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## THE RELATIONSHIP OF LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

MILTON C. ALBRECHT

### ABSTRACT

In most theories of the relationship of literature and society reflection, influence, and social control are implied. Literature is interpreted as reflecting norms and values, as revealing the ethos of culture, the processes of class struggle, and certain types of social "facts." "Influence" is not strictly the reverse of reflection, since social stability and cultural ideals are involved. Social control, however, articulates closely with one version of reflection, though to a limited extent in complex, dynamic societies.

As Mueller pointed out fifteen years ago,<sup>1</sup> sociologists in the United States have paid little attention to literature and art; they, like other social scientists, have focused primarily on the instrumental aspects of social life.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is because practical social problems have grown so urgent—but, whatever the reason, some interest in the arts has persisted and in recent years has increased, however sporadically.<sup>3</sup> Of literary and social histories as well as of more limited investigations there are, of course, an untold number. Our purpose in this paper is to examine critically some of their characteristic viewpoints and theoretical assumptions. One hypothesis is that literature "reflects" society; its supposed converse is that literature influences or "shapes" society. A third hypothesis is that literature functions socially to maintain and stabilize, if not to justify and sanctify, the social order, which may be called the "social-control" theory.

The idea that literature reflects society is

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Mueller, "Is Art the Product of Its Age?" *Social Forces*, XIII (March, 1935), 367-76; "The Folkway of Art," *American Journal of Sociology*, XLIV (September, 1938), 222-38.

<sup>2</sup> Kingsley Davis, *Human Society* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), p. 392.

<sup>3</sup> Bibliographies may be found in A. S. Tomars, *Introduction to the Sociology of Art* (Mexico City, 1940), pp. 418-21; in H. E. Barnes and H. Becker, *Contemporary Social Theory* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1940), pp. 889-92; in James H. Barnett, *Divorce and the American Divorce Novel, 1858-1937* (Philadelphia, 1939), pp. 146 ff.; in Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz, *Public Opinion and Communication* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950). For many other sources see Hugh D. Duncan, "An Annotated Bibliography on the Sociology of Literature" (University of Chicago thesis, 1947).

at least as old as Plato's concept of imitation.<sup>4</sup> Systematic application of the idea did not appear, however, until about a century and a half ago. The "beginning" might be said to be Madame de Staël's *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*,<sup>5</sup> published in 1800, in which the author offered a social and historical interpretation of the literature of several nations. Her outlook was romantic and idealistic, expressed in terms of individual and social perfectionism. Apparently, the theory of reflection arose out of the spirit of nationalism spreading throughout Europe and from the environmentalism of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers.<sup>6</sup> In general, the idea is a manifestation of a change in man's perspective, crystallized during the nineteenth century in philosophies of history, in the formulation of the theory of evolution, and in the sociological conceptions of societies and their changing character through successive ages.<sup>7</sup>

The essential function of the reflection theory was to "explain" in social and historical rather than individual terms the quality and greatness of literature, as well as its content, style, and forms. In effect, it emphasized social and cultural determinism

<sup>4</sup> *The Republic*, in *The Works of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (4 vols. in 1; New York: Dial Press, n.d.), II, 378 ff.

<sup>5</sup> 2 vols.; Paris, 1800. See also *De l'Allemagne* (Paris, 1813).

<sup>6</sup> Max Lerner and Edwin Mims, Jr., "Literature," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933), IX, 538-39.

<sup>7</sup> Floyd N. House, *The Development of Sociology* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1936).

instead of personal inspiration, and it became the broad orientation of innumerable works dealing with the arts. To be sure, other phrases were often used, such as "expression of society" or "mirror of life," but their meaning is practically identical with "reflection." These phrases were applied to nearly everything social and cultural as well as biological and geographical. At one time or another literature has been thought to reflect economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, religion, and many other more detailed aspects of environment and social life.<sup>8</sup>

This diversity results, apparently, from the fact that literature embraces a wide variety of subject matter, representing "settings," behavior patterns, and ideas in their complex interrelationships. It has led some, like Mueller, to believe that the reflection theory is "too all-embracing" to be useful.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it has traditionally been applied in a few major forms, sometimes stated explicitly but often merely implied or assumed—by literary and social historians as well as by sociologists and anthropologists. Probably the commonest conception has been that literature reflects predominantly the significant values and norms of a culture. As DeVoto says, "Literature is a record of social experience, an embodiment of social myths and ideals and aims, and an organization of social beliefs and sanctions."<sup>10</sup> These

"social beliefs and sanctions" have usually included religious beliefs and customs, as manifested in myths and other art forms, both of primitive societies and of earlier historical periods of civilizations.<sup>11</sup> Boas finds, for example, that the conditions of life in a number of Indian tribes can be abstracted from their traditional tales: "Beliefs and customs in life and in tales are in full agreement."<sup>12</sup> Whether this is fully as true in complex civilizations such as our own seems less clear, and it is uncertain whether the situations used as vehicles for illustrating or emphasizing important social values are those actually occurring in a society or truly typical. On these questions there seems less general agreement, but the use of literature as an index of significant beliefs and values in a society has been widespread.<sup>13</sup>

