Oct 1970, Encounter

LETTERS

Writers & Publishers

If Mr. Matthew Corrigan thinks that the hubristic publisher's editor is a new phenomenon, he may reflect that long after Byron was established as the most eminent (and profitable) of English authors, John Murray took advantage of his residence abroad to cut from his plays, without even seeking his permission, crucial lines which might be thought to offend the orthodox.

However, I do see what Mr. Corrigan means ["Malcolm Lowry, New York Publishing and the New Illiteracy," Encounter, July]. I only doubt if the American author is entirely the blameless victim he believes. Within my limited observation, there seems today a fatal tendency to confide, to seek reassurance from the editor, and often the agent too, about work in progress. I do not think Lowry was exceptional in this; writers do it who live quite gregarious lives. If an editor gets from one of his authors a long synopsis of his new book, a statement of its aims, and several draft chapters, he can hardly be blamed for assuming that his advice is sought, not only on the book's aesthetic in which the author must have lost his way, but on its commercial prospects. He will answer accordingly, and he is not infallible.

Perhaps unintentionally, Mr. Corrigan leaves an impression that publishers are forcing authors to submit unfinished work for scrutiny. I can only say that from the outset of my writing life, I have never given any information whatsoever about any book of mine, even its general subject, till I was ready to start the fair copy; and the fair copy is the only thing I have ever shown. If this has caused inconvenience, no publisher has ever put pressure on me to change my methods. I must take it therefore that if writers find their confidence sapped by editorial comment at a sensitive stage of the work, they have brought it upon themselves.

Mr. Corrigan seems himself to regard a writer's being alone with his creation as a traumatic experience, like being marooned in outer space. He says of Lowry "He was indeed isolated" (yet he had a loyal and perceptive confidante), "he was not a member of an intellectual coterie" (good for him; coterie life is usually a substitution of talk for work). Why must the writer keep grabbing for support, like a learner on a bicycle who dares not trust himself to his own centre of gravity? No one else in the world can know at what fellow human, *semblable et frère*, the work he has conceived is aimed, and he should have more sense than to ask for the information. One novelist I know has certain knowledge that his most successful book, both critically and commercially, would never have been written had he first consulted his English publisher, who on reading the *ms.* begged him earnestly not to do this kind of thing again.

Perhaps more in America than elsewhere, but probably everywhere, writers have compromised their own freedom by failing to accept that the companionship they seek must be bought at the price of solitude. The fellowship of minds, earned by the finished work, is their essential need; and only disaster can result from their sitting down on the way to reach for substitutes.

Cape Town Mary Renault

Tiger's Reply

Miss Kathleen Nott's reply [Encounter, January] to my article "The Dangers of Finding Something Out" is not very helpful. It was not my claim that social scientists should ignore questions of morality and artfulness; and it is simply incorrect for Miss Nott to suggest that "... social scientists don't know or largely ignore ... questions of morals and art." In fact, my argument was just the reverse of this: that social scientists have paid such attention to these very questions of morality and aesthetics or style between communities that they have overlooked some broad similarities which may reflect biological infrastructure of human life. One of these regularities is that humans create moral structures, which are also amenable to classification and analysis. A special characteristic of the human is precisely this propensity to create moralities, to define style, to pursue art. It is splendidly illogical to claim, as Miss Nott does, that the differences between humans and animals is that humans are moral—that in other words morality is a characteristic of the species—and then say this same morality proves we are not animals. Miss Nott suggests we are arguing about the definition of what is human. Not only is that now a supremely boring and anciently repetitive question, it is also a non-question. There is only one human species, and that is that. The real question is: what kinds of behaviour does this species show, what regularities, what divergences are there, and how is this behaviour generated, expressed, and modified.

It is unclear why Miss Nott objects to my effort to suggest that sexual differences in *Homo sapiens* may extend beyond the simple mechanical facts of reproduction. If anything reduces humans to "animals" it is this assertion of the limited and miserable view that we live by bed alone as males and females, and that there are no other real differences of consequence between the sexes. Aside from the empirical fact that in all cultures males and females engage in extensively different careers as people, surely one is entitled to consider the possibility that sexual equality need not rest on the premise that males and females are the same. If we are indeed the moral creatures Miss Nott thinks, then presumably we are capable of treating men and women equally even though we recognise that in certain respects they differ, just as in others they are similar. There is no reason whatever for females to have to compete as men in a male-oriented and dominated world when in fact everything we see around us suggests that most women have children, and yet have some interests in the labour force, in

Nov 1970, Encounter

LETTERS

Publishing & "Illiteracy"

MATTHEW CORRIGAN'S analysis of the New York publishing scene [ENCOUNTER, July] applies equally to publishing throughout the world. Publishers are fumbling to relate "successful" publishing to the technological era in the way Mr Corrigan describes, and in so doing are destroying the fundamentals of creative writing and publishing. As one of the few remaining independent publishers I believe it is our function to publish books of a high literary standard even though they may prove uncommercial; a good publisher should be ahead of trends. I know that often quality will achieve ultimate recognition. For example, two of the authors I publish, discarded by their previous publishers as being "uncommercial" are Anna Kavan and Anais Nin, whose books have now had their due recognition. I could name other examples of unfashionable writers whose worth has eventually been realised. One of the most phenomenal literary "discoveries" of recent years is Hermann Hesse; his first book appeared in 1898 and *Siddhartha* was introduced in England in 1954 by my firm.

