

LIFE IN A STEREOTYPE FACTORY

MARTIN MALONEY *

He did not know her name, but he knew that she worked in the Fiction Department. Presumably—since he had sometimes seen her with oily hands and carrying a spanner—she had some mechanical job on one of the novel-writing machines.

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

ONE OF THE great events of my childhood was the discovery of the Free Public Library in the town where I was born. The day I made this great discovery (being about seven at the time), I borrowed and read, in a space of some two hours, a kind of primitive comic book called *The Teenie-Weenies*. In the months following, I discovered *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Iliad*, and Thomas Dixon's novel of the post-bellum South, *The Klansman*. It seems to me now that I anticipated Korzybski's idea of the map-function of language; at least, I seem to have considered all of these documents about equally true to fact, and to have regarded them more or less literally as guides to conduct.

I don't recall that the Teenie-Weenies, amiable creatures that they were, gave me any special trouble. Neither did the Wizard of Oz, except that for some time I kept a Woolworth notebook full of formulas designed to turn one's enemies into frogs. The total failure of these baneful recipes made me skeptical of scientific claims for many years. Homer got me into some minor difficulties; I could not, at the time, make much sense of the Achilles-Briseis episode, but the methods of fighting seemed more ingenious than those I was accustomed to, and I subsequently threw a spear (broomstick) through a neighbor's window (value \$1.65) while trying to destroy an orange crate (Hector).

This was nothing compared to my brief career as an admirer of *The Klansman*. This novel, from which *The Birth of a Nation* was filmed, depicted the male southerner of 1865 as a young, handsome, dashing, courageous, chivalrous fellow, equally ready to toss his heart at the feet of a female southerner, to engage in a genteel scuffle conducted with pistols at 6 a.m., or to join in the midnight lynching of a Negro (a rapist, of course, and pretty apelike to boot). Some of these items I understood only vaguely, and some not at all; but one

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fascinated me. For a long time I nursed a secret wish to conduct a quarrel in the suave southern style. I didn't dare try it on any of my local friends; they weren't suave enough. So I waited.

A southern boy came to town. I figured he would fit the requirements for a male southerner—at least he was young, about nine or so. As soon as we had met and had our first minor disagreement, I insulted him. (This was an essential part of the ritual; I didn't really mean anything offensive.) He was then supposed to bow deeply and hand me his card. I was supposed to bow deeply and accept his card. Then we would both go off and get some seconds. As I say, I insulted him. Then I began my bow. As I did so (I could only imagine, later, that he must have come from a very undistinguished southern family) he hit me in the eye. I came out of the whole affair very badly, and the episode left a permanent mark on me. I have never since challenged anyone to formalized combat of any sort; as late as 1940 I found myself quite immune to the charms of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler in the films.

This was, as far as I can recall, my first experience as a victim of the literary habit of stereotyping. The consumption of stereotypes, however, is not so much my concern here. Except for some additional documentation, I could add little to S. I. Hayakawa's discussion, in an earlier issue of *ETC.*, of stereotypes—those patterns of "widely current misinformation about cannibals, Indians, Negroes, dentists, policemen, mothers-in-law, old maids, college professors, and so on"—as substitutes for observation and thought.¹ I should like instead to give some account of stereotyping from the manufacturer's point of view, as it were, and especially from the point of view of the humble fellow who turns nut No. 168 on assembly No. 10 in the stereotype factory.

HAVING become early and remained constantly a symbol-consumer, I have for a long time been interested in the fabrication of books, plays, short stories, articles, and the like. One of my earliest experiences with the commercial manufacture of stereotypes occurred when I was in college. I had a friend, a year or so younger than I, who had for sometime talked about "being a writer." In his sophomore year, my friend (his name was George Collins) realized that he was aging rapidly and could no longer afford to trifle with the profession of letters. He wrote, in a startlingly short space of time, some fifteen short stories, each one destined for a different magazine. When the manuscripts lay on his desk, each with self-addressed, stamped envelope attached, George told me that he proposed to decide his professional future according to the fate of these stories. If one of them was accepted, he would be an author thenceforward; if not, he would enter a monastery or the college of engineering, whichever would have him.

