

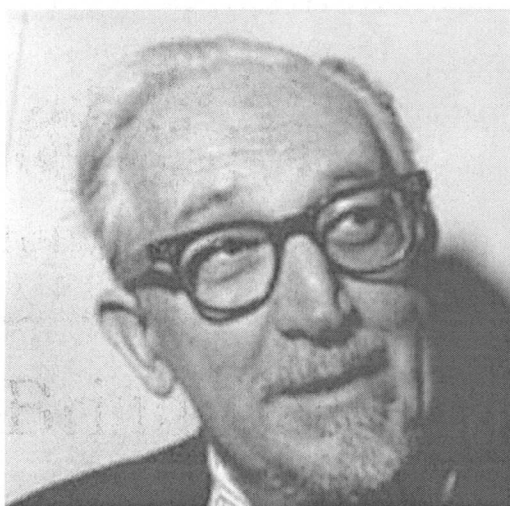


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## Bring Back Dwight!

John Summers January 20, 2010 | 4:11 pm



### **Against the American Grain**

by Dwight Macdonald

"Masscult is bad in a new way: it doesn't even have the theoretical possibility of being good," Dwight Macdonald scolded in *Against the American Grain: Essays on the Effects of Mass Culture*. "Those who consume Masscult might as well be eating ice-cream sodas, while those who fabricate it are no more expressing themselves than are the 'stylists' who design the latest atrocity from Detroit." Macdonald wanted to title his book *Reactions*, but bothering the memory of William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* conveyed the new tone of astringency well enough.

Williams voiced the hope of American renaissance. Macdonald said it was delusive to hope for any kind of renewal from corporate radio, film, broadcasting, or publishing. Their industrial methods were cutting off Americans from collective memory, and making the special personality of writers "totally subjected to the spectator." Income, leisure, and education

(conventional indexes of cultural progress) had spiked, but the prosperity was ironic. Masscult did not enlighten or entertain. It spread narcosis, distraction, and amnesia in direct proportion to its progress toward a universal market in cultural goods.

*Against the American Grain*, published in 1962, collected Macdonald's essays on Mark Twain, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and James Agee and his accusations of cultural malpractice against *Webster's New International Dictionary*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the University of Chicago, and the Bible. There were minor, trend-spotting pieces such as "Amateur Journalism" and "Howtoism," as well as prescient ones like "The Triumph of the Fact." The main idea arrived in the first chapter, "Masscult and Midcult."

Midcult, according to Macdonald, scrambled traditions of "High Culture" and "Folk Art" for profit. Midcult feared to offend consumers while it exploited the fading prestige of the avant-garde; thus, its product managed to be banal and pretentious at the same time. Americans made best-sellers out of bad novelists, such as Colin Wilson and James Gould Cozzens, awarded high honors to an inferior books, such as Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and followed "lumpen-avant-garde" movements such as the Beat poets, at least as long as they gratified a ginned-up appetite for novelty and phony glamour.

Detractors accused Macdonald of a bias for difficulty and against popularity--a ridiculous posture. Alvin Toffler called him "high priest of the culture snobs." Tom Wolfe, responding to his attacks on "parajournalism" in 1966, called him a "testy but lovable Boswell who annotates my old laundry slips." Macdonald's search for aesthetic and moral distinctions has seemed bizarrely archaic since his death in 1982.

“Masscult, midcult—who cares anymore?” James Wolcott asked in the (midcult) *New York Times Book Review* in 2006. Culture now signifies anything and everything—not excluding styles of ice-cream soda.

Macdonald was a snob, but that does not mean he was a fool. His won his insights from experience on the front lines of literary journalism. He went to work for Henry Luce’s *Time Inc.* soon after graduating from Yale in 1928 (“As smoking gives us something to do with our hands when we aren’t using them, *Time* gives us something to do with our minds when we aren’t thinking”); defected to *Partisan Review* in 1937; founded and edited *Politics* in 1944; then spent the 1950s as a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. From 1960 to 1966, he wrote a film column for *Esquire*.

Greater snobs, Alexis de Tocqueville and J.S. Mill, for example, had already puzzled over mass culture and produced insights into the moral culture of individuality. Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacob Burckhardt, and Jose Ortega y Gasset had interpreted mass phenomena as the erosion of European culture. The Institute for Social Research showed how the weed of fascism flourished in depleted soil. By 1944, when Macdonald published “A Theory of Popular Culture” in *Politics*, most conservatives and socialists and many liberals in Europe and America had abandoned hope for a democracy of culture. The theory of masses reached a dialectical impasse from which it has not returned.

Macdonald, seeking an opening, fashioned his perspective “conservative anarchism.” How could he blend the conservative’s piety for tradition with the anarchist’s disbelief in authority? “Well, I say, being an anarchist, that I don’t believe in taking people by the hand and force-feeding them culture,” he once told an interviewer. “I think they should make their own decisions. If they want to go to museums and concerts, that’s fine, but they

shouldn't be seduced into doing it or shamed into doing it.”

This raises many questions, including the large one of compulsory schooling. Macdonald, however, was not one for answering with programs or policies. He cited Randolph Bourne's "Trans-National America" in favor of cultural pluralism, yet appeared no more inclined to show what that might look like than to coordinate his personal attire. In *The End of Ideology*, Daniel Bell (another snob!) noted his fondness for wearing clashing pink-and-black-striped shirts. Of *Politics*, Bell said it was “the only magazine that was aware of and insistently kept calling attention to, changes that were taking place in the moral temper, the depths of which we still incompletely realize.” Can the same be said in favor of *Against the American Grain*?

Yes, if one remembers the book's protest against capitalist methods of cultural production and, to say the same thing twice, refuses to be misled by sentences like the following: “The great cultures of the past have all been elite affairs, centering in small upper-class communities which had certain standards in common and which both encouraged creativity by (informed) enthusiasm and disciplined it by (informed) criticism.”

It was not wealth (he had little) or Yale (from which he was nearly expelled) or bad politics (he was a democrat, and a friend to radical youth) or exotic taste (Poe was his favorite writer) that led Macdonald to locate creativity in small, self-selected communities. It was his experience in magazines. Masscult was unimprovable. Midcult was pernicious. But the audience was divisible on the principle of shared standards he had learned in his thirty years as a magazine editor and writer.

*Against the American Grain*, against the odds, still has something to say.

Who else can connect cable dramas such as "The Sopranos," "Mad Men," and "The Wire" with the midcentury *Partisan Review*, *Politics*, and the *New Yorker*? "One possibility is pay-TV, whose modest concept is that only those who subscribe could get the program, like a magazine; but, also like a magazine, the editors would decide what goes in, not the advertisers; a small gain but a real one," Macdonald wrote. "The networks oppose this on philanthropic grounds—they don't see why the customer should pay for what he now gets free. But perhaps one would rather pay for bread than get stones for nothing."

*John Summers is the author of Every Fury on Earth.*

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