

# Our Artists Have Turned Their Backs

By Archibald MacLeish

Archibald MacLeish, poet, professor and one-time Assistant Secretary of State, himself epitomizes the ideal of the man of letters who is also a man of affairs. Yet in his travels he has found that one of the great barriers to our much-sought international friendships is the widespread impression abroad of ours as a purely "materialistic" society, in which the artist and writer are second-class citizens. In this article, adapted from the current issue of "The Atlantic," he lays much of the blame for this impression at the door of the artistic community itself.

**T**HOUGH the possibility for artists and writers to work in America can be demonstrated by their work itself, it is not so obviously



self-evident that they have a place in American life. Seen from across the oceans in either direction, our writers appear to live in a kind of domestic exile. They are

noticed in the news columns when they die or when they distinguish themselves in some artistically irrelevant way such as selling a novel to the movies for more than the last novel brought, or marrying for the seventh time, but their opinions on questions of public concern are not recorded. There are, that is to say, no American Goethes. There is not even an American Sartre. There are merely—or so it looks from overseas—a number of more or less isolated individuals living quite out of the stream of American life while the great Republic speaks of itself to the world through its bankers and oilmen and corporation lawyers and generals.

Our friends abroad, needless to say, are well aware of the competence of those bankers and oilmen and generals. They do, however, find it both relevant and interesting that the most audible and authoritative voices in a Republic which once expressed itself through Whitman and Emerson should now be the voices of American men of business, and that the American people should see nothing odd in this situation.

The European mind, which once observed that war is too serious an affair to be left to the generals, still believes that life is too important a business to be left to the businessmen. It still believes that great societies find their voices in their arts.

And our friends abroad could hardly help noticing that American artists and American writers were among the principal targets of McCarthyism. They noticed too that even when McCarthy was belatedly censured there was no expression of public sympathy for these particular victims and no demand that the ugly nonsense end.

**S**OME of our fellow citizens, though holding no brief for McCarthyism, resent the conclusions drawn by Europeans from these facts.

Writers and artists, they point out, are notorious political innocents swinging wildly from one extreme to the other, like Malraux, or canting and recanting, like Picasso. If the opinions of such people are not highly regarded in the United States, they have themselves to thank.

The question with us, however, is not whether writers and artists change their minds. The question is whether the rest of the world is justified in regarding us as a materialistic people among whom artists and writers lead a second-class life or live in virtual exile. If it is, we can hardly regain its respect by arguing that we treat our writers and our artists as we do because they are political idiots. It is we who are on trial, not they. They are the witnesses.

It is my personal belief that most of them, given the opportunity, would deny that American materialism, which is real enough and overreal, has yet reached the point of saturation at which the arts are in danger. They would even deny that their miseries under McCarthyism were and are wholly the consequence of a public indifference. On the contrary, many would willingly admit—and this would be the most telling aspect of their evidence—that the in-



In art, isolation

difference was in large part theirs. They would not merely admit it; indeed, they would boast of it.

There are still American artists and writers to whom the political world is part of the world the arts can know. But enough would express themselves in these terms to make it fairly evident that the so-called "isolation of the American artist" of which our friends in Europe are so fond of talking is an isolation quite as much by choice as by necessity. The "political art" of the thirties is as unpopular in artistic circles as it is among the politicians. And it is unpopular not for political but for aesthetic reasons. It is not that its artist was then a Communist or a Social Credit man or a clerical fascist or a New Dealer; it is simply that he proved himself aesthetically unreliable. He violated the American mystique. He was not a pure artist. He was a political man.

What the dogmas of the current American aesthetic are is not perhaps as certain as it might be. None of the numerous critics who accept them have spelled them out

in detail. But the fundamental position is nevertheless reasonably clear. The American aesthetic rests, as so many modern aesthetics have rested before it, on the old dichotomy between life and art. It does not go as far as the London aesthetic of the nineties which made of art, in the angry phrase with which Yeats turned his back on it, a "terrible goddess" to whom life must be sacrificed, but it goes far enough to make of art a minor divinity which must have no traffic with one entire aspect of life.

One of its explicators, for example, informed his hearers on a most solemn occasion that the temptation most dangerous to the artist—the temptation the artist most should fear—is the temptation of public duty. Another, the editor of one of the principal organs of the American aesthetic, explained patiently to the Negro author of a brilliant first novel about American Negro life that a novel about American Negro life written by an American Negro cannot be a work of art because it must necessarily be a novel of "protest." Nor did he shrink from the logical conclusion that American Negroes are thus foreclosed from writing novels that can be works of art at all.

**T**HE dogmas behind these various pronouncements may be vague, but what they add up to in the way of aesthetic doctrine is clear enough. What they add up to is a rejection, in the name of aesthetic value, of the old human dream of a possible reconciliation between the outward world of event and the inward world of conception through the act of art; the old dream that art may interpret the inward world to the outward and eventually make the outward world habitable for the creature within; the dream which every statue of the great age of Greece expressed and which some of them may, in their now unknown originals, have realized. It is not an admirable or very impressive doctrine. To declare, as the American aesthetic seems to do, that the effort to act upon the external world in the making of a work of art is a betrayal of the work of art is a misconception of the nature of art. The nature of art is action, and there is no part of human experience, public or private, on which it cannot or should not act.

**I**F MORE American writers and artists went abroad to work and talk, whether they were men who believed in the American aesthetic or men who didn't, the truth of their situation would become more visible across the water than it is. It would then appear that though the increasing materialism of their country is an affliction to them all, their "isolation" in American life is quite as much a matter of the turning of their own backs on the age as of the age's turning of its back on them. It would appear, that is to say, that American materialism is not yet the materialism of the Soviets and, with a bit more courage in its writers and its artists, never need be.