¹ "Recognizing Stereotypes as Substitutes for Thought," *ETC.*, VIII (Spring 1950), 208-210.

In less than a week the returns began to come in. Mailmen staggered up to George's rooming-house bearing bundles of rejected manuscripts. In ten days he had apparently had twice as many stories rejected as he had sent out; in despair he gave up opening the envelopes or even counting them. He simply carried the envelopes to a drawer, threw them in and slammed the lid.

In two weeks the floodtide of rejections had passed, had dwindled to a trickle and finally stopped altogether, leaving George in a state of despair. A departing engineer had bequeathed him a slide rule, and he spent hours miserably trying to determine what the thing could be used for.

In all this time, he had never considered counting the manuscripts which had been returned, so that he was nearly prostrated when he received from the editor of a pulp magazine called *Air Action Stories* a letter in which was enclosed a check for fifty dollars in payment for the short story he had sent them.

Air Action Stories was a magazine which published exceedingly violent tales of the exploits of American fliers in the first World War. George had been born early in 1919. At the time he started his literary career, he had never flown a plane, been flown in a plane, or seen any sort of aircraft much more dangerous than a Piper Cub.

He was thus a great success at writing stories for *Air Action*, because when he wanted to get some technical detail straight he looked it up in a manual, and when he wanted to know what human beings or human experience in war were like, he read back issues of *Air Action Stories*. Curiosity might eventually have destroyed George; he might, for instance, have made the acquaintance of some military aviators or even joined the Air Force in an excess of enthusiasm. I believe he did eventually learn to fly a plane; but by that time, happily, he was writing historical romances for another magazine. Meanwhile, he rose from height to height, being promoted from short stories to novelettes to "full length novels complete in this issue."

In short, George became a professional writer of fiction, a successful, skillful manufacturer of stereotypes. Not that he particularly wanted or wants to deal in stereotypes; like many professionals, he would like to do what he thinks of as "serious writing." It is quite possible that he may do the trick; he is an able literary craftsman, and he may well command the other personal qualities necessary to be a "serious" writer. But if he does, he will have to gamble a sizeable sum in time, money, and skill—and perhaps his completed manuscript will never appear in print. Most writers discover that they cannot afford to do anything but piecework in the stereotype factory, whatever they like or think they would like to do.

THIS SITUATION bothers George, as it bothers most professional writers I have known. He has tried, but not very seriously or successfully, the two standard strategies for resolving the problem. He has tried to regard his published writ-

ings as "serious," commenting on the skill required to produce them, the great number of people they entertain, their status as a modern folk art, and so forth.² He has also tried to insert, as unobtrusively as possible, "good bits" of writing into otherwise commercial performances, and to mislead editors into publishing stories he himself could regard as "serious." George is, however, too shrewd a man to be able to take either of these rationalizations seriously, although he sometimes uses them ironically. I remember, for example, his story of the conversation he had with the fiction editor of a leading slick magazine. George had, at the time, long since graduated from the pulps and had made something of a splash in the world of the large-circulation journals. He was thus able to confer with the fiction editor of *The Friday Night Review*³ about the needs of that magazine.

"We'll be glad to publish some of your stories," said the fiction editor enthusiastically. "And I want to tell you right now that we have no formulas, no taboos, practically no editorial policies at the *Review*. All we want are good stories. Look at our back issues. In the past six months we've handled themes like rape, homosexuality, the race problem, and religion. There's practically *nothing* we won't touch. Now I'll bet"—and here he smiled confidentially at George—"I'll bet you've got a story up your sleeve. A good story. One you always wanted to write. Only you thought nobody would touch it. Now haven't you?"

"As a matter of fact," said George, "I have."

"Good!" said the editor. "What's it about?"

"Well," George said. "It's about a labor leader."

After a time the color came back into the editor's face. A few seconds more (he was a resilient sort of man), and his eyes began to sparkle. Then he spoke.

"Why, yes," he said. "For a minute I didn't get it. But I can see it all now. There's this venal, scheming, un-American union boss, a John L. Lewis type. He has this beautiful daughter who sticks with her father out of pure loyalty. The hero of the story is this young, handsome, upstanding fellow, the son of the president of the Gimmick Corporation, who is really interested in the welfare of the workers and wants to start this company union. That's what you had in mind, wasn't it?"