I believe instinct and sensitivity to be essential components of a publisher. The paucity and commercialisation of American publishing is such that we have pioneered a number of talented American authors, some of whom have since found publishers there, after a film deal or numerous submissions. Hesse was hawked around the States for more than ten years before the campus vogue confirmed his saleability. The major Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas suffered 26 rejections from American publishers before an imaginative young editor (at William Morrow) had the guts to back his instinct and bought *The Ice Palace*, and was proved right.

It is an indictment of publishing and reviewing when good writers strive in desperation to write commercial fiction, perhaps unaware that this commodity is rapidly moving into obscurity.

PETER OWEN

Peter Owen Ltd.,
London

Student Dissent

IT WOULD have been appropriate to have entered the lists against Mr Nisbet sooner ("Who Killed the Student Revolution?," ENCOUNTER, February), but one's time was occupied, as was that of a significant number of colleagues, in providing the opportunity for dissent's continued non-violent presence on this campus. In the event, Mr Hook came along with his tuppence worth ("The Ideology of Violence," ENCOUNTER, April), so the delay has served to broaden the opportunity.

It seems that Mr Nisbet has failed to comprehend the significance of the continuing disturbances within the universities. No one killed the student revolution; there never was one. Of course, it is hard not to smile at his extended analysis of the "revolutionary" postures of a minority. He appears to be describing a sort of bi-sexual Eton wall game, full of ritualistic writhing and grunting on the part of its specially favoured participants. What Mr Nisbet has failed to do is to comment on the *revolt* which *is* taking place on hundreds of campuses. If nothing else, these serious young people are questioning the role of the university in today's world. They are insisting, and Benda might well have been proud of them, that the academy sponsor a continual, critical (though not necessarily negative) dialogue with its local and national communities.

Now to Mr Hook, whose emphases are even more astonishing. I deplore violence as much as he does. But I acknowledge, as I feel he should, too, what has caused this objectionable ideology to take root. It is, quite simply, the pragmatic conclusion deduced by smaller "interest groups" from the ideology practised on a world-wide scale by their peer "interest group." To the extent the American government is justifying the use of (massive) violence to realise its foreign objectives —and claiming success for it!—so, too, will black power groups, student revolutionaries, etc., to realise their objectives. Don't blame the children, Mr Hook, go for the parents! As for the historical parallel, I doubt that the rebels of 1776 had any more monolithic an opposition to face than do those of today. But that is irrelevant. The point is that each group came to *feel* that the normal, peaceful means of change were closed to them, that they were obliged, therefore, to employ force.

Mr Hook cannot so easily have forgotten the gloomy years between the world wars when the régimes of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Falangist Spain were being consolidated. Does he really believe that it would ill have served university communities in those countries, let alone the public at large, to have sought, by vigorous and public dissent, to prevent those vicious developments? Did he not applaud when in Spain, Unamuno, from his rectorial chair, publicly insisted that to oppose the policy of Franco was altogether within his university's "sphere of competence and authority"? Would that there had been more of his stature then! And now!

T. P. JULIUSBERGER

Department of History,
University of Bridgeport,
Connecticut, U.S.A.

MR JULIUSBERGER trots out some of the most foolish clichés of ritualistic liberalism. The American government used much more violence

Encounter
Letts to Editor

Dec. 1970

The Crisis in Publishing

THERE ARE complex difficulties between publishers and writers which Miss Mary Renault seems rather to write off (October issue) in her comment on Matthew Corrigan's article (July) about Malcolm Lowry. May I give a few personal illustrations? In the case of my own work in progress, because a fearful mess was made in London of one book for various not quite decisive reasons, I insisted that the New York edition of the following novel should be corrected and copy-edited in New York. This gave the excuse for the London publisher to take the mats from the New York publisher and therefore to come out much later than planned since American printers are even slower than those in Britain. Summer publishing is not a bad thing, it seems from experience, in America, as it is in England—probably because of the huge public. There is nothing I can put a finger on in this; it just follows a pattern obscured by a truly unbelievable, perhaps not quite deliberate inefficiency which forms a smoke screen for heaven knows what.