In psychology a recent variant of this conception is that stories, at least as presented in movies, reflect the stress patterns and emotional needs of audiences, arising out of shared cultural and social life. Wolfenstein and Leites, for instance, believe that "the common day-dreams of a culture are in part the sources, in part the products of its popular myths, stories, plays and films."<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, the plots of the drama of a particular time or period show a distinctive configuration. Other investigators assume that a kind of collective unconscious is

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Lerner and Mims, *op. cit.*, p. 524. Franz Boas maintains (*General Anthropology* [New York: D. C. Heath & Co., 1938], p. 594) that "the contents of poetry are as varied as the cultural interests of the people." Henry Commager insists (*The American Mind* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950], p. 56) that imaginative literature could faithfully replace the documentary record of the contemporary scene.

<sup>9</sup> "Is Art the Product of Its Age?" *op. cit.*, p. 373.

<sup>10</sup> W. E. Lingelbach (ed.), *Approaches to American Social History* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1937), p. 54. Cf. David Daiches, *Literature and Society* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938); Irwin Edman, *Arts and the Man* (New York: New American Library, 1949), pp. 122-29; Ruth Benedict, *Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1946), pp. 100-133; Hortense Powdermaker,

"An Anthropologist Looks at the Movies," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CCLIV (November, 1947), 83-84.

<sup>11</sup> Consult E. Grosse, *The Beginnings of Art* (New York: Appleton, 1897); Y. Hirn, *The Origins of Art* (London, 1900); Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1913); Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo, 1927); Herbert Read, *Art and Society* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937); Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Penguin Books, 1948).

<sup>12</sup> *General Anthropology*, p. 600.

<sup>13</sup> See also studies of national character, surveyed by Otto Klineberg, *Tensions Affecting International Understanding* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1950), pp. 49-58.

<sup>14</sup> Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), pp. 12-13.

reflected, or, in psychoanalytic terms, that literature presents a manifest and latent content, as in dreams, both derived from stresses in society, and both given symbolic meaning.<sup>15</sup> However, as Fearing states, there is no indication as to how makers of films gain access to the collective unconscious of a population for whom they are intended, or whether films actually carry the symbolic meanings to a mass audience.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, literature or motion pictures may present interpretive frames of reference, as Wolfenstein and Leites suggest, which have their counterpart in real-life attitudes. Although the relationship of movie or literary patterns to the larger culture is complex and not well understood, it is assumed that these patterns reflect in significant and characteristic ways the attitudes and shared experiences in society.<sup>17</sup>

By students of culture, literature and other arts have been used as reflections of the fundamental reality of a culture, variously called "culture mentality," "Weltanschauung," "spiritual principle," or "soul," and of the different stages in the development of a culture.<sup>18</sup> These conceptions are derived largely from Hegel and other historical philosophers of the early nineteenth century as well as from the sociologists, Comte and Spencer. Taine, for example, attempted to account for the characteristics of English literature and their historical changes by applying his famous triad: race, environment, and time. Although regarding "mind or spirit" as the master-idea inherent

in "race," he was enough of a positivist to look forward to the quantification of his formula for successful prediction of future literary trends.<sup>19</sup>

More recent representatives of this tradition, who are concerned with the unity and change of civilizations, include Spengler, Toynbee, and Sorokin. Of these, Spengler is the most closely identified with Hegelian thought, both in the principles of spirit and destiny and in regarding history as proceeding through phases of growth, maturity, and decay.<sup>20</sup> Other differences in ideology and method between these representatives lie beyond the scope of this article, but there are certain general agreements. All of them identify two main phases in the history of societies, called "culture" and "civilization" by Spengler,<sup>21</sup> "yin" and "yang" by Toynbee,<sup>22</sup> "ideational" and "sensate" by Sorokin, although the latter also distinguishes several mixed forms, of which the "idealistic" is a special type.<sup>23</sup> Each set of terms refers to contrasting types of societies, the one stable and slow to change, the other dynamic and rapid in change. Each society is characterized by a number of other qualities, which are reflected in literature and art. Toynbee finds that art styles more accurately establish the time span of a civilization, its growth and dissolution, than any other method of measurement.<sup>24</sup> Sorokin, however,

<sup>19</sup> H. A. Taine, *History of English Literature* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1886), pp. 1-21. For comment see Albert Guérard, *Literature and Society* (Boston: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Co., 1935).

<sup>20</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (2 vols.; New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926-28), Vol. I, Introduction. Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Collier & Son, 1900), pp. 61-99, 115-34, 300-302.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, I, 31-35.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934-39), I, 201-4; III, 196 ff., 390; IV, 33-34. Dismissing Spengler's organic concept of cultures, Toynbee accepts the idea of dominant tendencies or bent (III, 382-90).