"All right," said George. "Tell your bodyguards to get their hands off me. That's what I had in mind."

When I last heard from him, George was still producing several thousand dollars' worth of formula stories per year. He was still working at and/or talking

² For a good example of this strategy, see Lennox Grey, "Communication and the Arts," in Lyman Bryson (ed.), *The Communication of Ideas* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948).

³ Not *The Saturday Evening Post*, incidentally. This incident *might* have happened in the offices of any American magazine intended for family reading, with a circulation in the millions and about 60% of its space devoted to advertisements for consumer goods.

about his "serious" book. This book has not yet appeared. If it appears, I plan to buy a copy, and I hope it contains all the things George knows about the world and people that will never be printed in the pages of *The Friday Night Review*. In that case, George's book will be well worth the price of admission; for the difference between the stereotypes of popular fiction and what almost any competent writer knows is vast indeed.

I hope that the general nature of stereotyping as we have been discussing it is fairly clear. The term "stereotype" refers to a pattern which is used to produce near-identical copies of any sort of statement. Stereotyping in radio, television, film, drama, and fiction applies not only to character types (the Scot who is always stingy, the Negro who favors dice, watermelon, and a straight razor), but to situations, locales, and other aspects of the play or story.

WRITERS of course man the assembly lines of the stereotype factory; but they frequently try to shift the moral responsibility for their sins to the editor. After all, they themselves are not free agents, they are obliged to sell what they write, and so on. But the editor himself is commonly in no better position, for he finds himself at the mercy of two monsters of heraldic grotesqueness, respectively labelled The Advertiser and The Audience.⁴

The Advertiser is likely to set both positive and negative stereotypes, or at least the editors believe that He does. (Actually, an editor's normal contact with The Advertiser is *via* the sales staff of his magazine or network—not always a reliable connection.) The Advertiser determines certain things which may not be said in stories: (1) implicit or explicit criticisms of the American Way of Life; (2) any sort of statement which might tend to discourage the consumption of goods;⁵ (3) any sort of statement derogatory to an advertiser's specific

⁴ These two monsters plague magazine editors and radio and television people in particular. Motion picture makers are of course free of advertisers, but are traditionally plagued by bankers, the Johnston Office, the Legion of Decency, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League, and the Congress of the United States. Book publishers have their own brand of winged snakes.

⁵ On the positive side, stereotypes are developed (see below) to encourage the extensive consumption of goods. I am reminded here of the current tendency in advertising to allege (as a virtue) that certain goods have so little effect that one may consume them in vast quantities without personal damage. Thus, Sano cigarette advertising cites the case of a young man who, because he was "smoking too much," took to Sanos. Now he smokes just as much, but since Sanos contain no nicotine, no tobacco, and perhaps no smoke, he is not troubled by his indulgence. I wonder if the same sort of "logic" has not crept into certain stereotypes. The following statement appears in *The Lone Ranger: Standards and Backgrounds*, a pamphlet published by the Trendle-Campbell Corporation for the benefit of prospective writers of "Lone Ranger" scripts: "*Brutality, Gore and Sex*. The relationship of the sexes in the stories is kept wholesome. The Lone Ranger has no love interest." This curious equating of "wholesomeness" with simple lack of activity probably has some precedent in the Puritan tradition; but it also seems fairly typical of a current tendency to reduce all human experience to something as near zero as possible.

product, or even the kind of product which he manufactures. At least one national magazine has a standing rule regarding automobile accidents (fictitious variety). It is all right to have an automobile wreck in a story, but the accident must be clearly shown to be due to human negligence, and never to any mechanical failure. (There is, so far as I know, no Advertiser who is concerned to cover up the mechanical failures of human beings.)

