

# WHERE HAVE ALL THE YOUNG WRITERS GONE?

*A Report on the 1965 Student Magazine Contest*

By SHERMAN B. CHICKERING

COLLEGE professors and literary critics wonder what has happened to student creative writing. Back in the Twenties and Thirties many of the great writers of today were publishing in college literary magazines. In the Forties and Fifties college literary efforts showed great technical promise and thematic relevance. In the Sixties, however, student writing has lost much of its promise and most of its relevance. Where have all the young writers gone?

Writers of earlier generations found their themes in various cataclysms of depression, war, and, of late, social disintegration. Today's young writers have no cataclysm to chronicle, no ready-made themes to deploy. They are members of what one observer calls the Ground Zero Generation. To them, everything seems to be in little pieces; all the atoms are split. There's nothing left to do but integrate. So the integration movement, whether artistic or social, takes the place of a cataclysm. Instead of disintegration, the young would-be writers have integration, in the broadest sense of the word, as an artistic *modus vivendi*. And integration, unlike a cataclysm, cannot be seen from the bleachers. That's why the young writer goes off to his Selma, or his Berkeley, or his Newport festival to live out a story and spin out a theme. Behind him he leaves an impoverished literary magazine.

The third annual contest for student literary magazines sponsored by SR and the U.S. National Student Association washed up a considerable amount of dereliction for appraisal. Though the thrust of the Sixties is present, it amounts

to little beside the wealth of leftovers from the Fifties. The contest judges, despite their seniority, did manage to honor some of the few entries which caught the spirit of the Sixties. Nevertheless, the top award in both fiction and overall magazine performance went to the hardy perennial, Bennington College's *Silo*, which suffers a most acute case of hangover from the days of Franny and Zooey.

*Silo's* winning story, "Dinah," was chosen by Leslie Fiedler because of the "ease with which it handles its complicated fable, its coolness and control which never slips over into slickness." The story, by Karen Jackel, is a 75-page novelette that tiptoes, like a swimmer testing for crabs, through the fractured and frequently improbable sensations of a banal young bride named Dinah. Dinah, and the people she meets, are brittle creatures. As Professor Jesse Rehder, judge of over-all magazine performance, calls them, "constricted people in a glass world." A Salinger world. Rehder goes on to find "a stringent, practical demand for sharp imagery" in *Silo's* poetry. Indeed, *Silo's* poetry and prose show facility in diction and the manipulation of imagery. As a whole the magazine emits a cool, controlled glow much as if it were a Southern California think factory issuing periodic encyclicals.

The world of *Silo*, as of "Dinah," is the highly competent world of the Fifties where creative writing served pre-eminently as an instrument for the exorcising of neuroses. It contrasts sharply with the world mirrored by other winning entries. Four of them in particular suggest where it is the young



would-be writers have all vanished to.

The first honorable mention story is "A View from the Spanish Steps," by Gorman Beauchamp (from the University of Houston's *Harvest*). The principal character, Cal, sits on the Spanish Steps in Rome "waiting for Godot." He is being picked up by a male American Negro expatriate, and there begins an exploration of not the race issue, but alienation. Near the end of the story, Cal and the Negro, Charlie, are bar-hopping and alienation meets its match for the evening: "Charlie looked across at Cal . . . and held out his glass. . . . 'This is Godot, California. And this.' He put his other hand on his belly. 'And this.' He ran his hand down his belly and rested it on his groin. 'That's Godot, man.'" The story is perhaps overly programmatic, but it is beguilingly direct, relaxed, and geared to authentic dialogue. It seems to say, "We're out after the grail, man." And since the author himself is clearly out there looking, he may not be back to write another story for a long, long time.

THE other two honorable mentions went to "The Story of the Birds," by James Riley (*The Portland State Review*), and "Here I Raise My Ebenezer," by Bonnie Jo Henderson (*Aurora*, of Agnes Scott College).

