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The Image of Journalism in American Poetry

By Howard Good

Distinguished American poets of the past century and a half have portrayed journalism either ambivalently or negatively. Their view of the press, particularly of the mass-circulation newspaper and television, has been anything but unbiased. As their voices have been increasingly drowned out by shrill headlines and fast-talking newscasters, and as they have felt their cultural authority eroding, they have grown increasingly distraught and resentful. Poetry and journalism have seemed to most of them to occupy opposite ends of the spectrum, and if poetry were the inner temple of literature, the sanctum sanctorum, then journalism was the red-light district.

This study analyzes American poems about popular journalism published from the 1840s to the 1980s. The poems were selected partly because of the critical reputations of their authors and partly because they follow a fairly straight evolutionary path.¹ Another historian might have chosen other poems. Certainly others on the subject exist, some of which sing the praises of the press and its practitioners. A number appeared in the trade magazine *The Journalist* in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries: for example, A.E. Jessop's "Who Makes the Paper?" (1891), the anonymous "The Editor" (1902), and L.F. Burton's "A Night With the City Editor" (1904). But these were poems by unknown or little-known writers; and, in any case, they are peripheral to the central concern here, which is to examine the wounds the explosive rise of the mass media inflicted on the poetic imagination, the traumas and scars that speak with dark eloquence of the impact of a powerful new order of journalism.

It is historically important to recollect the extreme things serious poets have had to say about the press. Their poems are a sort of barometer of the mounting anxiety that yellow journals, tabloids, and TV -- the most sensational of the media -- aroused among the educated classes. The poets wanted desperately to stem the advance of what they saw as the barbarity of journalism and the corruption of cultural values. One can read the poems as a shadow history of the press, written not in the dry, factual style of the monographist, but in dread and despair.

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The gulf between poetry and journalism didn't always yawn so wide. Poetry was a staple of the colonial weekly, and the versifiers wrote on such inspiring topics as the visits of dignitaries and the fall in paper currency. In the 1790s, with the Federalists and Republicans contesting for control of the central government, political parties supported the leading newspapers, and scholars and wits edited them. Philip Freneau, picked by Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson to edit his party's sheet, the *National Gazette*, was foremost a poet.

Newspapers continued regularly to publish poetry well into the nineteenth century. The New York *Sun* often devoted a column of its editorial page to what it called, more wishfully than accurately, "Poems Worth Reading." Charles Dana, owner-editor of the *Sun* from 1868 to 1897, was also editor of the best-selling *Household Book of Poetry*.²

Production departments and city rooms were once the rough equivalent of the writers' workshops that now abound at colleges and universities. Walt Whitman began his literary education as a printer's devil on the Long Island *Patriot* in 1831 when he was twelve. Standing at the typecase, laboriously setting stories by hand, he was in intimate and vital contact with language. Whitman later worked as a reporter and editor on so many papers -- *The Tatler*, *Sunday Times*, *Statesman*, *Plebian*, *Daily Eagle*, *Crescent*, *Democrat*, *New Mirror* -- that their names blurred in his memory.³ William Cullen Bryant, an old friend of Whitman's who turned distant after he read *Leaves of Grass*, edited the New York *Evening Post* for a half a century in addition to writing some of the most famous poems of his day. Stephen Crane was a newspaperman and poet, and there were others.

Industrialization ended the liaison between poetry and journalism. "Is the *Iliad* possible," Karl Marx rhetorically asked, "when the printing press, and even printing exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press, the singing and the telling and the muse cease; that is, the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear?"⁴ As the press developed, it both ruled out and insisted upon certain kinds of content and a certain kind of audience.⁵ The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the mechanization, standardization, and vulgarization of American culture. Journalism not only recorded the change but also participated in it.⁶ Taking advantage of inventions ranging from the Linotype to the folding machine, cheaply priced yellow journals arose. They found an eager audience among the semiliterate immigrants and factory workers that the older, conservative six-cent papers had ignored. In circulations, number of pages per issue, and advertising volume, city dailies grew to undreamed-of sizes, as did their costs and revenues.

