

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



Perishing for Want of Imagery

RUSSELL KIRK

"IT IS IMAGINATION that governs the human race." No professor of literature wrote those words: that is an aphorism of the master of the big battalions, Napoleon Bonaparte.

In a time when we Americans ought to be entering upon an Augustan age, we seem enervated. A feeling of powerlessness oppresses many Americans. Even the President and the Congress, theoretically invested with immense authority, tremble and change color like so many chameleons on aspen leaves, whenever some wind of fantastic doctrine disturbs them. Something has trickled out of this society of ours: so many voices tell us.

But what has departed? The abortionist, the pathic, the female freak, and the psychopath strut upon the national stage; the mass of decent Americans grumble in bewilderment, almost leaderless, while order and justice and freedom are crushed in most of the world, while a heavy bureaucracy settles upon us, while their savings evaporate, while everything is engulfed by political power, while what we took to be the "permanent things" are eroded to skeletal remains. What genius has forsaken us?

Now and again I marvel at the naïveté of some of the people who cry *O tempora, O mores*. Too many folk fancy, for instance, that the decadence of the age is worked by economic fallacies. It is true

enough that economic fallacies make mischief—especially the notion that we all can prosper somehow, even if nobody works very hard. But economic error is only one aspect of larger blunders. Someone once told Irving Babbitt that the future would be concerned principally with economics; if so, Babbitt replied, the future will be superficial. We have it on the authority of Gregory the Great that it has not pleased God to save mankind by logic; still less will the world be saved by little tracts and pamphlets about economic theory. People who think our civilization mainly an exercise in economics, and so devote their energies and their money to theoretical defenses of an abstract "capitalism," actually are unconscious Marxists—embracing the postulates of an ideology they think they detest. It is freedom of spirit that produces a free economy, among other things—not the other way round.

Napoleon was right: the world is ruled not by money, not by force of arms, but rather by imagination. In the long run, it is the poet who governs the human race. Poetry, even bad poetry, rouses the imagination and shapes our ends; without poetry, a civilization does not endure. I use the word "Poetry" as Eliseo Vivas does in his book on D. H. Lawrence—that is, "as a short and convenient term to refer to the whole of imaginative literature, whether

written in prose or verse." And there comes to my mind a passage in Vivas' introduction to his Lawrence book:

The vision the poet offers us has order and splendor, whereas the objects of our vision are incomplete, opaque, vague. The first and most important step in arriving at knowledge of ourselves and of the world is to apprehend both immediately in their own terms as objects of the act of aesthesis. It is at this point that the work of the poet comes to its full non-residential utility: we do not see the world reflected in it, we see the world by means of it. And the difference between the alternatives is radical. It is in this special sense that the poet's world is normative.

Just so. My English friend Paul Roche, poet and translator of classical poets, argues that to every cabinet minister there ought to be attached a poet, to whom the politician would be compelled to listen. One such poet, Roche says, commanding the ear of a minister of transport, would have averted the ruinous folly of British highway-construction on the American model—a policy which the British government has found it necessary to curtail after doing immense damage to the economy and the ecology. Similarly, a real poet breathing some imagination into HUD might have prevented the creation of America's urban deserts and urban jungles through mis-called "urban renewal." The poet perceives the norms for mankind. When a blinkered utilitarianism suppresses poetry, those norms are forgotten, and the human condition descends by stages to its primitive circumstances of life, "poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

In a confused fashion, this hard truth lay behind the recent violent protest in Kanawha County, West Virginia, against the abnormality of prevailing textbooks in literature and related disciplines. By imagery our minds are moved, our emotions are directed, our characters are formed; and if that imagery is base, a society degrades it-

self. By this word "imagery" I mean the formation of images by art; a type of general likeness; a similitude; a descriptive representation; an exhibition of ideal images to the mind; figurative illustration. "Imagery" is mental representation, or the formation of images in the mind. The lives of all of us are formed, willy-nilly, upon models we perceive and imitate. There is the emulation of Christ, and there is the emulation of Lucifer. Great poetry gives us mental images; the narcotic trance gives us mental images. Though the Decalogue forbids molten images of divine beings, in another sense all of us make unto ourselves an image—and worship it. Were that not so, we would live merely as dogs do, from day to day.