The nonfiction winner at a glance seems to share with most of its fellow entries a common origin—the classroom. "J. P. Sartre, A. Camus, and L'Homme Revolte," by Alan Milchman, appeared in the *November Review* of Brooklyn College, and looks ponderous. Instead, it is a carefully reasoned argument taking Camus to task for not facing squarely

the dilemma posed by killing in a revolutionary cause. "Sartre, with his total commitment to political and social action, is in fact making history. In withdrawing from effectual political activity, Camus insured the fact that history will proceed in a direction not of his own choosing." The same argument can be perceived today drifting up from the Black Belt, or steaming up off the pamphlets of the Berkeley people.

Honorable mention in nonfiction went to "A Little Essay on Economic Necessity," by Robert D. Fischer in the *Portland State Review*. The judge was Professor Steven Marcus of Columbia University.

First honorable mention magazine is a repeater (1963), the *Riata* of the University of Texas. As usual, the Texans remain relatively untouched by the excesses of "in" styling; *Riata* editors seem to refer occasionally to the tumbleweed tales of J. Frank Dobie and the cool, clear watercolors of Tom Lea. More susceptible to "in" styling, however, is the second honorable mention, the *New Student Review* of the State University of New York at Buffalo. And in this respect it is as "in" as "out." The *New Student Review* is sensationally Sixties. Its typography is scratchy, layout splotchy, balance toppled by reprints and faculty contributions. The *Review's* editor, Harriet Heitlinger, says "none of us have ever put out a magazine before. But we had something to say, and were lucky to find some good material." And *what* material. The stated theme of the magazine, good old "Alienation," comes down to earth in poetry that crawls up your spine and in photography that opens you up where you live—if you happen to be a student currently live-stocking a multiversity.

The *New Student Review* hardly out-alienates the winning poem chosen by poet John Hollander. "The Pigeon Roof," by Robert Dawson, appeared in the *Harvard Advocate* and undoubtedly scratched out many a faculty eyeball. The imagery makes the reader feel as if he's lying on his back being walked on and pecked at by numerous pigeons. The implications of the prone position and the emergency-ward metaphors are tantalizing, especially when strung out from a trilogy of opening gambits: "Of science . . . Of art . . . Of history." Dawson reaches out beyond alienation to where the five senses run headlong into the brain.

Honorable mention went to "Ferrottype," by Robert Petty in the *Wabash Review*.

The five senses. Godot is here. History is made. Alienation is *our* problem. These are the meanings that sound trite to any ears but those of the integration generation. The young writers who work these meanings are marching with the

activists in fantasy, if not in fact. And there are few of them who do not march first and write later. It is not surprising that few of them find their way into student literary magazines: They are too busy making the meanings stick.

But overt activism is only half of the answer. The other half lies in the transformation of artistic expression itself. The new substance requires a new form. Conventional art forms such as creative writing are not, by and large, art forms that are appropriate to the college generation. Every generation, every class, every society seems to have its emblematic art forms. The modern mammonite has pop art spread around his penthouse; the academic has his Sanskrit poetry or Samoan figurines. The integration generation, too, has its particular art forms, of which the folk song, jazz, and the film are the most prominent.

**T**HE distinguishing feature of these contemporary art forms is that they variously involve both audience and creator directly in the making, and sometimes the remaking, of the artistic experience. In fact, to the degree these art forms involve audience participation and improvisation they are excluded from college curricula—film the least, then folk singing and jazz. Of all the forms, only the film boasts any real place in the curriculum and then only, one suspects, because it can be readily domesticated (students on their own do not make prefabricated Hollywood-type films.) On campuses polled by Phil Werdell of the U.S. National Student Association, film and television together are part of the curriculum on 31 per cent of the campuses, folklore and singing

on 19 per cent, and jazz on 12 per cent.