<sup>23</sup> Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (4 vols.; New York: American Book Co., 1937-41), I, 55-102; IV, *passim*. He surveys various "phase" concepts of cultures in IV, 389 ff.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, III, 378-79.

<sup>15</sup> J. P. Mayer, *Sociology of the Film* (London: Faber & Faber, 1946); Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1947).

<sup>16</sup> Franklin Fearing, "Influence of the Movies on Attitudes and Behavior," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CCLIV (November, 1947), 76-78.

<sup>17</sup> Wolfenstein and Leites, *op. cit.*, pp. 295, 306-7.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Radhakamal Mukerjee, "The Meaning and Evolution of Art in Society," *American Sociological Review*, X (August, 1945), 496: Art reveals "the soul of a culture and social milieu in a more significant manner than religion, science, and philosophy."

has described and elaborated on these qualities probably more systematically than either Spengler or Toynbee. According to him, in the literature and art which reflect ideational culture the subjects deal with persons and events of religious significance, the attitudes are ascetic, otherworldly, the style is symbolic, formal, and conventional, and the techniques are relatively simple. Sensate literature, on the other hand, selects secular, commonplace topics and events, is sensational and erotic, individualistic and skeptical; the style is sensual, realistic, and naturalistic and the techniques are elaborate and complex.<sup>25</sup> Tomars, although more sociological than cultural in orientation and avoiding the theories of change of the above trio, comes to almost identical conclusions as these expressed by Sorokin.<sup>26</sup>

This conception that reflection reveals the essential world outlook of a culture obviously overlaps the idea expressed earlier that it represents norms and values and the stress patterns, but reflection of ethos emphasizes the integrative character of cultures and their organization around dominant activities or beliefs—the concept of cultural focus recognized and developed by a number of anthropologists, though without the philosophic overtones so conspicuous in Spengler.<sup>27</sup> It is questionable whether literature and the arts are always as reliable indexes as usually assumed. Probably they are only one index among many, whose rele-

vance and significance vary with the society or culture.<sup>28</sup> Between literature and other cultural products there also seem to exist specific interrelationships, without any systematic attempt being made to designate the principles governing their interaction. Consequently, literature and other arts may be an index of cultural change, but they apparently cannot account for shifts in “mentality.”<sup>29</sup> They are a symptom, not a cause. As such, they are passive, essentially static agents—a conclusion that hardly seems as inevitable as this formulation implies.

Another version of reflection derives from the dialectical materialism of Marx and his followers, who select the economic system rather than ethos or soul as the independent variable. Literature and art, along with other “ideologies,” are determined by “the mode of production in material life,”<sup>30</sup> and by the ideas of the ruling class, which are in every epoch the ruling ideas.<sup>31</sup> But in the dialectical process, manifested in the class struggle, “art expresses the tendencies of a rising, and therefore revolutionary class.”<sup>32</sup> The relationship of economic structure and ideological forms, however, is not causally direct and mechanical, as Engels points out.<sup>33</sup> Especially is this true of artistic greatness, which Marx admits has no direct rela-

<sup>25</sup> Sorokin, *op. cit.*, I, 679.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 300–306, 392–95. See also Herbert A. Bloch, “Towards the Development of a Sociology of Literary and Art Forms,” *American Sociological Review*, VIII (June, 1943), 310–20. Bloch presents a classification of literary patterns or themes which result when artists lack a common social idiom.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: New American Library, 1948); Ralph Linton (ed.), *The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 164–68; A. L. Kroeber, *Configurations of Culture Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1944), pp. 820–23, 826–28. Repudiating the idea of a master-plan, Kroeber uses the hypothesis that any notable cultural achievement presupposes adherence to a certain set of patterns which are limited and which may develop and become exhausted.

<sup>28</sup> Spengler regards the arts as “prime phenomena,” while Sorokin includes other cultural aspects, all of which show essentially the same trends. In 1934 Elliott and Merrill regarded literature as probably “the most significant index” of social disorganization, but the latest edition of their text fails to mention literary indexes (Mabel Elliott and Francis Merrill, *Social Disorganization* [3d ed.; New York: Harper & Bros., 1950], pp. 45–48).

<sup>29</sup> Toynbee, *op. cit.*, IV, 52.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Literature and Art* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1947), p. 1. Cf. Louis Harap, *Social Roots of the Arts* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1949), p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1939), p. 39. Cf. Harap, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>32</sup> Harap, *op. cit.*, p. 112; Marx and Engels, *Literature and Art*, pp. 25, 45, 52–55, 116.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondence, 1846–1895* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1936), p. 475. Cf. Harap, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

tion to either the degree of social development or the type of economic base.<sup>34</sup>

Among the numerous followers who have elaborated, interpreted, and applied these ideas are Veblen, Caudwell, Fox, Calverton, Parrington, and Hicks. Some are strict Marxists, others adapt and select Marx's ideas, of which the class influence on literature has been the most suggestive. Veblen shows the intrusion of economic motives, conspicuous waste, and expensiveness on the character of aesthetic objects.<sup>35</sup> Caudwell and Fox, dealing with poetry and the novel, respectively,<sup>36</sup> attempt to relate economic conditions and bourgeois ideas to the forms as well as the content of literature, and presume that artistic greatness will arise in a future classless society.<sup>37</sup> Parrington, a liberal rather than a Marxist, describes the economic background from which spring the regional and class differences that distinguish the main periods of American social and literary history.<sup>38</sup> More comprehensive and less doctrinaire than Calverton<sup>39</sup> or Hicks,<sup>40</sup> he traces the class and economic position of writers and shows how these "determine" their economic theories and their religious and political philosophies as well as the

character and form of their literary productions.