Indulge me, then, in a digression here concerning the impoverishment of the creative imagination, of imagery, in America. For what has trickled out of our society, I believe, is moral imagination. We stray enervated and bewildered because we have ignored the poet's vision.

America always was the least poetic of great nations. Until recent decades, nevertheless, we did not reject altogether what Michael Oakeshott calls "the voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind." But nowadays the voice of true poetry is nearly extinguished in our schools. Therefore we fall away rapidly from the norms of order and justice and freedom, in the person and in the republic. I venture to illustrate my point by examining a representative series of textbooks—subsidized by our federal government—in the discipline which used to be called humane letters. For my example, I take a series of high school anthologies, at three grade levels, called "Macmillan Gateway English: a Literature and Language Arts Program." This series is no worse than various others in its field. Having limited space here, I confine my criticisms to Level Three of the Macmillan Gateway program—a set of four paperback anthologies, intended for high school juniors or seniors. Its four volumes are entitled *Rebels and Regulars*, *People in*

Poetry, Something Strange, and Ways of Justice.

A product of the recent widespread concentration upon "center city" schooling, this Macmillan Gateway English series is meant to acquaint pupils with "relevant" literature. It is got up by the Project English Curriculum Center at Hunter College. As the Teacher's Manual puts it, ". . . the encouragement and the financial support out of which these units developed came from the U. S. Office of Education (Contract SAE OE-3-10-015) and from the Department of Education of Hunter College of the City University of New York"; so came to pass "the development of instructional materials which, it is hoped, will bring new understanding and heightened enjoyment of English to urban youth and their teachers." The editors are professors of education or high school teachers; no professor of literature or man of letters has a hand in these volumes.

Certainly this recent "urban" and "relevant" look at English (actually, almost wholly American) literature contrasts strongly with the smugness and dullness of the typical high school textbook of a very few years ago. I commend a perceptive study by James J. Lynch and Bertrand Evans, *High School English Textbooks: A Critical Examination* (Little, Brown, 1963). Professors Lynch and Evans, in their recommendations concerning anthologies, listed nine principal vices of the typical textbook, the last of those "editorial tone." The following passages from Lynch and Evans suggest the foibles of yesteryear:

Several of the anthologies stress the deliberate catering to the adolescent mind even to the point of embarrassment. Pieces are chosen because they lie within the narrow boundaries of the teen-age world, and their heroes and heroines are Dick and Jane just a few years older, now dating instead of playing, going to a dance instead of the local fire station, saying "round, round, jump the rut, round, round, round, jump

the rut, round, round—" instead of "jump, Spot, jump," but otherwise hardly different. The "image" of the American Boy that emerges is a clean-cut, socially-poised extrovert, an incurious observer of life rather than a participant, a willing conformer, more eager to get than to give, a bit of a hypocrite but a rather dull companion—a well-adjusted youth not much above a moron. And the "image" of the American Girl? She is one who likes the American Boy. The adolescent should read about adolescents, of course—but he can and will do so on his own. The constant restriction of the teen-ager's gaze to himself, his friends, his family, his hobbies, his little world of which he is the center, is likely to produce nothing else so quickly as acute narcissism.

Too true; but how all this has been altered in a decade! This recent Macmillan Gateway English breathes nonconformity (sometimes for nonconformity's sake), "relevance" (meaning contemporaneity), social awareness, humanitarianism, pessimism, "minority" images, and novelty. Yet perhaps this is merely the other face of the coin: the Un-American Boy is no more charming than the American Boy. And there is little more genuine literature of the first rank in this new approach than there was in the old: the moral imagination of the rising generation is left unsatisfied.

These Hunter College educationists may break with the "values" of the smug anthropologists of yesteryear, but they retain (perhaps unconsciously) rather woolly humanitarian values of their own. One is reminded of C. S. Lewis' mordant criticism of two British anthropologists, in his slim book *The Abolition of Man* (Macmillan, 1947). Lewis wrote:

Their scepticism about values is on the surface: it is for use on other people's values: about the values current in their own set it is not nearly sceptical enough. And this phenomenon is very usual. A great many of those who "de-

bunk" traditional or (as they would say) "sentimental" values have in the background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the de-bunking process. They claim to be cutting away the parasitic growth of emotion, the religious sanction, and inherited taboos, in order that "real" or "basic" values may emerge.

