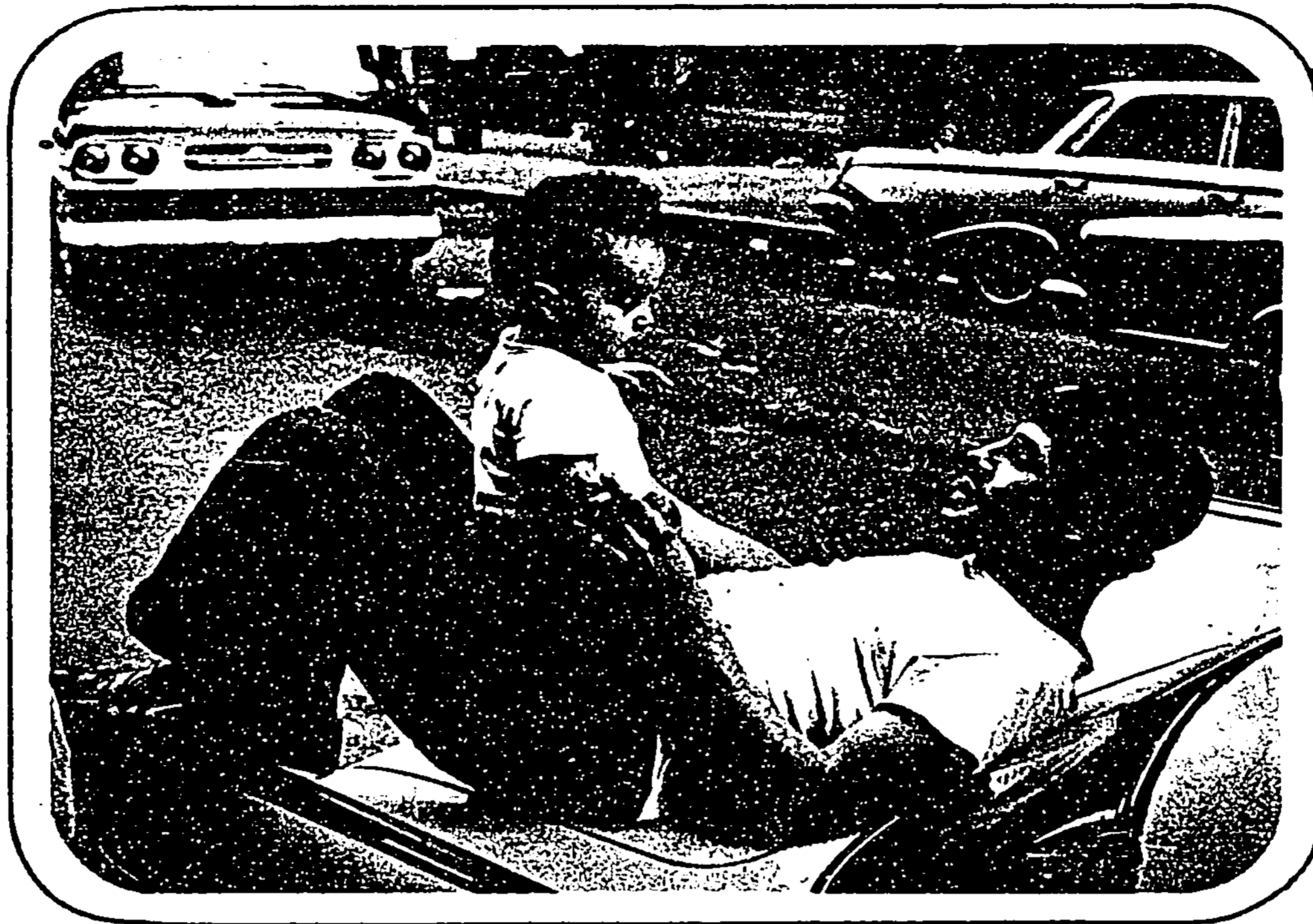


A Question Of Commitment



Because the summer of 1968 promises—or threatens—to be a critical one in American life—prominent novelists and critics were asked to address themselves once more to the old but lively question of “engagement.” Given the current divisions and dilemmas in our country, did they, as individuals or as craftsmen, expect to be spending the summer in any unusual (engaged) way? Participating in demonstrations? Preparing pamphlets? Writing novels of “social consciousness?” Were any of these considerations relevant to their work? If not, why not? A sampling of their sentiments is presented below.