One need not, of course, follow the Marxian system in investigating the influence of social classes on literature. Tomars, for example, adopting MacIver's concepts of corporate and competitive classes, describes and illustrates their differential influence on the subject matter and style of literature and other arts and examines interclass relationships as well.<sup>41</sup> More recently Gordon has been impressed by the accuracy with which novelists have represented the cultural traits that distinguish several social classes in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

In general, the Marxian orientation has been widely influential, though subject to a number of difficulties. Whether, for example, "proletarian" literature actually contributes to lower-class solidarity is questionable, and how in other respects it fosters the class struggle has not been systematically explored. Much of the Marxist writing is full of doctrinaire and negative judgments rather than thorough analysis or objective testing of hypotheses. The concept of classes seems of limited applicability to American society, and the system fails to include other types of groups from which certain variations of literary form and expression may be derived or to consider the influence on drama, for instance, of groups with conflicting or divergent interests.<sup>43</sup> The problem of how bourgeois writers and artists succeed in reflecting the ideas and aims of the proletarian class remains obscure. As for the notion that the classless society will provide the ultimate basis for the development of literary and artistic greatness, there is obviously no basis; it is either wishful thinking or hopeful propaganda—unless, of course, one accepts wholeheartedly the Marxian system. De-

<sup>34</sup> *Literature and Art*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>35</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Heubsch, 1924), pp. 126–66.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1947); Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1945).

<sup>37</sup> Caudwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 293–98; Fox, *op. cit.*, pp. 80, 125–26. Cf. Harap, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–82, and Lenin, in Clara Zelkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1934), p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (3 vols. in 1; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1930). In method Parrington was influenced by both Taine and J. Allen Smith, from whom he derived the concept of economic determinism (III, vii).

<sup>39</sup> V. F. Calverton, *The Newer Spirit* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925); *The Liberation of American Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

<sup>40</sup> Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1933); *Figures of Transition* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1939).

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 141–223.

<sup>42</sup> Milton M. Gordon, "Kitty Foyle and the Concept of Class as Culture," *American Journal of Sociology*, LIII (November, 1947), 210–18.

<sup>43</sup> Levin L. Schücking points out how heterogeneous audiences influenced Elizabethan drama (*Sociology of Literary Taste* [London: Kegan Paul, 1944], pp. 11–13).

spite these and other limitations, the fact remains that Marx's concepts are dynamic and have focused attention on social rather than on the more strictly cultural aspects of literary reflection.

Within the last fifteen years several sociologists have explored or implied another variety of reflection which has arisen evidently from accumulated sociological data and a concern for social problems. Their basic assumption is that literature, mainly fiction and biography in "popular" forms, reflects social "facts": vocational and divorce trends, population composition and distribution. This hypothesis is perhaps the most mechanistic version of all, since it postulates that literary data somehow correspond to certain types of statistical data; that heroines in popular fiction, for example, are portrayed as having the same occupations, proportionately, as actually exist in society at a particular time.<sup>44</sup> Although the hypothesis seems hardly promising, the results have been somewhat profitable, for they indicate the direction of the distortion of statistical facts.<sup>45</sup> Story content, indeed, seems to be slanted in the direction of widespread interests and ideals. Inglis, for instance, discovers that popular fiction mirrors not actual jobs of women or their circumstances but rather "certain typical American attitudes and ideals."<sup>46</sup> Barnett and Gruen show that "divorce" novels are sensitive to "wide-

spread attitudes toward marriage, love, and divorce."<sup>47</sup> These conclusions are largely in line with the first type of reflection described above, centering on norms and values, though dominant public interests and attitudes may not be identical with social norms.<sup>48</sup> Edgar Dale, for example, analyzing the content of fifteen hundred movies current in the twenties and early thirties, finds the distortion in the direction of sensational subjects, mainly crime, sex, and love, rather than desirable social values or even typical or "average" situations.<sup>49</sup> In this case the theory of emotional needs and stresses seems implied. Berelson and Salter, concerned with majority and minority Americans, observe that popular stories are biased in favor of the elite and the economically powerful—a bias which they believe to be characteristic in literary history.<sup>50</sup> In effect, therefore, they agree with Marx that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, although they emphasize ideas less than certain traits of hero and heroine. Statistical facts, then, are not reproduced in fiction. On the contrary, these studies, even though indirectly, support the argument for other types of reflection, described earlier.

