



**FIGURE ONE:** Archibald MacLeish, undated. From the Archives of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Reproduced by permission.

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**in search of an  
“image of mankind”  
the public poetry  
and prose  
of archibald macleish**

david barber

In the course of that long migration they had come of age as a people. They had conceived a good idea of themselves; they had dared to imagine and determine who they were.

—N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*<sup>1</sup>

In 1931 Archibald MacLeish conceived a goal which he never afterward abandoned, though his idea of how to accomplish it changed: to identify or generate a vision for humanity, a motivating “image of mankind in which men can again believe.”<sup>2</sup> This image, both in its American and its worldwide versions, would express and thereby advance democracy, cultural coherence, “brotherhood,” and human potential.

Who could accomplish this daunting task? MacLeish’s various answers correspond closely to the activities of his own multiple career. Primarily he thought of himself as a poet, and his first hope was always that through poetry or other forms of art the needed cultural vision would come. But he also

worked as a journalist. He wrote for Henry Luce's *Fortune* in the thirties and was always writing essays for various magazines. His final attempt to locate and express his long sought vision appeared as a prose poem on the front page of the *New York Times*. "Librarian of Congress from 1939 to 1944, an assistant secretary of state 1944-1946, professor at Harvard 1949-1962, MacLeish continually insisted that scholars had their public role to play, . . ." as did the producers of film and radio drama (MacLeish wrote radio plays, produced one film, and saw another film inspired by an essay of his).

Of the groups who have been left out, the most glaring omission—for a democrat and advocate of human "brotherhood"—is of course the common people, who are merely to *receive* the image and be improved thereby. Here is the great weakness of MacLeish's project, from which all the charges of arrogance, patrician mentality, dedication to big-brother government, and even fascism derived. Indeed he was inconsistent: he both embraced and denied democracy, especially during the Depression and World War II. These were also the years when he made his strongest claims for poetry as generator of the vision.

Of course, many deny that such a role is proper or possible for poetry, and MacLeish met his fiercest resistance when he enlisted art for a social purpose. His concept of poetry's public role could always be used against him by those who took poetry to be in its essence private, and government to contaminate all it touched. In 1960, when Henry Luce and others were stimulating a debate on "national purpose," John Chamberlain argued that the idea of a single national purpose was coercive and false to the true nature of American society. "America Was Purposes," said the title of his brief essay, playing on MacLeish's 1939 poem "America Was Promises."

When America was purposes, not purpose, the young Archibald MacLeish walked out of a Boston law office to sit at the feet of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and learn the art of poetry. In those days MacLeish had not yet succumbed to the idea that government is divinely ordained to compel individuals to a national purpose.<sup>3</sup>

In Chamberlain's view MacLeish as poet was separate from, and superior to, MacLeish as government sympathizer. The poet disappeared as the propagandist emerged. The effort to persuade the American people to a single "purpose" was somehow at odds with the nature of poetry and society's health. Public poetry, Chamberlain evidently believed, is a contradiction in terms.

Neither Chamberlain nor more recent American cultural critics and historians denied poets a place in pluralistic America. But Chamberlain appeared more at ease with American diversity than most commentators, who have sought common institutions, purposes, and values that can enhance both individual lives and cultural cohesion. Like MacLeish, they have wanted to revitalize the social ideals of "brotherhood" and citizenship. But few of them have seen a significant role in this enterprise for poets.

Wilson Carey McWilliams, for example, traced the fragile *Idea of Fraternity in America* (1973) and conceded that it is no longer possible to create a comprehensive fraternal tradition for American society. McWilliams hoped, however, that the ideal of citizenship, "eclipsed" in our time, might re-emerge, at least in enclaves, so that "a fraternal city can exist within an unfraternal polity."<sup>4</sup> Relying heavily on classic American authors for his evidence, he saw them as analysts but not as influences in creating the fraternal city. With similar goals Robert H. Wiebe described *The Segmented Society*, which is comprised of small social units including kinship networks, occupational groups, and ethnic affiliations. Wiebe traced the weakening public roles, activities, and influence of Americans, as political power has become concentrated in the hands of an elite. Wiebe saw little hope of reversing "the planned obsolescence of citizenship,"<sup>5</sup> and he certainly did not look to writers and artists for help.

Somewhat more hopeful was Robert Nisbet, whose *Twilight of Authority* connected contemporary American problems to the general decline of the political state in the West. After presenting this sobering picture, he suggested ways to restore "authority" and therefore social health in the United States. He wanted to strengthen the social units that Wiebe has called "segments," including kinship ties, regional loyalties, and voluntary associations. Nisbet rejected Plato's (and MacLeish's) unitary state in favor of the pluralistic society conceived by Aristotle and Edmund Burke, in which family, neighborhood, local and regional institutions provide (as Burke wrote) "little images of the great country in which the heart has found something it could fill."<sup>6</sup> Like McWilliams and Wiebe, Nisbet saw no major societal role for poets and artists.