JAMES BALDWIN (“Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone,” “The Fire Next Time,” “Another Country,” etc.):

THE black man’s continuing situation here is not an act of God. It has been willed into existence, and is perpetuated, by men.

Long before the unrest in the ghettos erupted so dramatically, the atmosphere was unmistakably electric with storm warnings. But everyone pretended that the anguish of the American blacks would somehow disappear, or, at least, would never have the effrontery to disturb the public peace. And now, because the perfectly comprehensible rage and pain of an intolerably aggrieved people has reached a level from which it will never recede, and has acquired proportions which make any dissembling or any hope of containment impossible—because, in short, the truth can no longer be ignored—white America appears to be seriously considering the possibilities of mass extermination. . . .

It seems to me that it has been a very long time since the people of this country took any real responsibility for their institutions, or any real responsibility for the people whom they describe as their representatives. Those are the people who

should be told to “cool it.” Among these people—these representatives—are some of the most arrogant and ignorant and dangerous men the world has ever seen. And their objective, by the way, is not the black man, who is, in their view, simply expendable: their objective is the control of this country and the control of the globe. For saying this, I may be dismissed as paranoid. So were those unhappy people (shortly to be reduced to corpses) who saw the real significance of the Reichstag Fire. (We may already have had ours.) . . .

The imagination of most white people in this country appears able, effortlessly, to divest the people in the ghetto of any human reality at all. But, “There are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers,” Ralph Ellison tells us, and I know that we, in this country now, are on the very edge of a steep place.

I have not talked about how this summer is likely to affect my writing life, because all of the summers I have spent in this country—or, for that matter, all of the winters—have been long and hazardous. I’m used to it. I intend to survive the summer because I am working on the screen version of “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” and hope to be shooting it, come the long, hard winter. When that’s done, we’ll see. For me, work is an act of love and an act of faith. And perhaps I hope, by working, to help to save that country for which Thomas Jefferson trembled when he remembered that God was just.

HORTENSE CALISHER (“Journal from Ellipsia,” “Extreme Magic,” “False Entry,” etc.):

I EXPECT to be on an island off the Maine coast. And to be as engagé as in any of the long hot summers when I was a slumworker in the ghettos of Harlem and the lower East Side, or a union election-campaigner (Briggs Local, Detroit, Roosevelt), or a white worker with

black organizations before this became either fashionable or unfashionable, or a cultural export to Southeast Asia from an Administration I didn’t agree with—or a teacher in the Meinhard Settlement, at the age of 16. Summer to winter, petitions to marches, I suppose I’ve committed most of the moderately engaged political acts of the time down to early protests on Vietnam—including a number of letters refused by The Times editorial page. I’ve never run for office; I speak only for myself. Otherwise, name it, I’ve probably done it. Short of jail. A distinction I don’t court—and don’t avoid.

Writing is my jail. Made of my own words and acts. Where I can be as immoderate as I must. And as reasonable as hope dares. But it is

not my island. I’ve never believed that the acts of the pen are committed in any ivory tower—or belong there. I don’t believe that the pen is mightier than the sword—but that maybe in the end, it is equal to it. I believe that except for the direct acts—like giving shelter and food, or making murder—the actions we like to call political are in the end no more powerful than the ideas which move us to them. In June I’m to give a talk on the “politics of art.” I call it “The Constancy of Concern.” This, I’ve come to think, is art’s real province.

I don’t write “political.” Because I never see a novel, story or play, as about only one thing. The Ku Klux Klan section in “False Entry” was the first of its kind, yet the book is not about that alone but about the whole innerness of America—and closer to Twain, or as some said Dickens, than to Camus. If later events of the sixties confirmed its presciences on the Klan, that was no triumph of my imagination, but a failure of life—observed.