In view of these several versions of reflection

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Inglis, "An Objective Approach to the Relationship between Fiction and Society," *American Sociological Review*, III (August, 1938), 526–31. Cf. Leo Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines," in *Radio Research, 1942–43*, eds. Paul Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce, 1944), pp. 507–48. Lowenthal examines leading characters in popular biography in relation to a "cross section of socially important occupations."

<sup>45</sup> Guérard, like many literary critics, recognizes that *artistic* literature is "a dangerously distorting mirror," but he fails to perceive patterns in the direction of distortion (*op. cit.*, p. 20).

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 530–31. Cf. Richard and Beatrice Hofstadter, who show that Churchill's novels reflected humanistic values in revolt against acquisitive and business goals ("Winston Churchill: A Study of the Popular Novel," *American Quarterly*, II [spring, 1950], 12–28).

<sup>47</sup> James H. Barnett and Rhoda Gruen, "Recent American Divorce Novels, 1938–1945: A Study in the Sociology of Literature," *Social Forces*, XXVI (March, 1948), 332–37. Barnett's earlier survey shows more extensive use of divorce statistics and legislation and less awareness of "distortions," except a historical lag between "public attitudes" and their representation in fiction.

<sup>48</sup> Francis L. K. Hsu believes that literature is an index to repression in Western cultures as compared with suppression in Eastern cultures ("Suppression versus Repression," *Psychiatry*, XII [August, 1949], 224–27).

<sup>49</sup> *The Content of Motion Pictures* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933). Like Inglis, Dale finds fictional representations favoring unmarried, youthful people and wealthy rather than poor. Barnett and Gruen (*op. cit.*) discover a bias toward professional people in urban settings.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard Berelson and Patricia Salter, "Majority and Minority Americans: An Analysis of Magazine Fiction," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, X (summer 1946), 188.

tion, it would seem that the theory is not entirely useless but that more extensive investigation is needed. The reliability of literature and art as indexes of the state of society and culture might be checked against other indexes, so that the danger is avoided of deducing the "spirit of the age" from its art and then rediscovering it in its art<sup>51</sup>—the danger which DeVoto calls "the literary fallacy."<sup>52</sup> It seems evident, also, that to some extent the phrase "reflection of society" is a misnomer, since much of what literature presumably reflects is specifically cultural rather than social, as Sorokin explicitly states.<sup>53</sup> Marx and others have called attention to the influence of social classes, but many other social aspects might be explored. It is not clearly understood, for example, what social processes develop and sustain differences in aesthetic taste or determine what is called artistic greatness. At present the reflection theory seems to account for some of the content and certain broad aspects of literary and artistic styles, without coming to grips with the problem of what social conditions are responsible for the existence and popularity of specific literary and artistic forms. And inevitably it stresses the external product as an artifact, so that some investigators minimize or deny the possible role of the arts in social change.

Despite gaps and uncertainties, these general orientations show some possibilities of ultimate agreement. It should be kept in mind, also, that historically the reflection theory has done valuable service in challenging older insights and established traditions. It has directed attention to the social and cultural characteristics of literature in addition to its more narrowly formal aspects. It has emphasized the conception of artists as agents of social forces rather than as individual geniuses or great men with inventive imaginations. It has provided social and historical modes of analysis as alterna-

tives to exclusively biographical and aesthetic approaches and offered concepts of cultural relativism in place of absolutist aesthetic principles and social determinism in place of artistic individualism.

The historical emphasis on reflection has naturally tended to distract attention from the question of the influence of literature on society, but the two concepts have frequently been regarded as mutually influential or as opposite sides of the same coin.<sup>54</sup> Mukerjee holds that "art is at once a social product and an established means of social control."<sup>55</sup> Inglis, finding no evidence that popular literature "shapes" society, believes that it results in a measure of social control by supporting the status quo of American attitudes and ideals.<sup>56</sup> In brief, one can formulate the proposition that, if literature reflects, then it also confirms and strengthens cultural norms, attitudes, and beliefs.

This "social control" function of literature is suggested in the article by Berelson and Salter,<sup>57</sup> and Betty Wang finds that it applies to the folk songs of China.<sup>58</sup> More systematically and directly, however, it is supported by Warner and Henry's investigation of *Big Sister*, a radio serial drama.<sup>59</sup> They conclude that this drama is essentially a minor morality play adapted to a secular society. Psychologically, it does not just "entertain" its listeners, but it releases their antisocial impulses, anxieties, and frustra-

<sup>54</sup> See Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Paul Meadows, "Social Determination of Art," *Sociology and Social Research*, XXVI (March-April, 1942), 310-13.

<sup>55</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 496.

<sup>56</sup> Inglis' use of "social control" as a form of "influence" seems to lead to some confusion. It seems preferable to restrict the term to its more limited and precise context.

<sup>57</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>58</sup> "Folk Songs as a Means of Social Control," *Sociology and Social Research*, XIX (September-October, 1934), 64-69; "Folk Songs as Regulators of Politics," *ibid.*, XX (November-December, 1935), 161-66.