On the positive side, The Advertiser probably has an indirect influence on the general content of stories, at least of those with a contemporary scene. David Riesman remarks that "the topics dealt with in modern fiction are . . . increasingly drawn from interpersonal problems in the consumption sphere."⁶ If we were to make a profile of short stories published in American slick magazines in the current month, we should probably come up with these characteristics: (1) the "typical" protagonist would be a woman, aged somewhere from 18-35; (2) she would probably be married or at least concerned with getting married; (3) economically speaking, she would be a member of the middle class; (4) otherwise she would be shown as white, native American of Anglo-Saxon stock, non-religious or Protestant; (5) her husband or prospective husband would be a business man; (6) her problem would turn around a threat to the "normal" and desirable way of life, i.e., domestic happiness or at least content, which involves a considerable leisure and a large use of mass-produced consumer goods.

THIS PATTERN is probably dictated only indirectly by The Advertiser. A likely line of influence is this: (1) women in the United States represent the largest group of buyers of goods; (2) therefore, advertising can most effectively be directed at them; (3) therefore, such vehicles of advertising as radio, television and magazines must in general be slanted toward women; (4) therefore, we have a great number of specific "women's magazines" and "women's programs," while most "general magazines" and "general programs" are directed largely toward women in their role as consumers; (5) hence, the development of suitable stereotypes to complete this chain.

The monster of The Audience I have discussed elsewhere.⁷ However, this much may be said about the relations of editors with The Audience. In any medium of popular art, the sheer number of favorable responses that a given work receives is important. The advertising rates of any magazine depend on circulation. Advertising rates in radio and television depend on the relative size of The Audience for a given station, a given time of day, a given program. The measure of a motion picture is, in practice, its gross. Publishing a single issue of a magazine, producing a motion picture, getting a new radio or tele-

⁶ David Riesman, et al., *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 171.

⁷ Martin Maloney, "The Unknown God: Notes on the Demonology of American Broadcasting." *ETC.*, IX (Winter 1952), 94-102.

vision program on the air—each of these, as a business venture, is a gamble and a very expensive one. Should anyone be surprised then, that editors, angels, producers, publishers, and all their clan imitate the (financially) successful plays, stories, songs of the past rather than striking out in new directions? That, inasmuch as they don't know and don't dare find out very much about the infinite variety of tastes and preferences that characterize consumers of the popular arts, they develop a monstrous, over-simplified, and heavily vulgarized image of The Audience (an image of their own anxieties rather than their customers' preferences) and cut their stereotypes to fit the image?⁸

THUS the taboos of the trade—that crime does not pay, that suicide is never justifiable, that "controversial topics" (including, by definition, any topic important enough to discuss on which two opinions may be held) must never be touched on directly lest someone disagree with what is said.⁹ Thus too the positive stereotypes of action: that murder will out, that *amor vincit omnia* (provided it is a romantic, idealized version of *amor* existing between two unmarried persons of opposite sexes), that any woman past fifty who has undergone the experience of child-bearing or any doctor old enough to be unable to practice his profession safely is qualified to solve, off-the-cuff, all personal or group problems ranging from the prospect of world war through cancer to un-

⁸ This process is neither simple nor naive. For example, "Books are now receiving the Hopkins Televoter treatment previously devised for movies. Albert Sindlinger has a New Entertainment Workshop based on his experience as a Gallup Poll vice-president. An author's manuscript is boiled down to a one-hour reading which is recorded and played to various segments of the population across the continent. They, in turn, record their impression (swell, so-so, bad) by a flick of the wrist, and a gadget pumps their responses together and digests them. 'People who scoff at poll-taking,' says Sindlinger, 'are scoffing at democracy.'" H. M. McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1951), p. 24.

⁹ There seems to be a common assumption, among broadcasting tycoons at least, that a *dramatic* statement of a controversial topic is perfectly irresistible to The Audience. Thus, two of the major radio networks in 1936 refused to allow the Republicans to buy time on the air for documentary campaign programs. The stated reason was that "the turn of national issues might well depend on the skill of warring dramatists rather than on the merits of the issues debated," since The Audience—chronically unable to resist drama—would of course be defenseless before these Shakespearean blandishments. (Quoted material from a pamphlet, *Political Broadcasts*, issued by the Columbia Broadcasting System, as reported in Eric Barnouw, *Handbook of Radio Writing* [Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1947] pp. 152-153.) Some time later, when the Taft-Hartley bill was before Congress, the A.F. of L took something like an hour and a half of time on the American Broadcasting Company network to oppose the measure with song, drama, testimonials, and oratory. I do not know how the bill was passed. I like to think that Senator Taft caused his colleagues' ears to be stopped with wax and himself lashed to his desk in the Senate, while he listened to the impassioned strains. Or possibly the Congress enjoys an immunity to drama too.

requited love. So also the stereotypes of character: the racial ones, the national ones, the occupational ones, private eyes and German *Unterseeboot* commanders who cannot ask for the salt at table without clicking their heels and howling "Achtung!"¹⁰ and comical Negroes who stooge perpetually for the white characters who appear opposite them.