So, on my literal island, I’ll be at it. Correcting the 300,000 word galleys of “The New Yorkers”—the novel to appear in the spring. Maybe dramatizing “Textures of Life”—about a young couple engaged in nothing else. And maybe doing a play called “The Girls in the Gym”—who like all of us are getting the world they deserve.

MALCOLM COWLEY (“Exiles Return,” “The Literary Situation,” etc.):

IT is dangerous for a writer not to be “engaged”—of course “enlisted” is closer to the meaning of the French word—at some period



of his life in some cause bigger than himself. Otherwise he is likely to spend his days in a narrow world that centers on his own irritability. I envy Galway Kinnell, who enlisted in the cause of civil liberties, who went to jail in Louisiana, and who came back with a truly visionary poem, "The Last River." But then Kinnell is a special case; he even wrote a good poem about Vietnam, a theme on which many other poets were merely coining metaphors, so that their work makes me think of blood pudding topped with a fancy meringue. I couldn't hope to equal Kinnell in such undertakings, and besides I served my enlistment during the 1930's. Now I have a fantastic lot of work to do and not much time to do it in. For me no demonstrations during this summer of crisis, no pamphlets written (or even read), no novel undertaken to prove my social consciousness. If you don't find me at my desk, look for me in the garden.

LESLIE FIEDLER ("Return of the Vanishing American," "The Last Jew in America," "Love and Death in the American Novel," etc.):

I SHALL be spending my summer in one of two ways. Either I will be pondering and writing about the war of the world against the young, especially with regard to the universities; or else I will be dreaming over and hoping to write something on the last plays of Shakespeare and the closing cantos of Dante's Purgatory. The former project is concerned with where we are and the latter with where we hope to get. There has never been and never will be anything else to write about—just Here and There and the Journey Between. If I get There ahead of the rest it won't break my heart either.

WILLIAM H. GASS ("In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" and "Omensetter's Luck"):

PLAINLY the problems of our country should engage us deeply; they should not be permitted to become mere distractions. We do not serve her; we do not love her well; we do not suffer our understanding of the deep corruption present in both our local and our national life sufficiently; the brutal war we've made in Vietnam, the tyranny we've indifferently allowed to smother Greece, the frightened, vicious war we've waged against so many of our citizens, until their hearts are darker than their skins and nearly as black as our own, or the small wars, bitter as an epic, carried on in families, over mattresses instead of meadows, or the one we fight, lose, and win by dying daily—to contain, refuse, destroy our richer natures and their realization—as mute and motionless through it all as if it took place in our sleep; if we post ourselves to banners, advertise our conscience on the walls, or urge on others into dangers we cannot risk ourselves; for

in so doing, it seems to me, we deny just those interior freedoms and obligations which art is all about, and trade accomplishment for gesture. So I shall work at Yaddo this summer where my heart, if it still has any courage, will make the only noise, and I shall put it, doubtless vainly, to the puzzle of itself and the body it beats in—yours, all strangers, and my own. And if someone replies, out of patience: there is no time, the artist must perform, I can only reply, inadequately, that the time for poetry is always pressing, that I am acting the way I must, doing all I know how to do, and engaging myself in the single pursuit I purely believe has any value. If this is the wrong view, and if very well may be, then I must live with that chance too. Conscience is also material.

MARYA MANNES ("But Will It Sell?" "More in Anger," "Who Owns the Air?" etc.):

IT is hard to see how any writer of feeling and conscience can disengage himself from present events. They now press in at such a point of crisis both here and abroad that the question "What can I—what can I do?" is a daily imperative.

For myself, this summer cannot mean escape, nor will it necessarily involve marching or demonstrating. I believe that what use I have lies in the word rather than in the feet, although I am equally aware that direct personal involvement at a store-front, street, and community level may now be more valuable—and certainly more courageous—than words.

Notwithstanding, I have just finished a novel of "human consciousness" and hope to continue trying to communicate in whatever way I can the urgent need for change within ourselves and in the political, economic, and social framework of our whole society if it is to survive.