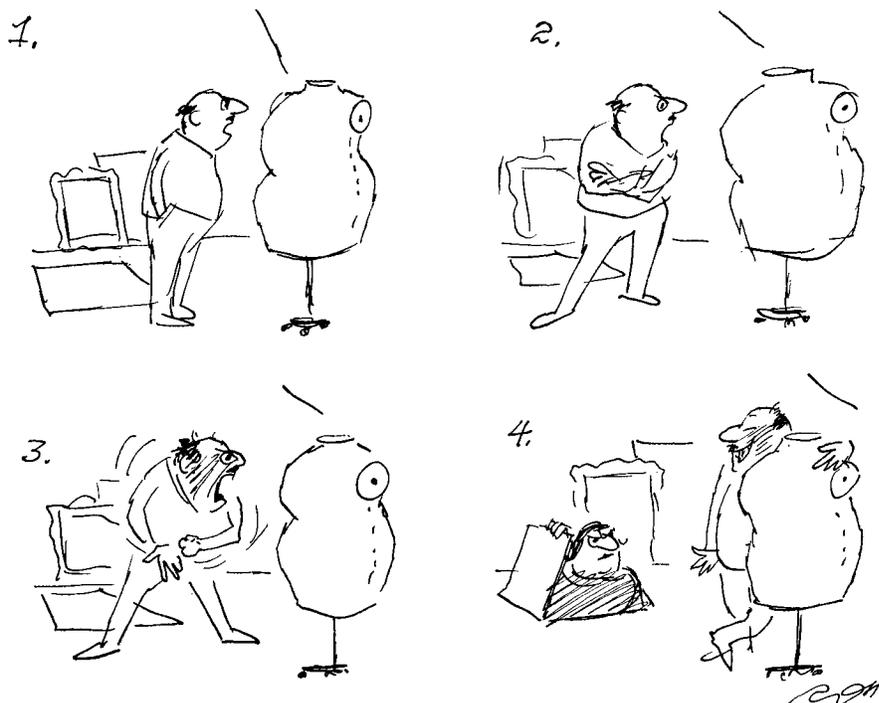
The conventional arts on campus have become, says President Perkins of Cornell, a "spectator sport." There is always some Big Cultural Event going on every month or two during the academic year. As with the laying on of a spiritual emphasis week at a church-supported college, administrators continue to lay down a smoke screen of culture, hoping thereby to asphyxiate student apathy. What they don't seem to realize is that The Arts are not what's happening, baby. *Cinéma vérité* shot from the hip is what's happening; so is jazz off the cuff, and off the record; and so are folk songs made up as you march along.

The only arts truly possible for the integration generation are the action arts. They go along with the fine arts of making nonviolent demonstration, of cutting clothes to fit the mood, and of taking a chance on love. The action arts are the ones that are beginning to put a little lyricism into American life. "We Shall Overcome" is not a song, it's a ritual, and ritual spells stagnation for the detached genres of the past.

Leslie Fiedler wonders where the young men are who really have something to say. "I was impressed by the high degree of technical competence shown in almost all the contest entries, depressed by how little experimentation or risk was to be found anywhere. It is a matter, I suppose, of the times."

It was a matter of the Fifties that experimentation and risk be absent from literary magazines; it is a matter of the Sixties that experimentation and risk be elsewhere expressed.

You can't see it from the bleachers any more.



# The Magnificent Middlebrow

By WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

**T**HOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY, raised to the peerage two years before his death, is a historian and essayist whose audience was wider in the Victorian heyday of his powers than it is today. This is apt to be the fate of thinkers who reflect too faithfully the spirit of their time. Macaulay is the very incarnation of the views and ideals of the increasingly confident and assertive British Victorian middle class, somewhat complacently convinced that their age is the best of times, their country the best of countries, that the key to perpetual material progress has been found, that the British ascendancy in India and Ireland is for the best, that Protestantism leads to higher rewards, in this world and the next, than Catholicism.

As one may learn merely by reading the memorial inscriptions to Wilberforce and other distinguished figures of the time in Westminster Abbey, this was a self-confident age and Macaulay was nothing if not self-confident, very sure of his judgments, inclined to see political and social issues, of the past and the present, in strong shades of white and black. He would have been an incomparably successful syndicated columnist or radio commentator, had those occupations existed in the first half of the nineteenth century, telling his audience very much what they wished to hear in impressively polished and eloquent language, assuring them that they were on the right track, with occasional suggestions for improvement.

As it was, endowed with phenomenal memory (he once declared that if every copy of *Paradise Lost* or *The Pilgrim's Progress* were lost he could reproduce these works from recollection), a fluent, vivid, and colorful style, and prodigious working energy, he achieved success in every task to which he applied himself. He was a magnificent middlebrow, opening up by his lucid, facile, readable works vistas of history and biography without making undue demands by posing difficult speculative problems.