For it is easy to ascertain (through the sales office) that The Advertiser does not object, however sensitive He may be, to such statements as these about the nature of the world and man. And it is well known that such statements excite, interest, and can be understood by that minimal abstraction of humanity, The Audience.

How do writers fit into this picture? If indeed editorial pressures are as overwhelmingly in favor of stereotyping as we have indicated, can a writer do anything but stereotype his work? Let us examine some of the possibilities.

Here is the beginning of an example: "On an exceptionally hot evening early in July a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. bridge." So Fyodor Dostoyevsky introduces the student Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. In the several hundred pages which follow Dostoyevsky develops a set of elaborate, complicated, highly sophisticated maps which give the reader a profound impression of partaking of the experiences of a living man.

Now we cannot even say of *Crime and Punishment*, "This is fiction, not fact." By common agreement at least, there has always been a substratum of truth in the lies of poets; and in the present year of grace, with its documented novels and fictionized biographies, one is hard put to it to distinguish fact from fiction.

This however we can say. Drama and fiction are inextricably bound up with human behavior. It is impossible to think of a dramatic action which does not deal with some kind of human behavior; indeed, even when—as in the documentary radio script—a dramatic statement deals with abstract forces or with

¹⁰ I cannot forbear quoting, in this connection, one of my favorite passages in the literature of radio. As a matter of professional courtesy, I shall not credit the author. The script was allegedly intended to persuade citizens to contribute blood to the Red Cross. In one scene, a group of Marines are moving across a battlefield. They hear a call of "Corpsman!" One of them, Wiley by name, exposes himself to locate the (presumably) injured American. At this juncture:

SOUND: OFF—SUDDEN LOUD SOUND OF SHOT.

VOICE III (OFF: YELLS) (CHINESE ACCENT) You stupid American!

How you like our gunfire?

One of the Marines, correctly evaluating the situation, says, "It was a dirty Commie trick!" The scene ends as the Marines, naturally, wipe out their treacherous opponents, one of them stating as he does so, "This one's for you, Wiley! This (SOBS) one's for you!"

I suppose it would not be correct to say that this drama was responsible for the small success of the blood drive; but it must have helped.

great masses of people, these forces must be personified and individualized.

The characters in a play or story we might then regard as imitations, or reflections, of living beings. To a certain extent this concept would be accurate, for fictional characters would be quite inconceivable if the writer had no experience of human models. Yet it is a mistake to conceive of the characters in a play as having a direct and immediate connection with living models, as a photograph has with its subject.

Where then is a "model" for Raskolnikov? We learn immediately that he is a Russian and, a few pages later, that he is a student; shortly thereafter we watch him commit a singularly brutal and horrible murder. While we may know perfectly well "what Russians are like," Raskolnikov does not fit the preconception, any more than he fits our notion of a student, or even of a murderer. His model, or referent, is thus not to be found in the "mind" of the reader; for Raskolnikov is something quite new and somewhat disturbing to that "mind."

Is this, then, a portrait of a living man? Are we to connect this verbal description with a particular living person? If we could do so, it would be remarkable indeed. Thomas Wolfe once said, "Dr. Johnson . . . remarked that a man might turn over half the volumes in his library to make a single book, and . . . in a similar way, a novelist might turn over half the characters in his native town to make a single figure for his novel." And again, "It is impossible for a man who has the stuff of creation in him to make a literal transcription of his own experiences. Everything in a work of art is changed and transfigured by the personality of the artist."¹¹

From these remarks we can draw our answer to the question which we raised a moment ago. The referent for Raskolnikov is not directly in life, and it is not in the reader's "mind." Raskolnikov has his origin in the personality of Dostoyevsky, under the stimulus of his observations of human beings and the world they live in.