In *Habits of the Heart* (1985) Robert Bellah and four associates examined the problems caused by American individualism, which they feared has become "cancerous." They explored ways to regain a cohesive, sustaining spirit of citizenship. One of their many ways of verifying cultural fragmentation was to establish that poetry cannot portray our society as unified, and that contemporary poets cannot speak on public issues as members of the community. The authors took as authority Wendell Berry, who claimed (in Bellah's words) that in a fragmentary, specialized society controlled by science, "poets can no longer be public persons, so that even when, as of late, some of them have turned to protest, it is a private protest."<sup>7</sup>

And therefore it is an ineffectual, unheard protest. But not everyone agrees that poets, even today, are barred from an effective public role. Cary Nelson and Robert von Hallberg have challenged this negative view. Nelson saw American poetry as in its essence public because it presents us with a vision of possibility: "Our poetry continually addresses the world at large . . . [with] a dream of the people we might become; it therefore rarely pretends finality, it prophesies possibilities."<sup>8</sup> Von Hallberg asserted that public poets exist and thrive and that public poems, "far from deserving the stigma of inauthenticity, . . . honor the loftiest ambitions poets and critics have traditionally voiced for the art."<sup>9</sup> Von Hallberg accepted Matthew Arnold's idea of the "classic national author," fully attuned to the spirit of his or her culture, and cited Olson, Ginsberg, Lowell and others as aspiring classic national American authors (2-3). And he argued that at least as recently as the 1950's, there was a strong sense



**FIGURE TWO:** Archibald MacLeish (left), and Deems Taylor, in the Library of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1949. From the Academy's Archives, reproduced by permission.

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of cultural coherence in the United States; American poets were significant in expressing that coherence, and even now many excellent American poets express “the tone of the center” of our culture, to a wide audience. These poets draw from the energy of our culture while maintaining “an ironic, sophisticated attitude” that prevents “facile jingoism” (6). Nelson and von Hallberg thus opposed critics like Christopher Clausen, who argued in 1981 that American poets have failed to find “a successful way of reintroducing poetry into the mainstream of culture” and whose efforts to do so have “merely deepened their own solitude.”<sup>10</sup>

It is by no means established that poets do not, cannot, or should not have an influential public voice when they deal with American society and public events. Nor are these questions settled in regard to social scientists or humanists. Archibald MacLeish’s sense of the public role and responsibility of poets is not entirely out of date, nor is his parallel insistence on the social obligations of scholars and all whose tools are words and images. The authors of *Habits of the Heart*, for example, felt compelled to argue that sociologists should be—as sociologists—participating members of society. They concluded the book with an essay on “Social Science as Public Philosophy,” in which they argued that “social science is not a disembodied enterprise. It is a tradition, or set of traditions, deeply rooted in the philosophical and humanistic (and . . . the religious) history of the West” (301). *Habits of the Heart* urged social scientists to help forge a new American cohesion through shared values that root individuals constructively within society.

Similarly, historians are debating whether and how to increase their public audience and contribute to our public life. Side-by-side articles in the June 1986 *Journal of American History* recently helped to define the issue for American historians. John Bodnar warned against simplistic synthesis when historians confront ideologically weighted subjects, and especially when they do so in the employment of public agencies such as the National Park Service.<sup>11</sup> Examining recent historical studies of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, Bodnar reminded historians that their work “is not tied solely to the past” but may serve “the maintenance of power and influence in the present” by creating an oversimple and distorted image of the past (147). Association with government and its special ideologies greatly intensifies the threat. Alongside this warning against the wrong kind of synthesis and public influence, Thomas Bender argued that historians must try to produce valid synthetic interpretations of American society.<sup>12</sup> Historians have lost their public and therefore their place in contemporary culture, he asserted, because of the narrow specialization of recent historical studies. Only by acknowledging a “public debt” to tell the public how they envision American society as a whole: “our interpretations of how our society and nation works” (136), can historians arrest the “declining significance of history in the general intellectual culture of our time” (120). Bender offered a framework for the task, not a guiding image but a “quasi-event,” “a plot that is adequate to our proliferating knowledge about society[:] . . . the making of public culture” (122). In a kindred spirit Lynne V. Cheney, head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, has begun an inquiry into “the scholar and society” by examining the theory and practice of literary scholars.<sup>13</sup>