Yellow journalism amazed and alarmed cultural custodians, who feared it signaled the imminent collapse of Christian civilization. Editorial writers and platform speakers condemned the yellow journals for playing up violence and scandal, and some libraries and gentleman's clubs banned them. But their circulations kept climbing. "Ivrybody is inthrested in what ivrybody else is doin's that's

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wrong," Finley Peter Dunne's Irish barkeeper, "Mr. Dooley," observed. "That's what makes th' newspapers." And he added: "A newspaper is to intertain, not to teach a moral lesson."⁷

It was also to make money. The spiraling costs of reporting, labor, machinery, and transportation drove papers to hunt constantly for new readers. In 1897 Lincoln Steffens wrote, "The magnitude of the financial operations of the newspaper is turning journalism upside down."⁸ The era of personal journalism, of the editor-publisher who boldly stamped his character on his paper, was fading. Editors were hired men. They put into their papers only so much of their conscience and ideals as comported with profitability and office policy.⁹ Edwin L. Shuman noted in 1903 that "If a publisher sees that a sensational style sells the most papers, he is strongly tempted to give the public 'a yellow journal,' just as a merchant gives his customers calico if they want it instead of silk."¹⁰ Journalism was no longer a career or forum for high-minded poets and essayists. "More and more," Edward Alsworth Ross said in 1910, "the owner of the big city daily is a business man who finds it hard to see why he should run property on different lines from the hotel proprietor, the vaudeville manager, or the owner of an amusement park."¹¹

When journalism grew into a major business and went after a mass audience with snappy stories and big, black headlines, it drifted beyond the pale of literary respectability. Nearly all of the poems analyzed in the following pages imply that journalism and poetry are different ways of knowing and that a collision between their competing visions of reality is inevitable. Most depict journalism as distracting and deadening. Some fault it for turning human suffering into hot copy, others for erasing memory by focusing relentlessly on the present. Often the poems urge a return to a simpler, more natural world and are themselves attempts to get back to that world, a world of clean proportions hidden beneath the darkness that fills the news.

Snuffing the Powder of Monstrous News

In the first series of *The Biglow Papers*, James Russell Lowell, abolitionist, poet, essayist, and Boston Brahmin, set down in verse the flaws of the nineteenth-century press. The series, which originally appeared in the *Boston Courier* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* from 1846 to 1848, satirized the South and the causes of the war between the United States and Mexico.¹² Number VI of the papers is "The Pious Editor's Creed," a piece of doggerel that ridiculed the type of editor who supported the Mexican War:

I du believe wutever trash
 'll keep the people in blindness,--
 Thet we the Mexicuns can thrash
 Right inter brotherly kindness,
 Thet bombshells, grape, an' powder 'n' ball

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Air good-will's strongest magnets,
Thet peace, to make it stick at all,
Must be druv in with bagnets.¹³

The "pious" editor hadn't the dimmest understanding of his calling and its immense responsibility. He delighted in humbug and cant and was guided solely by self-interest:

I du believe in bein' this
Or that, ez it may happen
One way or t'other hendiest is
To ketch the people nappin';
In aint princerples nor men
My preudent couse is steadied,--
I scent wich pays the best, an' then
Go into it baldheaded.¹⁴

Yet in a pseudo-scholarly note appended to the poem, Lowell (writing in the guise of Parson Homer Wilbur of Jaalam, Massachusetts) declared, "Wonderful, to him that has the eyes to see it rightly, is the newspaper." The arrival of the parson's weekly journal was like that of a "puppet-show, on whose stage...the tragedy, comedy, and farce of life are played in little." He tore off the brown wrapper and suddenly held in his hands the "ends of myriad invisible electric conductors, along which tremble the joys, sorrows, wrongs, triumphs, hopes, and despairs of as many men and women everywhere." And though tomorrow the front page might be a "platter for a beggar's broken victuals," it did contain for this one thrilling instant a vision "let down...from Heaven."¹⁵

Lowell questioned certain tendencies or practices of the press but still saw magic in the "little show box," as he described the newspaper, and its repertoire of revolutions, disasters, crimes, and speeches.¹⁶ Like most nineteenth-century poets, he was more ambivalent than cynical about journalism. He was dazzled by the speed and reach of the infant telegraph (those "myriad invisible electric conductors") even while he regretted that it granted to ignorant editors unprecedented influence over public opinion.