THE INVENTION of character is one of the creative writer's greatest achievements. His serious function, in the long run, is to say new and important things about human beings (or to restate old and important things), his method being to seem to present men and women in their habit, as they lived. The referent for his characters is in himself; it is his perception of humanity that he publishes, in his characters and their actions, to the world.

Only the very rare writer is genuinely original in the sense described above. To a greater or less extent, most writers of fiction tend to substitute imitations of other fictions for statements about their own extensional knowledge of the world and its people. To the extent that they do this, from whatever motive, they are perpetuating stereotypes.

¹¹ *The Story of a Novel*, in *The Portable Thomas Wolfe* (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 572.

Why do writers stereotype? If we were to ask the authors of, say, any six stories published in this month's magazines, they would probably tell us that you have to write to formula if you want to sell. (Of course, there remains the evident fact that the few writers who become exceedingly successful are those who have developed fairly original characters, situations, and themes. But most writers, modest fellows that they are, will not gamble on the long chance that they might turn out to be as good as Faulkner, Hemingway, or even Maugham. It is a much simpler matter to imitate Hemingway than to try to be Hemingway.) Besides, most commercial writers live on a piecemeal basis; pulp writers rarely receive more than two or three cents a word, a half-hour radio script can be sold for an average of two hundred dollars and a television script for four or five hundred, and so on. To make a steady living, most commercial writers must turn out anything from a sizeable to an enormous amount of saleable work per year, and in consequence they are likely to make use of all the technical shortcuts they know. The stereotyping of character, dialogue, situations, and story lines is fast and relatively painless—to the writer. It is sometimes not so painless to the person who has had to live within the limitations of a popular stereotype.

I remember, some time ago, being introduced to a Mr. Cassius, a soft-spoken, anonymous-looking, middle-aged man. We had indulged in a little phatic communion and were about to part when I happened to remark that I sometimes wrote for the radio. At this, Mr. Cassius became interested. His eyes glittered.

"Ever write detective stories?" he asked.

I said that I had not.

"That's good," he said, with a kind of sinister if obscure emphasis. I was glad, later, that I was not the author of "Mr. and Mrs. North," or some similar fable, for it appeared that Mr. Cassius was a private detective. He had been for more than twenty years an employee of one of the larger agencies; and his favorite daydream was to catch an author of any sort of material about "private eyes" in some sort of spectacular peccadillo and see him imprisoned for life, preferably in Alcatraz.

The chain of events which resulted in Mr. Cassius' annoyance is an interesting one, which we may describe in simplified form here. Our story might begin with Dashiell Hammett who, with the founding of *Black Mask Magazine* a quarter-century ago, had an opportunity to write a new kind of detective story. Hammett was well qualified to write about the private detectives, the official police, and the criminals of the nineteen-twenties. He himself had been a private detective, and he had seen, talked to, talked about, and worked with, some dozens and hundreds of others. In the course of his professional work, he of course picked up a considerable practical knowledge of criminals. As everyone knows, Hammett wrote a number of short stories and books, all of them competently written and some of them brilliantly done, in which private detectives appear as characters.

But now comes a person to whom we shall tactfully refer as Writer B, who also wishes to write about private detectives. But he has never been one nor seen one. So he writes a more-or-less skillful but basically sterile imitation of Hammett's statement of what private detectives are like.

Come now Writers C, D, E, F, and G, who want to repeat this operation. Some of them exhibit superior literary taste by imitating Hammett directly, whereas others imitate his imitators.

As this process continues, the fictitious "private eye" departs further and further from the complex fact of the individual Mr. Cassius. The process works along the lines of that old parlor game in which you whisper to your neighbor, "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plains," and he repeats the sentence to his neighbor, and he to the next, so that the statement comes out, after half-a-dozen exchanges, as "Susie sells sea shells." Except as writers, somewhere along their line of development, go and look at the extensional phenomena they are talking about, the development of any stereotype involves structural distortion. So the "private eye" becomes a literary convention. He appears in the pulp magazines, the slick magazines, in books, in motion pictures, on the stage, on radio and television. John Crosby's summary of the radio crop of several years ago is still generally accurate. "The naturalist school of murder is presided over by Sam Spade, Nick Charles, and the Fat Man (all of which are, more or less, Hammett creations). In these everybody is studiously indifferent to bloodshed, and the private dick is a very tough cookie indeed, who can break a man's wrist without a quiver of distaste. He also like blondes, and may have a different one in each episode. There are half a dozen of them on the air now, all alike as two paper clips, and the public can't seem to get enough."¹²