Probably many writers, either from neurosis or lack of confidence, do ask advice from publishers in the middle of work, but my own experiences suggest that it may not be quite so simple as Miss Renault (a writer I much admire) finds it in her own case. Publishers do, more and more, expect to interfere with my own work. This may be so in my case because they seem almost to demand that each new book should sell at least *as* widely as the book that made the breakthrough into success. Obviously this is impossible, but the attitude is taken for granted; it is their right to get a best-seller every time. So it may not by any means be always the author who offers half-finished work for inspection; when I submit a finished draft ready for fair-copying (as Miss Renault apparently also does) it is treated as a rough sketch which the publisher's readers may then, as they think, improve upon. Even if the writer tries to indicate without actually being rude, that this is not to happen (by announcing a prolonged absence from home, for instance or even by putting a note on the title-page that the manuscript remains the author's private property until publication confers copyright) the Publishers go to endless trouble to force their views on the writer.

And I am not talking about things that are the legitimate concern of an editor such as failures of logic, breakdowns of continuity, slackness of characterisation etc. etc. I mean that they pronounce on what sort of book they wanted and were expecting; they point out passages (in my case usually of opinions they don't like which are held widely by foreigners) and even say that these opinions, or whatever, cannot possibly be considered credible. With my last book I received one letter from an editor before the *ms.* was read, that they would do the revising in the office! This was the same editor from whom I had three subsequent letters about the *ms.* in which every single character mentioned was either misnamed or mis-spelled, including my protagonist whose name can hardly be new after three books. This is true, I am not exaggerating. Typescripts are also shown to outsiders; in one case a book (not this one) was sent to a semi-illiterate film agent who suggested in reply that it might be all right if it began differently and ended differently and most of the persons were altered. This letter was actually sent on to me, as advice, and later some officious clerk remarked that I had not yet replied to the agent—which, of course, I never did. This treating of the writer and the work as the property of the Publisher brings up questions of copyright as well as other things, since a *ms.* has no claim to copyright. I can't believe that this sort of crass impudence is only offered to myself.

Nor is this interference confined to one publisher. On my last three books I have received suggested, almost ordered, alterations from both British and American publishers. The curious thing is that the letters containing these editorial suggestions are often confused, ill-written, garbled by typists and hopelessly inaccurate about the contents of the book. So that the loss of confidence caused by such extensive wishes for revision is made up by the obvious thought that the editor knows nothing about writing so one may safely ignore him. This confusion, both of ideas and the writing of them, in letters of editorial suggestion is psychologically interesting. I have noticed it in a number of different editors and it contrasts with perfectly reasonable and well-conceived letters on other subjects from the same people. On the other hand, copy-editors are usually both more competent and more modest, although one did once suggest that "none of them was there" should be corrected to "none of them were there."

Anybody can use advice, everyone makes mistakes; but in my experience the suggestions are frequently useless and mischievous. One can't use them even where a feeling exists that improvement is needed, but they destroy confidence. They are also couched in hectoring and condescending terms which put one's back up anyway. One has become a property.

SINCE I HAVE NEVER submitted an idea or synopsis, with or without some draft chapters, to a publisher, none has ever told me what I ought to write; only what I ought to have written. But this may be because I never talk about work in progress to anyone nor show it to an editor until I have practically finished with it. But editors do because printing costs had recently risen; nowhere did he suggest that cuts would improve the work although any writer has to admit that cuts often do improve work. In this case cuts would have made the book much shorter than its companion volumes.

Some of the revision suggestions are so funny one can hardly believe them: a passage of ex-soldiers using soldiers' slang (without the four-letter words) was castigated as "colloquial, almost slangy". This in the day of Portnoy. Nobody suggested, when the other editor agreed with him, that my soldier's slang was *wrong*; apparently they thought a private would say "Corporal, do you think I should shoot him through the head?" instead of "Shall I knock him off?" The mad thing about this detail is that the editor concerned spent years in the army, and by the way, the incident is a true one and the man actually said *"Soll ich ihn umlegen?"* in real life.

So I don't think Miss Renault has it quite right. Publishers do interfere and they interfere without knowing either about writing fiction or about what will sell. They not only want one writer's books all to fit a pattern, but they have a whole framework of quite incorrect notions of what makes fiction (*a*) good and (*b*) successful; so that the long tale of oft-refused masterpieces is countered by an equally long list of books that would have been ruined if the writer had listened to what the publisher wanted. And they don't even have the decency to admit they were wrong when the book they feared bad turns out a success.

This is only the first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of publishers; a second should really deal with the publisher as artist *manqué*.

X.Y.Z.

THE AUTHOR *is a well-known English novelist, living abroad.*