The entwined promise and threat of the press were the focus of Walt Whitman's "A Font of Type" (1888). Whitman drew on his youth at the typeset to invoke the contradictory powers of the printed word to liberate, slay, whore, or heal:

This latent mine -- these unlaunch'd voices
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Wrath, argument, or praise, or comic leer,
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(Not nonpareil, brevier, bourgeois,

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long primer merely,)

These ocean waves arousable to fury and to death,

Or sooth's to ease and sheeny sun and sleep,

Within the pallid slivers slumbering.¹⁷

"Nonpareil," "brevier," "bourgeois," and "long primer" are the names of type faces. Whitman chose them partly for their sound and partly for their symbolic overtones. For example, brevier was so called from its use in printing breviaries, and here represented the sacredness of language, the holy ghost of creativity. Bourgeois was its antithesis, suggesting writings that were philistine and commercial. The capacity of print to uplift existed side by side with its capacity to corrupt. To Whitman, the double life that words lead was less a cause for concern than for celebration. It made possible not only newspapers but also poetry.

If this versatility filled Whitman with excitement, it filled Stephen Crane with misgivings. Crane, who had failed at journalism in New York before the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895, but who was a successful war correspondent after the novel came out, expressed his reservations so forcefully in "A newspaper is a collection" (1899) that he alienated reporter acquaintances.¹⁸ The poem lambasted the yellow press of the 1880s and 1890s, which, to the chagrin of many thoughtful people, had intensified the rowdiness and luridness of the penny papers of the 1830s. Crane seems to have been particularly provoked by the hypocrisy of the sensational journals in trying to pass off stories of sex, blood, and money as morally instructive. The oxymora that gave his poem its peculiar tone ("A newspaper is a court/Where every one is kindly and unfairly tried/by a squalor of honest men") implied that journalism wasn't quite the friend of truth or justice or the workingman that it professed to be.¹⁹

But Crane blamed emotion-starved readers (families that "cuddle the joys of fireside/When spurred by tale of dire lone agony") at least as much as profit-hungry publishers for sensationalism. By delving into the "laboring classes" for circulation and by carrying out noisy crusades, the yellow press had aroused fears of mobocracy. Crane vented his distrust of the hoi polloi ("a million merciful and sneering men") in savage lines such as "A newspaper is a market/Where wisdom sells its freedom/And melons are crowned by the crowd."²⁰

One poem from early in this century, T.S. Eliot's "The Boston Evening Transcript" (1915), subjected a respectable newspaper to the sort of scorn usually reserved for scandal sheets. The *Evening Transcript* was the bible of Beacon Hill. Its politics were conservative, its social pages extensive, and its financial pages complete. For its small subscriptions list, it was a reassuring reminder of class superiority, but for Eliot, it personified an almost congenital narrow-mindedness. The point was underlined by his summoning from the shadows the ghost of La Rochefoucauld, whose *The Maxims* dissected another closed society, the court of Louis XIV:

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When evening quickens faintly in the street,
 Wakening the appetites of life in some
 And to others bringing the *Boston Evening Transcript*,
 I mount the steps and ring the bell, turning
 Wearily, as one would turn to nod goodbye to
 Rochefoucauld,
 If the street were time and he at the end of the street,
 And I say, "Cousin Harriet, here is the *Boston*
Evening Transcript."²¹

The pace of the poem is languid. Words like "faintly" and "wearily" added to the picture of an aristocracy in the final stages of decay. The readers of the genteel *Evening Transcript* appeared so thoroughly insulated from the real world as to be entombed. They were trapped in an evolutionary dead end and about to be swamped by the burgeoning mass culture that Crane had glimpsed with such uneasiness.