TO RETURN to Mr. Cassius. When he had finally expressed himself, at considerable length, on the subject of detective fiction, he fell to talking about the realities of criminal investigation and remarked, quaintly enough, that criminal behavior depended on a man's occupation.

"Once you know a guy's job," he said, "you can pretty well tell how he'll go wrong, if he does. Bank tellers are suckers for embezzlement. So are accountants. But they don't commit robberies."

I was interested in this rather special abstraction of human motives. "What about teachers?" I asked him.

"Them? They're like preachers," said Mr. Cassius. "Petty larceny and sex crimes, that's all."

All stereotypes involve a degree of distortion, and for that reason, none can be considered harmless. Some are, of course, more troublesome than others. Writers tend to stereotype individuals according to profession, for example. Truck drivers, opera singers, teachers, priests and ministers, industrial tycoons—

¹² "Radio and Who Makes It," *The Atlantic Monthly* (January 1948) p. 7.

all have fairly well defined stereotypes, most of which are annoying, few of which are actually dangerous.

Less happily, we also stereotype familial roles. Certain performances are set by stereotype for wives, husbands, children, mothers-in-law, grandparents, and so on, in various situations; since these stereotypes are shaped to dramatic ends, their distortions are unwholesome indeed. That is to say: fictions of any sort deal with conflict; it is exceedingly difficult to write fictions about characters who are happy, well-adjusted, etc.; consequently, the most useful dramatic stereotypes perpetuate misvaluations, conflict situations, and so on. We do not, as a matter of fact, develop stereotypes of non-possessive wives, non-jealous husbands, non-interfering mothers-in-law; of what use would they be to a writer? And is it not commonplace to observe that "nature" imitates art, even when the "art" perpetuates a false vision of the world? that Scotsmen perhaps become stingy and mothers-in-law learn to interfere, as the appropriate stereotypes are more widely diffused?¹³

Stereotyping according to "race" and national background is, of course, quite familiar to us all. There is the "good" Italian who owns a pushcart and says things like, "Cospetto! Santa Maria! No pincha da banan'!" And the bad Italian who is slim, pale, murderous, and says very little indeed. There is the amorous Frenchman, the pig-headed, methodical German, the wise and devious Chinese . . . but the list is endless.

I should point out here that a writer can and should interest himself legitimately in the stereotypes of character. Anybody who has paid much attention to human beings knows that the personalities of living men are shaped to some extent by the groups with which they identify themselves. Take any man and let him follow the profession of banking for twenty years, and you will inevitably influence his character, for better or for worse. Substitute plumbing, teaching, or playing the violin, and you will undeniably change the resultant person. The same observation applies to all kinds of group membership, including national and "racial" ones. The notion of "race" as commonly held may be quite meaningless to a biologist, and yet have a psychological and social reality which is astounding.¹⁴ A writer may study the effects of classifications upon people who accept them as self-descriptions. He may also use classifications himself, for the classification of human beings is a pre-requisite to studying them. But he must treat his own classifications of people with profound suspicion; he must insist on believing in the uniqueness of each separate human being.

¹³ See, in this connection, Robert K. Merton, "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," in *The Antioch Review*, Summer 1948.

¹⁴ This is the theme of Laura Hobson's novel, *Gentlemen's Agreement*, in which a "gentile" writer, for the sake of a magazine assignment, lets it be known that he is a "Jew." The result is that socially—and almost psychologically—he becomes a "Jew." See also Sinclair Lewis' *Kingsblood Royal* for a similar handling of this idea.