What values the Hunter College anthropologists embrace may be suggested by certain sentences near the beginning of the Teacher's Manual. They are tempted to espouse dissent on principle:

Adults who may have forgotten their own similar feelings, or who view the rebellion of today's youth as more fundamental, more overt, even more violent than their own, may be quick to condemn young people whenever they do not conform to adult expectations. Such condemnation contributes to the alienation young people feel toward the institutions and authority figures that are the gatekeepers of the adult world. . . . And if adolescent and young adult protest is more violent and more easily embittered today, adults must recognize the urgency of the problems—of war, racism, poverty—which the generation now coming of age must face.

Indeed? The problem of war is not more dismaying than it was in Shakespeare's time; the problem of "racism" is not more complex than it was in Disraeli's age; the problem of poverty surely is less acute than it was in the day of Piers Plowman. (None of these writers, incidentally, finds a place in this Hunter-Macmillan series.) But for these new anthropologists, the past scarcely exists; pupils must be exhorted to immerse themselves in activity and "becoming," not in meditation on the permanent things.

Moods alter rapidly nowadays. I suspect that administrators and teachers of secondary schools are less eager to encourage activism among their charges in 1976 than they were when Macmillan Gateway was

compiled, almost eight years ago; in that sense, Macmillan Gateway English itself has ceased to be "relevant." A dean of students at a state university told me recently:

There are no radical students at our university: only characterless students badly reared by their parents and badly schooled. Our "radicals" don't know enough to be really radical about anything. They don't even know what "character" means.

Now a principal purpose of the teaching of humane letters always has been the development of sound character; one may go so far as to say, with Irving Babbitt, that the literary discipline is an intellectual means to an ethical end. The editors of this Hunter-Macmillan series are not unaware of this ethical end; indeed, they seem considerably more concerned for "right attitudes" than they are for great writing.

What sort of character are they molding by *Rebels and Regulars*, the first volume of Level III? Well, they are not very fond of Regulars: far from commending conformity to the image of the American Boy, they present the pupil with a diversity of rebels against custom and convention. Almost the only cautionary voice tolerated in this anthology is that of John Dos Passos, writing about James Dean. Yet in general, these are not overtly violent rebels: the tone is set by Martin Luther King, whose "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is presented as a model of twentieth-century prose. One encounters no exhortation to march to Zion: it's merely that nobody ought to be expected to conform to anything.

Of the thirty-odd selections in *Rebels and Regulars*, only two are from authors (Hans Christian Andersen and Henry David Thoreau) of the nineteenth century; all the rest are twentieth-century pieces. If one hopes to form character through the study of literature, this policy confines students to a small compass in time and space; it is what T. S. Eliot called the error of contemporaneity. "In our age," Eliot told the Virgil Society in 1945,

when men seem more than ever prone to confuse wisdom with knowledge, and knowledge with information, and try to solve problems of life in terms of engineering, there is coming into existence a new kind of provincialism which perhaps deserves a new name.

Precisely that sort of provinciality is stamped upon *Rebels and Regulars*: so far as this anthology offers models for character at all, it presents those (with next to no exceptions) of one country and one century only. This is what Eliot called the provincialism of time—

one for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares. The menace of this kind of provincialism is that we can all, all the peoples on the globe, be provincials together; and those who are not content to be provincials, can only become hermits. If this kind of provincialism led to greater tolerance, in the sense of forbearance, there might be something to be said for it; but it seems more likely to lead to our becoming indifferent, in matters where we ought to maintain a distinctive dogma or standard, and to our becoming intolerant, in matters which might be left to local or personal preference.

The editors of *Rebels and Regulars* command tolerance and breadth of view; but they may be imparting something different—that is, a new conformity to a standardized “nonconformity” of amorphous humanitarianism. True, they devote considerable space to the grievances of Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Indians, and even Africans—whether or not the selections chosen for these topics possess literary worth. Yet one senses behind these diverse sketches a kind of doctrinaire egalitarianism, the notion that everybody belongs to everybody else, as in *Brave New World*.

