

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

Middlebury

Vermont

American Literature Department
R. L. Cook

Sierra Madre, California.
April 29, 1942.

Dear Peter,

The copies of Directions which you have so kindly sent me are certainly up to the standard of last year. There seems also to be more new names, which suggests either that you have made a concerted drive to get more people interested in the publication, or more students are responding in their own right. I hope the latter is the correct alternative. A college with 800 students ought to keep such a magazine very much alive. I've never been able to understand the apathy which led to the decline of the Saxonian. Probably the intellectual atmosphere or lack of it at Middlebury was the primary reason. I've always felt something was lacking, and how to generate more use of the imagination in the production of creative literature has troubled me no end. The creative writing must be kept on a personal basis. The writer must want to do it because it is the only thing that matters to him. He should neither be forced nor enticed in to writing. Possibly our writing assignments in the classes tap the only people who care about writing. In consequence, these students are drained by what Mr. Frost so acutely calls "busy work". Possibly, most students need to have writing assignments to overcome personal inertia, but I have wondered if those who showed real ability shouldn't be permitted to throw all their energy into more imaginative productivity. My friend, Mr. Cox, gets a lively response at Dartmouth from a few writing students. The little magazine which his class of ten or fifteen publishes is one of the best that I have ever seen. It is called The Dart, and if you can get a hold of a copy you'd see what I mean.

The material in Directions was varied. It was a little slight so far as the essays were concerned. The essay form is such an easy one to handle that more essays ought to be available. Anyone can write a half-way decent essay, but how many can tell stories or write poems? Good solid essays could be written on problems in contemporary literature, such for example, as the new ideological trends, the negro contributions from fellows like Richard Wright (who ought to be better known), the craftsmanship of Katherine Anne Porter, and the work of the Writers' Program on the W.P.A. (the latter is a perfect mine for the understanding of what America is like). Further, I don't think the rest of the faculty is helping as much as they might. If they were made to feel that their students, let us say in Philosophy, Economics, Sociology, Psychology, etc., could contribute directly to the support of the magazine then its content might be even more varied than it is, and its place

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in Middlebury would become an indispensable one.

I read your contributions with pleasure. My preference would be *Death in the Desert*. It is well done; easily the best thing that I've seen of yours. The Dryden epistle and the Agamemnon poem were mechanically competent (the former I preferred above the latter). But *Death in the Desert* had a genuine feeling. For what it is worth, I think the less literary association an imaginative piece of writing has the nearer one comes to one's own quality. When you absorb all you've read, you write all your background without realizing it. Not that the writer must avoid literary subjects consciously. Lordy, no! But he must be wary of literary subjects. I realize that you can come back at me by saying, look at T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Sure enough, but there Eliot is writing out of what he has absorbed and not out of the raw stuff. An even better example is Coleridge. Lowell of Harvard showed us how remarkably S.T.C. had absorbed his reading. Personally I prefer unreminiscent poets, like Hopkins, Housman, MacLeish, Frost (after N. of B.), Yeats, Hardy, et al.

Among the other contributors to *Directions*, it is apparent that Sullivan has the most real ability. He is provocative in the way that Steinbeck is. You can't tell what is coming up next, and he is both imaginatively alive and interesting in what he writes. There are others to be encouraged, and I think you would help a great deal - and you've already done more to stimulate creative writing than any dozen other students put together in the twelve years of my association with Middlebury as a teacher - by suggesting that those who have any ability keep their hand in this summer. Just as football players keep in training all summer, so it seems to me, similarly, writers should look around consciously, and fill their notebooks with all kinds of things. No one ever knows what exactly is usable, but the cultivation of the habit of close observation is intensified by notebook keeping. Have you ever read the notebooks of Chekov and Katherine Mansfield? They are superb, and if you know their stories you can follow a notebook notation directly into a short story. Of course that is more exciting to a teacher of literature than it would be to a writer.