Eliot's tone was refined, like the paper he was caricaturing. More typical of twentieth-century poetry about the press was the pure vitriol of Edgar Lee Masters' "Editor Whedon" in *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). For eight years, Masters was a partner of the celebrated criminal lawyer and defender of lost causes Clarence Darrow. He also was a part of the Chicago Literary Renaissance. Other key figures in the renaissance, which lasted from the mid-1910s to the early 1920s and helped introduce, or reintroduce, the vernacular to American literature, included Carl Sandburg and Ben Hecht.²² Both had backgrounds in journalism, and their reporting may have afforded them their first inklings of the extraordinary uses to which ordinary language could be put. Given Masters' circumstances and cohorts, there is a distinct, and ironic, possibility that the terse phrasing of the criticisms he flung at the press was shaped to some unconscious extent by newspaper writing.

The conscious inspiration for the poems in *Spoon River* was classical Greek epitaphs. With the anguished voice of the eternally damned, Whedon spoke from beyond the grave about his career as a small-town editor. Death had dissolved his illusions, and he now saw with terrifying clarity that he had gloried "...in demonic power, ditching civilization./As a paranoid boy puts a log on the track/and derails the express train." He had, he said, exploited his trusted position in the community "To scratch dirt over scandal for money/And exhume it to the winds for revenge./Or to sell papers...."²³ His confession was a strangled echo of Lowell's "The Pious Editor's Creed," strangled because the follies and flaws of the press that Lowell had treated with good-humored satire assumed here a dark, tragic cast. It was as if the press were growing too large and powerful -- daily circulation rose from 28 million in 1914 to 36 million in 1926 -- to be a laughing matter anymore.²⁴

Masters returned to the same theme in "Jay Hawkins" in *The New Spoon River* (1924), but this time from the perspective of the newspaper reader. The poem

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expressed the alarm felt in some quarters at the gutter journalism of the tabloids, which were then approaching the height of competitive frenzy, each trying to outshout the others about sex and crime. It opened with the narrator exclaiming: "Jay walking! Reading the head lines! Struck down/by a fliver and killed while reading/About the man-girl slayer!"²⁵ That the automobile and the tabloid were connected in Masters' mind is telling. The tabloid, with its photographs of corpses and scantily clad women, reflected the currents sweeping through American life after World War I. Prosperity, Prohibition, the assembly line, feminism, and the popularization of Freudian psychology washed away traditional mores. The automobile also played a role in the overthrow of old taboos, for it allowed young people to escape the immediate supervision of their parents and brought the sinful delights of the city within easier reach of the countryside.

In the poem, the tabloid was a convenient symbol for the huge, pinwheeling forces hastening moral rot. Hawkins represented a public "Cursed with the newspaper habit:/ Snuffing the powder of monstrous news" out of frustration and boredom with their own lives. But like an addiction to heroin or cocaine, the habit required ever-increasing dosages for its satisfaction, and its consequences were catastrophic, either burnout or death. Masters dreamed of a journalism less obsessed with stories of "Lying, stealing, lusting, wasting...." Through his repentant narrator, he asked, as thousands of newspaper readers have asked since, "...if life is full of beauty,/And full of nobility and creating,/Why don't they write about it?"²⁶

Unknown Voices and Rumors of Crowds

The second half of the twentieth century has seen poets relinquish the hope that popular journalism will ever change its sensational ways. No doubt the advent of television, with its speed-of-light technology, immense nightly audience (there are more television sets in the United States than bathtubs or toilets), and arresting film footage, has contributed to their pessimism.²⁷ They feel threatened by what Christopher Lasch called the "propaganda of death and destruction emanating ceaselessly from the mass media," the swirling kaleidoscopic images of war and famine and earthquake.²⁸ "I try desperately to sleep, to dream, to vomit -- /anything to shut out the hissing sound/of limbs and heads as they bob to the surface/from the fathomless layers of print," William Witherup wrote in his Vietnam era poem "Depression."²⁹ Witherup struck the essential note of dread that echoes through contemporary poetry about the press. The poets seem to live in fear of the unconscious invasion of their minds by "mediaspeak." They worry that someday they will search their imaginations for a fresh phrase or image, and find only the detritus of the mass media.