JOYCE CAROL OATES ("Garden of Earthly Delights," "With Shuddering Fall," "By the North Gate," etc.):

IT is difficult to imagine any writer who has not been profoundly affected by the social revolution that is taking place in this country. Violence we've had all along, it is certainly part of our history, but violence as normality—as a kind of status quo, predictable enough so that women's fashions might very well be influenced by it—this seems to me something new. I will spend the summer working on a long novel which takes place in Detroit, dealing minutely with Detroit's social realities and hallucinations, beginning in 1937 and ending with the 1967 riot (which I hope won't be known simply as the First Detroit Riot in a series . . . and won't be outdated and made anemic by the impending summer). This is a tough, bizarre city, hardly habitable but immensely crowded, and any writer who has

spent some time here would certainly be obsessed enough by it to try to put its crazy essence into fictional form.

NORMAN PODHORETZ ("Making It" and "Doings and Undoings"):

AS the editor of a monthly magazine dealing in large part with current affairs, I necessarily spend most of my time in an "engaged" way. This summer I hope to sneak off for a few weeks to work on a book about the 1930's—a period which seems to me crucial for the understanding of the present moment. I don't plan to participate in demonstrations; nor do I believe that

events as truth. The more unimportant and popular the writer, the more he is vocal on issues, the more he is on view, strikes attitudes, is partisan on "noble" movements of the hour or day. For me, the only "engagement" or cause a "called" writer can have (as opposed to a public writer) is his own vision and work. It is an irrevocable decision: he can march only in his own parade. On the other hand, how easy it is to be "engaged" in any one of the issues of today (even if the writer hasn't taken the time to understand it or the men behind it), march and testify, expose himself and howl before the



activism is quite the same thing as engagement. There is no question in my mind that writers in America have an enormous influence in the formation of national attitudes and—ultimately—policies. But there is even less question in my mind that they exercise this influence most effectively by writing rather than by demonstrating or involving themselves in other forms of direct political action.

REYNOLDS PRICE ("Love and Work," "A Generous Man," "A Long and Happy Life," etc.):

SPARED, I'd hope to spend the summer of 1968 at work on a book of related stories—some long, some short—called "Permanent Errors" (they being what the stories try to comprehend). I would thus be engaged in what I have a chance of understanding, even achieving—in what would amount to the manufacture of intelligent arms, by the only means possible to me at least ("silence, exile, and cunning").

JAMES PURDY ("Cabot Wright Begins," "Color of Darkness," "Malcolm," etc.):

THIS is an age of exhibitionists, not souls. The press and the public primarily recognize only writers who give them "doctored" current

cameras, rather than face the solitary and gruelling ordeal of telling the one truth it is given him to know and which is his work.

JOHN SIMON ("Private Screenings" and "Acid Test"):

I DON'T know where I shall be this summer, but from wherever I am, I shall do the best my placement and abilities permit to support Eugene McCarthy's campaign. That is about as much direct political action as I find consonant with my critical endeavors. Beyond that, full-time opposition to radical or reactionary excesses in the arts and criticism strikes me as proper and sufficient activity for a critic. And political enough, too in its ultimate implications.

GORE VIDAL ("Myra Breckinridge," "Washington, D.C.," "Julian," etc.):

IT is now plain that none of the world's existing political and economic systems is able to deal with any of the great problems we face today. From over-population to the mindless destruction of natural resources, our (Continued on Page 14)

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society has neither the means nor the will to take action. Brooding in Rome, I am more and more convinced that some sort of absolute Authority must be created to insure human survival.

I am a curiously unpolemical novelist, considering my political interests. Yet even a comic fantasy like "Myra Breckinridge" tends to reflect the common predicament. And so, while pondering whether or not to plunge directly into political action this fall, I am making a film of "Myra," as well as assembling a new volume of essays to be called "Reflections upon a Sinking Ship," written—needless to say—in the hope that with bold planning, the ship may yet proceed upon its way, adequately victualled and not overmanned.

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