Everybody is protesting and rebelling—against what? Why, it’s hard to say what: for so little space in this collection is allotted to “Regulars” that protest itself is left without adversaries. Even a character of negation requires something to deny or reject; but *Rebels and Regulars* leaves its readers quite adrift—no splendor, no tragedy, no norms, no authority even to flout, merely a pouting resentment. It leaves the rising generation, that is, bored and characterless. The small beer of the Un-American Boy is quite as dull as the small beer of the American Boy. What J. Frank Dobie wrote of the typical high school anthology of a decade ago is quite as true (with few exceptions) of *Rebels and Regulars*: “stuffed with banal tripe that would bore the brain of a hard-shelled terrapin.”

After such prose (the selection from Thoreau, by the way, consisting of three sentences merely, as if the pupils’ intellects would bear no longer passage of literate exposition), one turns for relief to *People in Poetry*, the second volume of Level Three. Most of the students who use this slim book will be seniors; for most of them, it will be their last formal approach to poetry. And what do they get? More “relevance”; next to no beauty; for that matter, next to no rhyme. There is room for LeRoi Jones, but no space for the three most famous poets of the twentieth century: not one selection from William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, or Robert Frost. (Frost’s “Witch of Coos,” however, is included in the following volume of this series.) One is given a surfeit of Carl Sandburg, true—because Sandburg is regarded as a poet of “democracy” and “protest.”

Of the 109 poems—or items, rather—in the anthology of verse, only three are by well-known poets who wrote before the twentieth century. There are a few translations from other languages—by twentieth-century hands. Nearly all the poets are Americans; some of them are obscure; some are wretched. All the poems are short, and of those by the better poets, the choice often is poor. One is interested to find that

Miss Bobbie Gentry, the singer, is a poet important enough to deserve the study of "urban" pupils: indeed, the second poem in the volume is her song "Ode to Billy Joe"—which owes whatever merits it may possess to its tune and to Miss Gentry's voice, not to her lyrics.

But why fret whether the verse is good or bad? It will fill up the kids' time, anyway; and remember, this is an anthology entitled *People and Poetry*. So long as we have the people—John F. Kennedy, Harriet Tubman, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—why scan the verses? It seems to have been impossible to find tolerable verses about Dr. King, but the deficiency is supplied by a passage in prose entitled "A Drum Major for Justice and Peace" by that leader himself, in praise of himself. Doubtless it is better that young folk should admire Martin Luther King than that they should admire Frank Sinatra, say; but I'd not print any "poems" by Sinatra, either.

In all this volume, there is not one great poem; nor are there many lyric or dramatic poems of the sort to catch a young person's imagination. One is tempted to apply to this anthology what T. S. Eliot said of the English Association's anthology *The Modern Muse*, in 1941: "brainless balderdash."

Something Strange is the third volume in this Third Level: a collection of uncanny or fantastic tales and poems. When I took up this anthology, I was filled with enthusiasm: high school students have been starved for this genre for a great while. Two admirable storytellers, Ray Bradbury and Roald Dahl, are represented; there is a scenario by Rod Serling; there are poems by Frost, Keats, Housman, William Carlos Williams, and Archibald MacLeish.

The editor of this volume, in her preface, declares that we all are in "a funhouse gone mad." The editors of the series make considerable concessions to the demands of fantasy; well and good. Yet when we turn to the selections themselves, we are disabused of our hopes. It is a relief to have escaped from the fatuous jollity of a teen-

age version of Dick, Jane, and Spot; but after plodding out of one slough, the editors plunge into another. These "strange" tales are the fantasy of despair, of nihilism. In general, the vast outpourings of "science fiction" in recent years have been anti-utopian—to which characteristic I do not object. Most of what is chosen for this anthology, however, reminds one of Ambrose Bierce's definition of suicide: "A door leading out of the jail-house of life. It leads into the jail-yard." This really is a "funhouse gone mad," deprived of norms and of hope.