Modern poets have struggled to transcend the claustrophobic confines of the media-made environment. William Stafford, in "Evening News" (1970), described television as a "great window," but not one that looks out and clearly reveals the passing scene. Television "...puts forth its own scene,/the whole

man-girl slayer!" That the automobile and the tabloid were connected in Masters' mind is telling. The tabloid, with its photographs of corpses and scantily clad women, reflected the currents sweeping through American life after World War I. Prosperity, Prohibition, the assembly line, feminism, and the popularization of Freudian psychology washed away traditional mores. The automobile also played a role in the overthrow of old taboos, for it allowed young people to escape the immediate supervision of their parents and brought the sinful delights of the city within easier reach of the countryside.

In the poem, the tabloid was a convenient symbol for the huge, pinwheeling forces hastening moral rot. Hawkins represented a public "Cursed with the newspaper habit:/ Snuffing the powder of monstrous news" out of frustration and boredom with their own lives. But like an addiction to heroin or cocaine, the habit required ever-increasing dosages for its satisfaction, and its consequences were catastrophic, either burnout or death. Masters dreamed of a journalism less obsessed with stories of "Lying, stealing, lust, wasting..." Through his repentant narrator, he asked, as thousands of newspaper readers have asked since, "...if life is full of beauty,/And full of nobility and creating,/Why don't they write about it?"

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Modern poets have struggled to transcend the claustrophobic confines of the media-made environment. William Stafford, in "Evening News" (1970), described television as a "great window," but not one that looks out and clearly reveals the passing scene. Television "...puts forth its own scene,/the whole

world/alive in glass." Those who mistake the televised fragments of experience for reality are strangely diminished, "...become unknown/voices and rumors of crowds." Stafford's solution to the discontinuities of the mass media was a romantic worship of the generative spirit that glows in nature, a spirit that was there before the news was invented and that will be there still when the news has been forgotten. He prayed "...birds/wind, unscheduled grass,/that they please help to make/everything go deep again."³⁰

In "The Morning's News" (1970), Wendell Berry also turned to the unbroken rhythms of nature for solace. Initially Berry, like Witherup in "Depression," was overwhelmed by the clamor of the press:

The morning's news drives sleep out of the head
at night. Uselessness and horror hold the eyes
open to the dark....³¹

But unlike Witherup, Berry escaped the phantasmagoria of violence and bloodshed by submitting to "...the ancient wisdom/of tribesman and peasant, who understood they labored on earth only to lie down in it/in peace, and were content." When he realized that "The earth is news," he was reborn a natural man at home among the creatures.³²

Stephen Crane, disillusioned with the yellow journalism of the 1890s, had looked back longingly in his newspaper poem to "remote ages" that were undisturbed by scareheads and scoops.³³ As the tempo of the news has accelerated throughout the twentieth century, nostalgia for a vanished golden world has deepened in poetry about the press. Seeking refuge from the media onslaught, Berry, Stafford, and other contemporary poets have conjured a mythical garden, nature's dream kingdom. Their ultimate defense against the terrors and distractions of the mass media is a heart faithful to the mystery in a cloud.

Conclusion

Long before our own time, Lowell, Crane, and Masters voiced serious misgivings about the press. They considered the popular journalism of their eras degenerate and self-serving, a potentially dangerous crack in the social foundations. More recently, Philip Levine asked in his poem "Sources" (1981), "What do we have today?" and promptly answered, "A morning newspaper full of lies."³⁴

A few poets did perceive something in journalism beyond crass commercialism or mindless diversion. Whitman, for example, rejoiced in the range of magical transformations of which print was capable, all the way from the sensational headline to the soulful hymn. But for a century and a half, the predominant attitude of poets toward the press has been a bitter mixture of condescension and criticism. It has been taken more or less for fact that poetry is the pinnacle of literary art, and journalism the sprawling shantytown at the foot of the mountain.