It was said that almost every literate settler in Australia kept on his shelf three books: the Bible, Shakespeare, and Macaulay's *Essays*. His *History of England* was a spectacular success: 140,000 copies were sold in Great Britain alone

and the work was widely read in the United States and translated into the principal languages. The 20,000-pound check (then many times the value of such a sum today) was a landmark in the annals of British publishing.

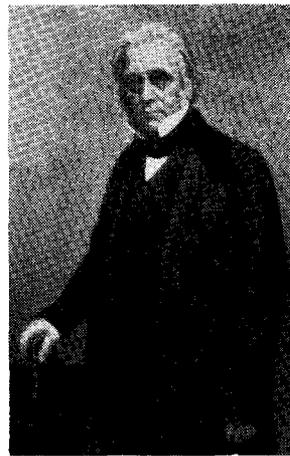
Apart from his prolific writing, Macaulay served as a high administrator in India, a fact that influenced his appraisals of the two early British empire-builders, Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, and sat in Parliament, where his learning and eloquence made a strong impression. A good specimen is his devastating attack on Sir Robert Peel on the subject of his devious twistings on the administration of Ireland:

"There you sit, doing penance for the disingenuousness of years. Show us how, if you are honest in 1845, you can have been honest in 1841. Explain to us why, after having goaded Ireland to madness for the purpose of ingratiating yourselves with the English, you are now setting England on fire for the purpose of ingratiating yourselves with the Irish. Give us some reason which shall prove that the policy you are following, as Ministers, is entitled to support, and which shall not equally prove you to have been the most factious and unprincipled Opposition that ever this country saw."

**M**ACAULAY himself, in his diary, recalled "how white poor Peel looked while I was speaking." And Peel was not the only victim, living or dead, of his sledgehammer style of invective. With his downright convictions, his tendency to read moral issues into differences of opinion and values, he is unsparing in controversy, and the Anglo-Saxon battle-ax, rather than the rapier, is his favorite weapon. "I have beaten Croker black and blue," he wrote on one occasion, exulting in his feat of turning a review of an edition of Boswell into an attack on a political opponent. Anyone in search of a vocabulary of invective could do worse than run through Macaulay's *History* and other writings, of which the following excerpts furnish good examples:

"We are tempted to forget the vices of Laud's heart in the imbecility of his intellect."

(Of Marlborough) "The loss of half a guinea would have done more to spoil



—Bettmann Archive.

**Macaulay—more often right than wrong.**

his appetite and disturb his conscience than all the terrors of an evil conscience."

(Of George Fox, founder of Quakerism) "An intellect in the most unhappy of all states, that is to say, too much disordered for liberty and not sufficiently disordered for Bedlam."

"If his word was doubted, he was willing to repeat his assertion on oath. The public, however, which had formed a very correct notion of his character, thought that his word was worth as much as his oath, and that his oath was worth nothing."

"The majority of the House more justly regarded him [Titus Oates] as the falsest, the most malignant and most impudent being that had ever disgraced the human form."

"Whether James designed, as his enemies suspected, to commit murder or only, as his friends affirmed, to commit extortion by threatening to commit murder, cannot now be ascertained."

"Perth, who stood high in the favor of his late master [James II], both as an apostate from the Protestant religion and as the author of the last improvement on the thumbscrew. . . ."

If Samuel Johnson boasted that, in a magazine which he edited, he saw to it that "the Whig dogs should not have the best of it," Macaulay is conspicuously lacking in charity toward those who upheld the cause of the unhappy Stuart dynasty, finally banished from British political life with the accession of William and Mary in 1688. Indeed, he was a sturdy fighter on two fronts, against upholders of the divine right of kings and against advocates of such measures as all-out democracy as universal suffrage.

To paraphrase Daniel Webster, Macaulay's slogan might well have been: liberty and property, one and inseparable, now and forever. When England was stirred up by the agitation of the Chartists, Macaulay nailed the conservative part of his creed firmly to the mast:

"My firm conviction it that, in our country, universal suffrage is incompat-