A nasty vein of cruelty and despair runs through the textbook. At least eight of the selections have to do with a predicted future that is utterly ruined or dehumanized. One encounters next to no suggestions that any sort of regeneration is possible. This terror without catharsis is as bad, in its way, as stuffing young people full of indigestible meliorism. One is given various glimpses of hell, but no hint of divine justice.

I was pleased to encounter two stories by my friend Ray Bradbury in this volume, because he is a man of high imagination and creative power. Like almost all of his work, the two stories reprinted here are good ones; but they scarcely are representative of the power for good which Bradbury has exerted upon young people. I do not object to these stories being printed, but I do declare that—the dismal and grisly tone of the other stories in this volume considered—it would have been well to choose something from the more hopeful Bradbury. Ray Bradbury is full of the love of life, which cries out courageously from his two best books, *Dandelion Wine* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. Yet one never would surmise that Bradbury virtue from these two stories. "Zero Hour" is a tale of how parents are betrayed to Martian invaders by those parents' children, corrupted by the Martians. This hints at the famous "generation gap"; but if the intention of the editors was to present a generation gap fable of moral significance, they should have chosen Bradbury's better story "The Veldt."

One might think that what students read in the newspapers, or see at work in their own neighborhoods, might insure that they had already supped full of horrors. The world of *Something Strange* is a world without mercy, faith, hope, charity, purpose, or justice.

Justice? Why, that's provided in the final volume of this series, *Ways of Justice*. "Justice" is nowhere defined by the editors; one gathers than it is scarcely more than an untutored sentiment, though praiseworthy.

The "justice" of this anthology is almost justice without judges. Two selections might please Miss Angela Davis. One of these is Carl Sandburg's "What Is a Judge?" which instructs the reader that a judge is:

a snow-white crow . . . a featherless human biped having bowels, bladders, and intricate blood vessels of the brain. . . . Therefore should any judge open his mouth and speak as though his words are an added light and weight beyond the speech of one man?

The other vial of scorn poured upon judges is Edgar Lee Masters' "Judge Selah Lively"—who was a pillar of severity because he (being five feet two) envied taller men. True, these comminations are balanced by some praise of particular judges. Louis Adamic eulogizes Fiorello La Guardia because he fined the spectators in his courtroom rather than fine an elderly thief; and Dr. Marjorie B. Smiley (senior editor in this Hunter program) prints a kind of poem of her own, lengthy but sufficiently represented by its concluding lines:

A judge is a man
is where he's come from
is what he's done
is
where he aims to go.

This is "Mr. Justice Marshall"—Thurgood, that is, not John, the latter being unmentioned in this volume. For my part, I'd rather not be judged by a magistrate who

"is where he aims to go"; I'd prefer one with knowledge of law.

Like its companion volumes, *Ways of Justice* makes much of injustices against "minorities"—in a fashion that may nurture resentments among some students and rouse reaction in others. The Establishment, one is tempted to conclude, is stupid and insensitive at best—frequently corrupt and evil. Is another Establishment conceivable? If so, on what foundation? The editors do not inform their high school readers.

Levels I and II of the Hunter-Macmillan program are no better than Level III. (Level One, somewhat surprisingly, does include the Polyphemus episode from *The Odyssey*, and the adaptation is attributed to A. J. Church; but if one consults Church's actual prose narration, one discovers that somebody has rewritten Church, for the worse.) In general, Macmillan Gateway emphasizes the "generation gap"—without bridging that chasm by our patrimony of great humane literature, which joins dead and living and those yet unborn.

As Lynch and Evans wrote a dozen years ago:

The conflict between youth and age is a natural condition of man older than Cicero and Bacon, and as necessary as it is natural; contempt enters the relationship when age pretends to be youth. And contempt can transfer itself from apparatus to selection, from selection to teacher, from teacher to subject, from subject to education, from education to the values by which civilized men live. Before the students can grow up, their textbooks must.

Macmillan Gateway English has not grown up. Except for a few cautionary selections—chiefly those in opposition to reckless drivers and junkies—the tendency of this program is to pander to the cult of youth and the fad of "relevance." Students' rebellion, in recent years, against the patronizing chumminess of yesteryear's

English textbooks may be paralleled, already, by as strong a rebellion against the smug "rebel" chumminess of such a series as this. Neither type of textbook offers much for the reason or for the imagination; and youth can abide anything except boredom.

