion of “the reader as an oral interpreter,” for the wisdom of literature is finally for the ear, not the eye. In commenting on film, Gass continues:

One of the fundamental problems
with film is not simply its easy effects, and its conceptual poverty. That may in time be overcome. Film may be able to carry universals in a useful way. But you can't show films to yourself. There is no way of communicating inside your head but speech. And if you can't talk well to yourself, who can you talk to? You simply aren't anybody. I frequently imagine people who get bored with their own talk, who don't talk to themselves very much. Talk is essential to the human spirit. It is the human speech. Not silence. If all teachers, especially teachers of literature, were to stop being dispensers of information and "correct" interpretations, and instead begin to model for their students how texts are to be "played," were they to begin to legitimate and encourage in their students the active dynamics of response, thus fostering confidence in these responses, the great gulf between the formulaic best seller and the true classic might at last be bridged. Then critical reading which truly informs our sympathies would be within everyone's grasp, and response might once again become inner, not other, directed.

Radical Schmaltz

Tad Szulc: Diplomatic Immunity; Simon & Schuster; New York.

by Valentino E. Martinez

Tad Szulc is a reporter of varied experience and certain repute. His first novel, which treats war and revolution in Central America, has been described as a work of "unforgettable power and conviction." It is nothing of the kind. As a novel, it is mediocre and predictable; as a political ukase, it is naive and foolish.

The plot is straightforward: a National Security Council assistant is sent to the Central American country of Malagua as an ambassador. She is liberal and liberated, but not obnoxiously so. Malagua is naturally torn by civil strife and disorder because a corrupt and venal dictator rules a hungry and unhappy populace. One of the revolutionary leaders is a handsome Jesuit who is torn by doubt, hot for rebellion, and soon summoned by the attractive ambassador, who believes that the United States should open up communications with the opposition. The local CIA station chief is a close friend of the dictator and opposes such a move. In keeping with the tenor of the times, the CIA man is portrayed as a murderer, blackmailer, drug trafficker, alcoholic and generally disloyal, dishonest and ingenuous. Predictably, the dictator and the station chief lose out in the end to the ambassador and the Jesuit, but only after 400-odd pages of revolutionary violence, government repression, stilted dialogue and political punditry that would make even an operative of the Socialist International blush.

There is little doubt that Mr. Szulc intends this novel to be revolutionary. The opposition leaders constantly berate the ambassador for America's preoccupation with communism and Cuba and explain how the United States must be neutral in Central America, that is, allow the revolutionaries to win and they might trust you in the future. Mr. Szulc apparently believes that American neutrality and/or economic assistance will serve to curb the irresistible revolutionary impulse to scotch the bourgeoisie. He is little bothered by the fact that Castro's political prisoners—including many who also fought Batista— languish in prison while the Maximum Leader exchanges epigrams with Barbara Walters. The Sandinistas, the Vietcong and many lesser paladins of "national liberation" are seen as romantic heroes fighting the relentless American imperialism. In reality, the sum total of the social revolution, Latin American style, is this: the secret police replace the National Guard, the Party replaces the dictator and yet another nation sends its revolutionary plenipotentiary to the United Nations to be warmly greeted by the American liberal press.

Obviously, Mr. Szulc's novel represents the garden-variety American liberalism that has absorbed the doctrine that the future inevitably belongs to the left. It is this attitude that discards the use of power and prestige by the United States and mobilizes tens of thousands to protest 50 American advisors in El Salvador. These advisors, of course, terrorize while the 18,000 Cubans in Angola merely stabilize. This warped logic is deeply etched in the minds of many of America's opinion-makers. That it is sanctimonious cant hardly matters; that it at times paralyzes national will is cause for concern. This is much more than the "Vietnam Syndrome." It is no longer a matter of avoiding overseas military involvements. What we are now witnessing is an increasing inability even to criticize despots who ruin their countries through revolutionary socialism and one-party rule. It is, in a word, the Ramsey Clark Syndrome. Vile anti-Americanism is to be understood and tolerated for we have sinned against history by opposing the left's vision of mankind, and only the left has the right to condemn us and to announce our demise.

Karl Marx, in one of his more accurate fits of vituperation, described the character of Adolphe Thiers, French politician and historian. Marx wrote that Thiers was a French Sulla, "a master of petty-state roguery, a virtuoso in perjury and treason . . . never scrupling, when out of office, to fan a revolution, and to stifle it in blood when at the helm of state; with class prejudices standing him in the place of ideas, and vanity in the place of a heart." Thiers was, indeed, probably the most disgraceable apostle of petrified order in the 19th century;