<sup>59</sup> W. Lloyd Warner and William E. Henry, "The Radio Daytime Serial: A Symbolic Analysis," *Genetic Psychological Monographs*, XXXVII (February, 1948), 3-73.

<sup>51</sup> Schücking, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard DeVoto, *The Literary Fallacy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1944).

<sup>53</sup> *Op. cit.*, IV, 124-28.



tions and provides them with both a feeling of being instructed and a sense of security and importance. Socially the program promotes understanding of the ideals and values of family life, and it strengthens and stabilizes the basic social institution of our society, the family.<sup>60</sup>

Although no mention is made of Malinowski in this study, these conclusions recall his statements on the role of myth among the Trobriand Islanders. Myth comes into play, he says, "when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity."<sup>61</sup> Psychologically, myths help to still doubts and calm fears. Myths of death, for example, bring down "a vague but great apprehension to the compass of a trivial, domestic reality."<sup>62</sup> Myths of origin are not "explanations," as some anthropologists have thought, but ways of instruction in and justification of the social system. Such a myth "conveys, expresses, and strengthens the fundamental fact of the local unity of the group of people descendent from a common ancestress."<sup>63</sup> It thus contributes to social solidarity and supports the existing social order.

Malinowski's findings and those of Warner and Henry are apparently consistent and essentially the same, both in psychological and in social functions of certain types of literature. Both investigations uphold the theory of social control. It should be recognized, however, that *Big Sister* applies to only a single social institution, the family, whereas Trobriand myths affect the total society. Moreover, the radio listeners to *Big Sister* are confined to the "common man" of modern American society; they do not include career women from the upper middle class (the control group), for whom the program has little or no appeal. Presumably

these women would prefer programs expressing different values, as may other subgroups, such as members of the upper and lower classes. In short, different social classes or groups in our society may select and emphasize distinct social and aesthetic values, ranging from comic books to stories in the *New Yorker*, or from popular fiction to classical art.

In our complex society, then, as contrasted with Trobriand society, social control through literature may either be limited to those norms and values common to all groups or applied to class or group control, each class or group responding to the art and literature that confirms its own set of values, customs, and beliefs. In the latter case, if these sets are to some extent in conflict, one may logically expect literature in some degree to further their antagonism and thus contribute not to social solidarity but to intergroup conflict and to social disunity. Group differences, for example, may be exposed and attacked. Writers satirize businessmen and business ethics, opposing certain widespread social beliefs and practices. Or, as Marxian theory indicates, literature may tend to perpetuate the status quo of the "common man," yet operate simultaneously, though perhaps unintentionally, to confirm and strengthen an entrenched economic power elite. Maintaining the status quo in the family system and in other institutions at various social class levels may also help to impede or reduce social changes that are adaptive to new conditions, so that the literature which supports the older, traditional social forms may serve as a conservative rather than as a dynamic force.<sup>64</sup>

Some literature, however, may minimize

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>61</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1948), pp. 84-85.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93; cf. pp. 85-89, 109.

<sup>64</sup> This conservative effect of literature may be conspicuous in periods of rapid social change, as seems demonstrated in L. K. Knight's *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937) and in Walter Taylor's *The Economic Novel in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942). Conservative aspects of radio programs are pointed out by Paul Lazarsfeld in *Print, Radio, and Film in a Democracy*, ed. Douglas Waples (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 66-78.

or reconcile intergroup conflict, like humor for different racial groups,<sup>65</sup> and some may contribute to social mobility, which is an important cultural value in our society. Literature and art, as Fearing states, may reveal to an individual a wide variety of patterns of behavior which he may accept or reject.<sup>66</sup> In either case, his awareness of the range of possibilities, the degree of freedom for action, would be increased, the areas of significant meanings enlarged, and his horizon expanded. It seems possible that, if accepted, some of the new values would promote social mobility rather than reconciling one to his "place."<sup>67</sup>

In these and probably other ways the social control theory seems inadequate for explaining a number of direct and "hidden" social effects of literature in a complex society—effects that await further testing. Nevertheless, recognition and support of this theory, particularly by Malinowski and the Warner-Henry study, indicates its importance to students of the general problem of the function of literature and art in society. Its significance is increased by the fact that it articulates so closely with what is probably the commonest version of reflection, so that each tends to reinforce the other and to uphold in part the proposition stated earlier.

The concept of social control, then, may well be considered as separate and distinct from the influence theory which emphasizes literature as "shaping" society. Actually, the idea of literature as shaping or molding society seems to have taken two broad forms, depending on whether the influence has been regarded as beneficial or detrimental to society. Both are obviously value

judgments rather than theories, but they have been widely held. The theory, for instance, that some literature, if not all, tends to disrupt or to corrupt society has been a hardy perennial in the history of Western civilization. Its traditional form was set by Plato in *The Republic*, where he feared that the fundamental laws of the state would be altered by shifts in modes of "music."<sup>68</sup> This concept was later adopted by the Christian church, remained current throughout the Middle Ages, and found its strongest expression in sixteenth-century Catholicism and in Puritanism.<sup>69</sup> Today, in similar fashion, the Soviet Union strictly controls the character of aesthetic output, while in the United States censorship is more limited.<sup>70</sup> All such measures have been direct attempts to prescribe artistic production or prevent its circulation, on the assumption that some works extend and perpetuate values antithetical to an emerging social order, as in Russia, or introduce and display values disruptive of an existing social order, as in the United States.