Neither C. S. Lewis nor J. R. R. Tolkien, popular though they are with the rising generation, is represented in these anthologies. Lewis writes that he never understood why some educationists oppose "escape literature" until Tolkien asked him this question: "What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?" The answer is obvious: jailers. It is possible to talk much cant about emancipation, and yet to remain a jailer of intellect and emotion.

So we return to *The Abolition of Man*. "Without the aid of trained emotions," Lewis wrote, "the intellect is powerless against the animal organism." Lewis found that the dryasdust school anthologies he criticized were imprisoning young people in "contemporaneity" and in an arid pseudo-rationalism and in vague sociological generalization. Those manuals did not warm the heart; they did not adequately train emotions (or what Eliot called "sentiments"). It is so with the Macmillan-Hunter program.

"And all the time—such is the tragedy of our situation—we continue to clamor for those very qualities we are rendering impossible," Lewis declares.

You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more "drive," or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or "creativity." In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

Macmillan Gateway English is a program well intended, no doubt, but in effect a program of gelding. What has been excised by the Hunter College crew? Why, great literature. The pupil is left with "approved attitudes"—which, even though disguised as "protest" and "being uniquely oneself," actually constitute a plodding humanitarian orthodoxy. In the main these are anthologies of mediocre writing for mediocre or inferior pupils, got up by mediocre professors and teachers. Shakespeare is excluded from this whole three-level program; perhaps the editors themselves cannot make head or tail of Shakespeare. They leave their young charges adrift in a turbulent age—to be made tolerable, one takes it, merely through sympathizing with one's age-group peers and commiserating with one's self. This is a program of "literature and language arts" deficient in power, aspiration, high thought, noble language, and norms. Though it is "moralizing" in the bad sense of that expression, it has next to no true ethical character. One touch of Shakespeare, say, might have leavened this lump. But there is no yeast in the Project English Curriculum Center at Hunter College. How much more enduring relevance to the human condition, and how much better counsel, one finds in a single speech of Edgar, in *Lear*, than in all these Macmillan-Hunter volumes:

Take heed o' the foul fiend: obey thy parents; keep thy word justly; swear not; commit not with man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud array. . . . Keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend.

There's English literature and language for you; but the Hunter people endeavor to assure that their pupils will hearken to no such speech. The imagination of those students will be nourished by the sociology of Dr. Marjorie B. Smiley, professor of education, and by the deathless lines of Miss

Bobbie Gentry, songstress of the Tallach-
chee Bridge.

Rising disheartened from my examina-
tion of this wearisome program, I went to
some dusty shelves in my library on which
I keep old textbooks. I found there the
sixth-grade reader which I used at Stark-
weather School, in Plymouth, Michigan, in
dear dead days beyond recall: *The Elson
Readers*, Book Six, edited by William H.
Elson and Christine M. Keck (1929). Also
I encountered on those shelves my sister's
copy of *Elson Basic Readers*, Book Five
(1931). There had occurred a decay of
standards in the Elson series even during
those two intervening years. Nevertheless,
my sister's fifth-grade reader was much
superior, in content and in style, to the
present Macmillan Gateway English in-
tended for high school students.

Now the Elson Readers, widely used dur-
ing my schooldays, were not *conspicuously*
good. At Starkweather School we had a
room where older basic manuals, no longer
used in classes, were stored; and on two or
three occasions I had the opportunity to
browse in that storeroom. Even then, my
half-developed critical sense informed me
that the readers of a decade earlier dis-
tinctly had been more lively and more in-
telligent than those of 1929.

How marvellously superior my sixth
grade Elson was to any level of the second-
ary-school Macmillan-Hunter! "The foun-
dation of the book must be the acknowl-
edged masterpieces of American and
British authors," the Elson editors wrote.
My sixth-grade reader was divided into
three parts: "Nature—Home and Coun-
try"; "Stories of Greece and Rome"; and
"Great American Authors." In Part I we
had admirable selections of some length
about "The World of Nature" from The-
odore Roosevelt, Samuel White Baker, Cap-
tain Mayne Reid, John James Audubon,
Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bliss Carman,
James Lane Allen, William Wordsworth,
James Russell Lowell, and other worthies;
and there was another section, "Home and
Country," with essays or stories by Irving,

Dickens, Tennyson, Lanier, Leigh Hunt,
Ruskin ("The King of the Golden River"),
Cardinal Mercier, Lincoln, Browning, and
others.

