

Phone for the Deaf

Photo by Susan McKinney

Miss Norma Rappale, left, is present as a new visual telephone system for the deaf is tested by Gerald DeCoursey who is deaf, right. Sister DeChantal, St. Mary's Hospital Administrator watches the phone in action. The Rev. Alvin P. Burnworth of the Episcopal Mission to the Deaf holds the phone Miss Rappale gave to St. Mary's Hospital in memory of her mother Anna Rappal.

# US of A American Literary Artists And the Bicentennial

By Sister Mary Sullivan, RSM

What role have American writers played during the 200 years of our national existence?

In the world of his time, the literary artist, untrammelled by its power and privilege, is often called upon to see and critique its ways; to reveal in artistic form its values and the values which it neglects. Thus the artist in any society may perform a truly prophetic role, if not in the fully biblical sense of that word, at least in a sense akin to it.

American literature has included many such voices proclaiming "Yes" and "No" in response to elements in the general drift of American life.

The revolution in perception and in valuing with which this country began has in a persistent way continued in the writings of poets, novelists, and essayists. Even when unheard or unread by the majority of Americans — as is traditionally the case with prophets in their own countries — these writers have created works of literature which revolt against particular prevailing injustices or foibles, and declare once again certain human values to which at least they and perhaps many other Americans are committed.

Henry David Thoreau comes, obviously, to mind. In *Walden* (1854), he records his impressions of a two-year personal experiment in simplified living at Walden Pond, and in doing so creates a classic statement against thoughtless consumerism and against mistaking a multiplicity of material goods for prosperity. His work affirms simplicity of life-style and the reflection and spiritual development to which it may be conducive.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), a recluse for most of her adult life, has left us a trunkful of poems which subtly defy the violence of easily labeling persons and the dangerous error of assuming that what the many do is always supportive of human life and growth.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck registers a protest as complex and deep as the organicity of the Depression economy or of the Western ecology itself. The enforced exodus of 250,000 Okies to the unfruitful (for them) promised land of California presages a fundamental disruption of the Man-Nature relationship with bitter and threatening consequences. Yet Steinbeck's claim is that the poor, hard family will endure, they will prevail, and their breast milk will in the end maintain the human community — no

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matter what the banks or agribusiness do to them.

Eldridge Cleaver once claimed that Richard Wright was "of all black American novelists and indeed of all American novelists of any hue supreme for his profound political, economic and social reference." Certainly, his *Native Son* (1940) is the most politically and socially condemning American novel in my reading experience; it thrusts home a well-aimed, searching judgment against American racism. The evil of American treatment of black people is castigated with depth and stringency by the artistry of the novel as a whole — "an evil so hard and deep" that Wright demanded that the readers face it "without the consolation of tears."

As Socrates with self-assurance declared to the citizens of Athens, which city he loved (and this love is important to note): "I am the gadfly which God has attached to the State, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you," so many American writers have found themselves like the prophet in Richard Wilbur's poem, "Mad-eyed from stating the obvious." Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, E.E. Cummings, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Saul Bellow, and countless others have each in his own personal style and tone affirmed what Americans have at times officially and unofficially claimed is precious to them, and denounced what is false, vulgar, short-sighted or cruel.

In his poem, "Autobiography," Ferlinghetti wrote: "I am a word in a tell. I am a hill of poetry. I am a raid on the inarticulate." Etymologically, to "protest" has meant "to be or speak as a witness." In the midst of all the potential for human dignity and human degradation which a republican form of democracy allows, the finest American literature has raised just such a protest on behalf of the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and has given voice to the inarticulate and the unarticulated in our society.

In varying ways and degrees, with

varying visions and voices, major American writers have in their works stood beside human life and against what is alien to it. Although as W.H. Auden wrote in his elegy for the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, "poetry makes nothing happen; it survives in the valley of its saying, a way of happening, a mouth," many American writers — indeed, the greatest of them — have attempted to do what Albert Camus, the great French writer of this century, advised all responsible artists: they have tried in their works to speak "in a sort of mad race against time, fighting openly against the death instinct at work in our history."

Celebration of the American Bicentennial is incomplete and shallow if it does not give a hearing to the critical statements which such artists have made on American life.

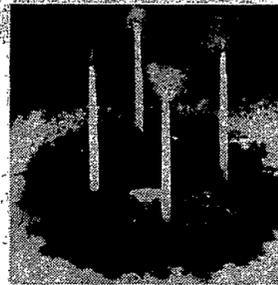
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