This was the orientation of the series of investigations on movies sponsored in the 1930's by the Payne Fund and of a number of more recent independent studies. Since many of these are well known, we shall confine our discussion to a few aspects. In general, it was assumed that people, especially children, are more or less passive and can easily be swayed by the stimuli of the movies or other artistic forms to act in given directions, usually toward immoral or criminal behavior. A popular account pictured children as "molded by movies," as "movie-made criminals," though a few were influ-

<sup>65</sup> Milton Barron, "A Content Analysis of Intergroup Humor," *American Sociological Review*, XV (February, 1950), 88-95; Richard Stephenson, "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor," *American Journal of Sociology*, LVI (May, 1951), 569-75.

<sup>66</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (10th ed.; New York: World Publishing Co., 1945), pp. 217-22, 226-28: "I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. . . . It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities."

<sup>68</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 140, 186-87.

<sup>69</sup> Lerner and Mims, *op. cit.*, pp. 537-38.

<sup>70</sup> For Soviet control of the arts see Tomars, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-301, 370-71; Max Eastman, *Artists in Uniform* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1934), pp. 33-38; Juri Jelagin, *Taming of the Arts* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1951), p. 76. For American censorship see Ruth A. Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947); Charles A. Siepmann, *Radio, Television and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

enced to adopt more ideal attitudes and goals.<sup>71</sup>

The bulk of the evidence from the Payne studies, however, is to the contrary. That movies do have measurable effects on attitudes of children Thurstone and Peterson clearly demonstrate,<sup>72</sup> and that conduct may also be affected is evident from several of the investigations.<sup>73</sup> But the influence is not a simple cause-effect relationship, as commonly assumed; it is selective, being determined primarily by an individual's background and needs.<sup>74</sup> A person may focus on particular items such as hair or dress styles, manners, methods or robbery, or courtship techniques, but opposing forces may also be present to cancel or modify the effect of these influences. The consensus of all these studies seems to be that movies have differential effects depending on movie content, on an individual's needs, and on his social and cultural background.<sup>75</sup> When Hulett attempted to discover the net effect of a commercial motion picture, *Sister Kenny*, upon public opinion in a whole community rather than on specific individuals, he obtained negative results.<sup>76</sup>

It must be admitted that the larger ques-

<sup>71</sup> Henry J. Forman, *Our Movie Made Children* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935), *passim*.

<sup>72</sup> Ruth C. Peterson and L. L. Thurstone, *Motion Pictures and the Social Attitudes of Children* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933).

<sup>73</sup> Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933); Herbert Blumer and Philip M. Hauser, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933); Paul G. Cressey and Frederick M. Thrasher, *Boys, Movies, and City Streets* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933).

<sup>74</sup> Mildred J. Weise and Steward G. Cole, "A Study of Children's Attitudes and the influence of a Commercial Motion Picture," *Journal of Psychology*, XXI (1946), 151-71.

<sup>75</sup> Paul G. Cressey, "The Motion Picture Experience as Modified by Social Background and Personality," *American Sociological Review*, III (August, 1938), 516-25.

<sup>76</sup> J. E. Hulett, Jr., "Estimating the Net Effort of a Commercial Motion Picture upon the Trend of Local Public Opinion," *American Sociological Review*, XIV (April, 1949), 263-75.

tion of the negative impact of films on society or culture is still unanswered, to say nothing of the influence of literature or art. The complexity of the problem as yet defies adequate testing, although certainly the naïve assumption of a one-directional type of influence is thoroughly discredited, at least among social scientists. Among laymen and some "experts" the idea persists and has again found expression recently concerning television.

The very persistence of the idea that movies or other forms of literature and art are socially disruptive apparently indicates an enormous respect for the power of artistic media—a respect deeply entrenched in tradition. The conception also seems to manifest fears which arise and become widespread during periods of rapid social and cultural change, when a society is more or less disorganized. When underlying causes of change are obscured or unrecognized, pervasive anxieties seem to find one outlet by attacking movies or other artistic forms, or by curbing their publishers and producers. That this process is a channeling if not a displacement of anxiety seems possible, but it leaves unresolved the problem of the extent to which artistic products may not only reflect social change but also contribute to it.

If the detrimental effects of movies or literature on society are still undetermined, the beneficial effects are even less so, though the traditional claims have been many and exceedingly great. Historically, one such claim refers to the "moral" value of literature, already dealt with in connection with the social control theory, but the effects of the arts beyond their social control function may more appropriately be classified as influence in "shaping" society, a power which Toynbee and others have denied to the arts.