Part II consisted of long extracts from
the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, all
in the prose of A. J. Church—the writer so
hacked about in the Macmillan-Hunter se-
lection. Part III included several selections
apiece from Benjamin Franklin, William
Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfel-
low, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Greenleaf
Whittier, and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

I am not declaring that the discrimina-
tion of Elson and Keck was impeccable; it
wasn't. Yet a great gulf is fixed between the
Elson people, who did love literature, and
the Hunter people, who do love "research"
at the expense of the Office of Education.
A European scholar of distinction once
inquired of me, "Dr. Kirk, how did you
manage to acquire some genuine schooling
in the United States?" I smiled: "I crossed
the drawbridge just before the portcullis
fell." Only seven years later, when my sis-
ter attended the same school, literary stan-
dards had diminished—and had been dam-
aged more heavily at most other schools,
well before that.

It may be objected that television did the
mischief to American literacy and taste for
good literature. True, the boob-tube has
diminished the imagination, the attention-
span, and the functional literacy of many
young people. Yet the decay of literary in-
struction in American schools commenced
years before most folk ever had beheld a
television set. Certain publishers and too
many teachers abandoned the ethical and
aesthetic purposes of literary study, for the
sake of "awareness" of, and "adjustment"
to, contemporary life; often this dereliction
of English-teaching made schooling smugly
complacent.

Subtly unpleasant things happen to a
people who cast off their literary patrimony
as so much vexatious baggage. There sub-
sists a close connection between the order
of the soul and the order of the common-
wealth, on the one hand, and the received

insights of great men of letters, on the other hand. A people who have forgotten Homer and Plato and Virgil and Dante and Shakespeare and Cervantes and Johnson, and many more—who have forgotten their own Hawthorne and Melville—presently find themselves in personal and social difficulties: for their moral imagination is parched. Immersed in the ephemeral moment, and reading (if they read at all) at best the selections of the Book of the Month Club, such a people fail to apprehend adequately the human condition in the twentieth century, or in any century.

Various empire-builders in the desolated realm of education may retort that Russell Kirk must have attended an “elitist” school—whereas the Macmillan-Hunter program is intended especially for the “culturally deprived.” Nay, not so. Starkweather School was built in the “Lower Town” of Plymouth, literally on the wrong side of the tracks; the neighborhood was a kind of railway ghetto, near the great yards outside Detroit. My schoolmates and I came from families of limited and uncertain means. We had a sprinkling of “minority” children who didn’t know that they were culturally disadvantaged. But all of us were offered a sound literary instruction, and with most of us it took root well enough.

One of the bookworms among us was Philip, a potato-faced Irish boy, who was truant at least a third of the time—running away from home in freight cars, carrying with him an armful of good books from the school library (which he returned dutifully after a week’s peregrinations). Our favorite playground was a marshy triangle called “The Y” at the junction of the lines from Detroit and Toledo; there we played at being Knights of the Table Round. As for me, my father was a locomotive fireman and my parents and I lived in a creaky old house with no bathtub and an outside privy. Everybody took this existence for granted and practically all children liked the school, read competently, and chose good books. The school’s admirable library was open all summer, and we used it. Our teachers

of English literature and language knew their discipline and walked by its light.

“Decadence” is the loss of an object: that is, things fall apart when the purpose of an institution or a way of life has been forgotten. Beyond simple skills of reading and writing, the object of studying literature—poetry, if you will—was to wake the imagination and to bring people to a fuller understanding of the human condition. Like many another textbook series of recent years, Macmillan Gateway English endeavors to substitute vague sentiments for right reason and for the high moral imagination of significant literature. If the teaching of literature is decadent, what wonder that young people had rather watch television’s masters of ceremonies? Perhaps a good many high school students nowadays, not being able to read proficiently, can apprehend no prose more aspiring than what is contained in the Macmillan Gateway program. (Gateway to what?) But in some part, is not functional illiteracy to be laid at the doors of inadequate programs in “literature and language arts”? One doesn’t have to be born to affluent suburban parents to profit from great poetry.