Now let us put our question once more: why do writers stereotype? It is not easy to do honest characterization. Relatively few writers are capable of it. On the other hand, there is an enormous demand for written material, which the relatively few writers would be hard put to it to satisfy. Hence, the remarkable modern phenomenon of the mechanic-writer, the wrench-turner in the stereotype factory. The stereotypes save him from having to know much, and they assure him of being understood, in a limited way. It is far easier to learn a few, simple, verbal "character traits" which enable you to write a funny Negro maid into your script or story, than it is to go forth and make the strange and difficult discovery that any given Negro woman is as individual and complex a creature as you yourself.

There has been a great deal of pother, among writers and people interested in writing, about certain special stereotypes, specifically those dealing with "minority groups." Several writers' organizations—notably the Authors' League of America and the Radio and Television Writers' Guild—have in late years been most vehement in their insistence that such stereotypes be abandoned. Some magazine and radio editors take the same line. It appears to me that, while such activities demonstrate the social conscience and general good will of the groups and persons involved, they are practically rather pointless. If the comic Negro, the Rochester, the Beulah, were done away with in the popular arts, we should only have two alternatives: either to substitute other stereotypes, or not to talk about Negroes.¹⁵

I am very well aware that the statement I shall now make is idealistic and impractical. The only reason I can make it at all is the reason which has, in Western history since the Greeks, kept creative writing a free and fruitful means of expression. The reason is this: it doesn't cost much to write. You can do it with the stub of a pencil and a piece of wrapping paper. You can even do it with a burnt stick and a chunk of bark. You don't need an image orthicon camera, a document from F.C.C., a thousand rolls of newsprint, or a million dollars in cash or credit. As a result, creative writing can and probably will continue to be flexible. It is still possible to write what you want to write.

Hence, my conclusion: It is not enough now to exhort writers to abandon their most obvious stereotypes. What we sadly need are writers of such originality and insight that their own vision is not limited by the verbal stereo-

¹⁵ A case in point here was the radio series, "Destination Freedom," as originally sponsored by Station WMAQ (Chicago) and a Negro newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*. These programs were chiefly dramatic biographies of Negroes; they were written by Richard Durham, who is himself Negro. Despite the real eloquence of many of these scripts, they provide an interesting example of stereotyping in reverse. The black-white, in-group vs. out-group classifications were never for a moment questioned; only the evaluations were reversed. Yet I am sure that the sponsors and author of these programs would join in objecting to the Beulahs and Rochesters of the air-waves because they are stereotypes and false to fact.

types which they unconsciously accept—writers who see the earth and its cities as freshly and cleanly as if they had been born yesterday, and had nothing to unlearn—writers who can make for us a fresh and accurate statement of *their own*, and not someone else's, evaluations. Such freshness of vision we call, in general semantics, "extensionality."

Good writers, like good scientists, are those who have never lost, in spite of popular stereotypes, their capacity for personal vision and observation. That such writers will be forthcoming, I do not doubt. There may not be very many of them, and their coming may not be heralded either by the Book of the Month Club or New Directions. But they will appear. At least, they always have.

There are certain terms that have a peculiar property. Ostensibly, they mark off specific concepts, concepts that lay claim to a rigorously objective validity. In practice, they label vague terrains of thought that shift or narrow or widen with the point of view of who so makes use of them, embracing within their gamut of significance conceptions that not only do not harmonize but are in part contradictory. . . . Thus, what is 'crime' to one man is 'nobility' to another, yet both are agreed that crime, whatever it is, is an undesirable category, that nobility, whatever it is, is an estimable one. In the same way, such a term as art may be made to mean divers things, but whatever it means, the term itself demands respectful attention and calls forth, normally, a pleasantly polished state of mind, an expectation of lofty satisfactions. If the particular conception of art is distasteful to us, we do not express our dissatisfaction by saying, 'Then I don't like art'. . . . Ordinarily we get around the difficulty by saying, 'But that's not art' . . . We disagree on the value of things and the relations of things, but often enough we agree on the particular value of a label. It is only when the question arises of just where to put the label, that trouble begins. These labels — perhaps we had better call them *empty thrones* — *are enemies of mankind*, yet we have no recourse but to make peace with them. We do this by seating our favorite pretenders. The rival pretenders war to the death; the thrones to which they aspire remain serenely splendid in gold. EDWARD SAPIR, 'Culture, Genuine and Spurious,' in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*.