When one examines various claims, they prove to be a curious mixture. Albert Guérard, for example, states that literary works have set fashions, such as a "fatal pallor," and that Goethe's *Werther* was "responsible for" a wave of suicides.<sup>77</sup> He be-

<sup>77</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 337.

lieves that literature has produced the conceptions of national types and that literary ideas preceded and "guided" political movements and reforms.<sup>78</sup> Similar claims have been made about particular works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Jungle*, by Upton Sinclair, which is supposed to have "brought about" the reform of the packing houses in 1906. In fact, however, these claims have not been substantiated.<sup>79</sup> Essentially, they rest on the same kind of simplified notion of causation as those for the "bad" influence of the movies.

Some of these so-called "influences," indeed, are mainly problems of cultural diffusion as related to social change, which have been dealt with by both Tomars and Sorokin, among others. Tomars has concentrated on interclass currents and fashions of art in a competitive society as contrasted to a corporate society.<sup>80</sup> Sorokin has more comprehensively stated some approximate uniformities of spatial displacement, mobility, circulation, and diffusion of cultural phenomena, including literature and art.<sup>81</sup> Again, both emphasize the complexity of such processes. As Sorokin points out, whether literary or art forms "penetrate" another social class or a different culture involves a number of conditions, which include at least the degree of "refinement" and complexity of a work, the nature of the culture or subculture being "influenced," the type of communication system being used, and sometimes the amount and character of coercion or force that is applied.<sup>82</sup> The diffusion of certain types of literature or art may,

then, be involved in social change. However, whether literature or any other kind of art "penetrates" first in time or more successfully than other cultural objects or ideas is doubtful; even if true, it is clearly not the function merely of the work of art itself.<sup>83</sup>

Much the same difficulty is encountered in other traditional assertions about the "shaping" influence of art, especially those pertaining to personal character and to ideal human existence. John Dewey, for example, insists that, when we enter into the spirit of Negro or Polynesian art, "barriers are dissolved, limiting prejudices melt away."<sup>84</sup> Developing this thought, Gotshalk declares that the fine arts are "an indispensable foundation of congruity of feeling or social solidarity between individuals and peoples."<sup>85</sup> Consistent with these judgments is the evaluation of the arts as the crowning achievement of civilization, the chief means of measuring the stature of a society, a symbol of its internal power and worth.<sup>86</sup>

These statements refer to the "highest" cultural ideals for individuals and for humanity, essentially the religious conception of brotherhood. Obviously they are not formulated in ways that would lend themselves to scientific test. Perhaps the arts help to perpetuate such ideals or contribute to their acceptance by other cultures. To the extent that they reinforce these values in our culture, they would presumably perform the social control function, though probably for certain elite groups more than for others. As Eastman points out, the present attempts at maintaining this supreme evaluation of the arts are primarily directed

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 338-40.

<sup>79</sup> In *American Outpost* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1932) Sinclair acknowledges that he is supposed to have helped clean up the stockyards but insists "this is mostly delusion." Donald Grant came to similar conclusions in "The Jungle: A Study of Literary Influence" (unpublished paper, University of Buffalo). Materials on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are well known.

<sup>80</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 141-23.

<sup>81</sup> *Op. cit.*, IV, 197-289.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 202 ff.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268-79, 282-88.

<sup>84</sup> *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934), p. 334 ff. Cf. Albert R. Chandler, *Beauty and Human Nature* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1934), pp. 294-95; Daiches, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> D. W. Gotshalk, *Art and the Social Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 210, 212-13.

<sup>86</sup> Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 345; Gotshalk, *op. cit.*, p. 203; Edman, *op. cit.*, p. 51; Auguste Rodin, *Art* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1928), pp. 7-9.

at preserving the high status of embattled men-of-letters, who seek to recapture the position they enjoyed in the past, when their association with religion and "superior" knowledge gave to the arts singular prestige. Today their position is being undermined by the encroachments of experimental science, once rated low in the social scale as "the vulgar pursuit of useful knowledge."<sup>87</sup>

To define the problem in this way would be to investigate the historical origins and the social structures that support and maintain the high cultural value placed on the arts—the fine arts especially, but popular arts as well—and to assess their effects on social behavior in many groups, in comparison to other kinds of cultural interest. Lundberg thinks that "social relations are today managed on the basis of what poets, play-

wrights, journalists, preachers and radio commentators assume, on the basis of folklore, literature, and highly limited personal experience, to be principles of human nature and human relations."<sup>88</sup> Future research will no doubt determine the truth of this statement, and eventually we may also be able to trace more clearly the extent to which art has become, as Max Weber states, a cosmos of independent values, which are in dynamic tension with religion and which take over "the function of a this-worldly salvation," especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> George A. Lundberg, *Can Science Save Us?* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1947), p. 63.

<sup>89</sup> H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 342.

<sup>87</sup> Max Eastman, *The Literary Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), pp. 36–53.