The portrayal of journalism in American poetry represents what some of our most thoughtful and talented writers have concluded about the press -- and they

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The portrayal of journalism in American poetry represents what some of our most thoughtful and talented writers have concluded about the press — and they

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generally have concluded the worst. They have found the mass media guilty of extinguishing imagination and memory, reason and peace. In lines more direful than beautiful, the poets have warned people to throw down their newspapers and turn off their TVs and to discover the truth for themselves, and soon, before there are no words left to tell it.

NOTES

- ¹My analysis is of poems I've found through personal reading and various editions of *Granger's Index to Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press). For space and other reasons my discussion is necessarily limited to a small number of poems. Those I do examine, are, in my judgment, the most representative or interesting. I have included an Appendix listing the seventeen poems that formed the basis for my interpretation.
- ²Edward P. Mitchell, "Mr. Dana of 'The Sun,'" *McClure's Magazine*, October 1894, p. 379.
- ³Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (Philadelphia, 1882; rpt. Boston, 1971), p. 118; Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York, 1980), pp. 74-74, 104.
- ⁴Quoted in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, 1985), p. 42-43.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ⁶Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven, 1950), pp. 67, 69.
- ⁷Finley Peter Dunne, *Observations by Mr. Dooley* (New York, 1902), pp. 243-44.
- ⁸Quoted in Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1962), p. 547.
- ⁹Edward Alsworth Ross, "The Suppression of Important News," in *The Profession of Journalism*, ed. Willard Grosvenor Bleyer (Boston, 1918), p. 81.
- ¹⁰Edwin L. Shuman, *Practical Journalism* (New York, 1903), p. 16.
- ¹¹Ross, p. 81.
- ¹²Richard Croom Beatty, *James Russell Lowell* (Nashville, Vanderbilt, 1942; rpt. n.p.: Archon Books, 1969), p. 75.
- ¹³James Russell Lowell, *The Biglow Papers*, with a Prefatory Note by Ernest Rhys (London, n.d.), p. 94.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 93.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 95-96.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 95.
- ¹⁷Walt Whitman, "A Font of Type," in *Whitman*, ed. Leslie A. Fiedler (New York, 1959), p. 155.
- ¹⁸Thomas Beer, *Stephen Crane* (New York, 1923), p. 222.
- ¹⁹Stephen Crane, "A newspaper is a collection," in *Poems of Stephen Crane*, ed. Gerald M. McDonald (New York, 1964), p. 39.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*
- ²¹T.S. Eliot, "The Boston Evening Transcript," in *Collected Poems, 1910-1962* (New York, 1963), p. 20.
- ²²Mark Van Doren, "Introduction," in *Harvest Poems* by Carl Sandburg (New York, 1960), pp. 5-10; Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds., *Twentieth Century Authors* (New York, 1942), pp. 631-32.
- ²³Edgar Lee Masters, "Editor Whedon," in *Spoon River Anthology* (New York, 1931), p. 189.
- ²⁴Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York, 1931), p. 189.
- ²⁵Edgar Lee Masters, "Jay Hawkins," in *The New Spoon River* (New York, 1924), p. 36.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*
- ²⁷Edwin Diamond, *The Tin Kazoo*:

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^ Edwin Diamond, The Tin Kazoo:

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^T.S. Eliot, "The Boston Evening

Television, Politics, and the News (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 13.

²⁸Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979), p. 130.

²⁹William Witherup, "Depression," in *Now Voices: The Poetry of the Present*, ed. Angelo Carli and Theodore Kilman (New York, 1977), p. 215.

³⁰William Stafford, "Evening News," in *Allegiances* (New York, 1970), p. 58.

³¹Wendell Berry, "The Morning's News," in *Farming: A Hand Book* (New York, 1970), p. 19.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³Crane, p. 39.

³⁴Philip Levine, "Sources," in *One for the Rose* (New York, 1981), p. 68.

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