You ask what do I see militarily out here. Of course, what we see is all ^{seen} inadvertently. On the surface, it is hardly likely for one to suspect that we are at war. But a visit to L.A. on a Saturday night and the shopper begins to see what's going on. Multiply Joe Calvi's corner on Saturday night by all the street corners in a city with over a million population and crowd those street corners with soldiers and you get some idea

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what it looks like - all khaki and a little blue. The soldiers move in groups of 2, and 4, and 6, and 8. They stream in from all the surrounding camps and take over. It is roughly estimated that a half million are stationed in Cal. Perhaps many more, I hear, but there's always an influx and an efflux. They stop here temporarily and then move on to Australia or Alaska.

We get a little idea of what is going on when we meet caravans of jeeps. It reminds me of the old days when I would stand and count the freight cars rolling by - getting really excited when the number got above 50. But here you sometimes see 70 or 80 jeeps, et al., roll by you at the intersections. On clear nights we watch airplanes gliding up the valley and the searchlights from hidden positions stab the sky in an effort to catch them in the crossbeams. Yet on the surface, as I said, there is almost no evidence of war. You pass the Vultee training plant or the Douglas Bomber plant over in Bellflower and the big fields are crowded with planes, but so many soldiers are on guard and so energetic in keeping you moving that you can't really take it all in. You get a peek, not a good look at what is happening. If I said I saw a 100 planes I might over-estimate or under-estimate. One soldier to whom I gave a lift told me that a small rounded hill we were approaching was an anti-aircraft position. The hill certainly looked innocent enough to me. Another detail of unsuspecting activity is the assembling of the Japs at Santa Anita racetrack. Ten thousand are now stationed there, but you'd never know it. Everything is done with rare efficiency and secrecy. We have black outs - mainly short ones - occasionally prolonged. A few days afterward we hear rumors that the Queen Mary docked at Long Beach, took aboard a complement of soldiers, and then hastened away on its destination. Well, if it weren't the Queen Mary it was probably some other large vessel, and so it goes. Always in readiness because the Japs have proved that it is not difficult to approach the California coast. Just imagine their ability to pick and choose from all the coastal oil fields and to turn their guns on the only one that really counted - the Hi-Octane, and aviation gas produced in the coastal field at Elwood, north of Santa Barbara. This action, from where I sit, looks like brazen contempt of our defenses. If the Japs and Nazis know this coast with such special knowledge, isn't it more than likely they can do what they want to do when the chips are down - unless we anticipate them?

The hitch-hiking soldiers I've picked up are fine fellows: big, young, strong, able and keen about the Army life. The combat work is exciting to them and they find they are

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treated very decently. Preferment depends upon ability, and the only criticism is directed at the pay. They like Roosevelt and the New Deal and look toward a new form of collectivism in this country after the war. Naturally, I've not interviewed a cross section. Perhaps I've just struck some of the less conservative ones, but at least some of the soldiers are thinking about the kind of world we ought to have after this thing is over.

The other side of the picture concerns what is happening in the boom industries. Floor sweepers at Lockheed earn \$45 a week. In the old days a sweeper was lucky to get \$12 a week. Carpenters get \$80 plus a week. Our laundry man makes a little over \$80 (I saw his pay envelope, and ~~he said it~~ it was a consistent salary). However, it won't last past this war. Sometimes we've met able-bodied skilled workers who can get nowhere in the industries out here, either because of temperament, or because they do not belong to unions, or because of the inability of work bureaus to handle the turnover. Lockheed at Glendale alone employs 50,000 men.

The consensus is that production is already all-out, and that results are gratifying. The plane industry will equal F.D.R.'s challenging quotas in his mid-winter boast to the Nazis. If only supplies can coordinate with production we may make short shrift of this war.

I am grateful to you for forwarding Mr. Frost's address, and I want to thank you again for your thoughtfulness in sending me the copies of Directions. What are your plans for next year? If I can help you in any way, do not hesitate to call upon me. We are leaving here the first of May but I can always be reached at my Middlebury address. The best to you.

Sincerely,

R. L. Cook