Talk of cultural deprivation! The Hunter College educationists are among the gentry who—doubtless with the kindest of muddled motives—contribute to the impoverishment of reason and imagination. Such a program condemns the teachers to the chore of mere adolescent-sitting (increasingly a career of danger and daring), and condemns the pupils to confinement in the crepuscular little corner of their moment in time. And the federal Office of Education subsidizes this deadly dullness.

Nature abhorring a vacuum, when our minds are deprived of high poetic images, the vacancy will be filled by images of another origin and character. One may distinguish three types of imagination: the moral, the idyllic, the diabolic. (Here I acknowledge my debt to Irving Babbitt and T. S. Eliot.) The moral imagination is informed by the great ethical poets. The idyllic imagination responds to primitiv-

tic fantasies—to the notions of Rousseau, for instance; it roused the radical emotions of young people in the 'sixties, even though they might know Rousseau only at third-hand. The diabolic imagination loves the violent and the perverse; one need not go so far as Sade to find it; it runs through D. H. Lawrence, for one.

So it is no mere coincidence that a time of literary decadence merges into a time of political disorder. When the images of Dante are rejected, the images of LeRoi Jones will be applauded. And, nature imitating art, presently a playwright may look from his window upon a howling revolutionary mob and murmur complacently, "There's my pageant passing!" But in the end, the mob will rend the dramatist too.

In a footnote, Michael Oakeshott remarks the poetic character of politics:

The assimilation of "politics" to practical activity is characteristic (though not exclusively so) of the history of modern Europe, and during the last four centuries it has become increasingly complete. But in ancient Greece (particularly in Athens) "politics" was understood as a "poetic" activity in which speaking (not merely to persuade but chiefly to compose memorable verbal images) was pre-eminent and in which action was for the achievement of "glory" and "greatness"—a view of things which is reflected in the pages of Machiavelli.

The politics of Machiavelli, however, imperfect, must be preferred above the politics of Hitler, of Mao, or of Idi Amin Dada. Unpoetic politics must be politics without imagination—or, at best, illuminated only by the impractical idyllic imagination, to be followed by the grisly diabolic imagination. Imagery lacking, the commonwealth will not know glory of greatness. And the emasculated "literature and language arts" of our day, in this land, leave the rising generation ignorant of the poet's vision of order and splendor. Since somehow we must know the world through images.

Much of the rising generation, perishing for want of vision, finds images of a sort in the pornographic film, the inanities of commercial television, and the "mind-expanding" drug. When this decadence of imagery is sufficiently advanced, all coherence is lost—in the person, in the republic.

A silly high school anthology is a symptom of a much larger decay of imagination; also it is a contributory cause of that affliction. Were it not for the imagination, said Samuel Johnson, a man might be as happy in the arms of a chambermaid as in those of a duchess. Were it not for the imagination, one may add, the life of an ant would be as satisfying as the life of a man. Yet because we human beings are imaginative by nature, we cannot choose to live by the routine of the ant-heap. If deprived of the imagery of virtue, we will seek out the imagery of vice. The triumph of the diabolic imagination, however, soon terminates in personal and social extinction. Therefore, when the corrupting of imagination has proceeded to intolerable lengths, there emerges some grim new morality, very unlike the "New Morality" of license and irresponsibility so much talked about in recent years; and the punishments of the total state substitute, after a fashion, for that control over will and appetite previously exerted by the moral imagination.

That is one reason why I do not believe poetic images to be mere Corinthian ornaments of a society. The conservators and the reformers of society ought to be men of poetic imagery, like Solon, if their labors are to endure. The primary purpose of schools ought to be the seeking of truth through images, not mere "social adjustments." (The memorizing of poems in school, something now almost wholly vanished, actually was no silly exercise, but rather a means of awakening children to the life of spirit.) Yet it seems improbable that the American people will recognize their urgent need for the normative vision of the poet, the real world revealed in images, until the Iliad of our woes is longer still.