No one today could recover, or would wish to recover, the innocence of MacLeish's visionary ambition in 1931. But the issues in which MacLeish's search involved him are hardly dead: the nature of American society with its tension between citizenship and individualism, the public roles of poets, artists, and scholars, the danger that association with government will distort one's vision and values. MacLeish dealt with them all as he explored the public roles first of poets and artists, then also of historians, journalists, film makers, librarians, and humanists generally. Should they let society's welfare guide their judgments and efforts? Should they and *can* they influence society's vision and direction? MacLeish answered these questions differently during four main periods of his life: his youth to about 1920, his period of social withdrawal until 1930, his major period of "public poetry," until 1941, and the forty years following. This paper traces the evolution of his answers, concentrating on the period 1930-1945, when the Depression and World War II underscored the issue of art's social function. Now, when the literature of the Vietnam War has again focused attention on this issue, MacLeish's theory and practice can help us decide what public literature can and cannot do.

## I

"I do not believe there is a school in the world that does more to produce moral earnestness and manly self-reliance than Hotchkiss," Martha Hilliard MacLeish wrote to the headmaster of her son's school in 1909.<sup>14</sup> Mrs. MacLeish clearly did her own part in developing these qualities in him, as well as a sense of social responsibility that included a certain *noblesse oblige*. These traits appeared early, as when he protested, to the *Yale Daily News* in 1914, irreverent comments about Nathan Hale: "To mock his supreme sacrifice is to mock what most of us hold worthy of reverence."<sup>15</sup> Patriotic loyalties forbade disrespect. Yale students had obligations, and so did poets, whose fraternity MacLeish always aspired to join. "I shall never attempt poetry," he wrote to a friend in 1916, "till there is in me a great truth crying to be *preached*. Yes—pedagogy in verse—even so!" Although his reaction to World War I eventually destroyed, for a few years, this desire to teach and to have an effect on America public life, he could still declare in 1919 that "It is not the practice of the idea but its expression in terms that convince that produces change" and in 1922: "Political science and such poetry as I really wish to write will fuse."<sup>16</sup>

Having married in 1916, MacLeish entered the U.S. Army in 1917 and served in France while rising from private to captain. The combat death of his brother Kenneth contributed to his judgment of World War I as "an awful, awful, failure. A hideous joke."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this disillusionment influenced his decision in 1923 to leave his social obligation in Boston and devote himself to writing poetry in Paris about isolated individuals. But all his statements about the move suggest that his desire to be a poet, and his growing conviction that to continue practicing law would destroy his poetic goals, were the primary motivators. "I knew this much before I went: If I hadn't gone when I did—that was about the last possible moment—I was thirty-one years old in 1923, . . . I would have continued to be a lawyer; I would have had to be."<sup>18</sup>

And yet his sense of social loyalty and obligation was not really dead but merely transferred onto an abstraction he called *poetry*,

I was writing, yes [in Boston], but out of the margins of my life, and the work showed it: lines like letters from a brief vacation in another country. And though I had solved, as I thought, the problem of supporting a family and writing verse, I did not feel I had solved anything. If I had, why should I wake at morning with that sense of *owing*? Owing what? To whom?<sup>19</sup>

He was at this time in the process of creating an entity, "poetry," and transferring his allegiance to it. "It was the art I owed" (75). Here, undoubtedly, the effects of World War I were important. In the temporary loss of his social ideal, he kept the societal commitment alive by putting a reified art in society's place and pledging his allegiance to it. The many critics who later in the thirties complained that MacLeish jumped with suspicious haste from "pure" art into public poetry did not know the internal logic of his transformations.

In his Paris sojourn from 1923 to 1928, MacLeish was as usual a little behind the leaders: he left the United States the year that Malcolm Cowley returned. Like Cowley, he went to Europe partly because he felt nostalgic toward American life before 1916 and despaired of ever finding it. Like Cowley he discovered in Europe a new sense of America and American themes.<sup>20</sup> And although in the mid-twenties he wrote poem after poem about solitary individuals, their sense of void was largely sadness at lacking a place in a cohesive, supportive society. The most solitary of his characters was a Mr. Beck, who, alone in the natural world, mourns the loss of religion and human relations. Before MacLeish finally succeeded in publishing *Biography of Mr. Beck the Suicide*, he gave it a whole new public dimension by incorporating one of the most dynamic figures of the intellectual and cultural life of the period. He retitled the poem *Einstein!*<sup>21</sup> Gradually a new sense of connection to the public world was infiltrating his devotion to pure "poetry." Well before returning to the United States in 1928, MacLeish was planning a major poem on an American theme, which eventually became *Conquistador*. In 1928 he returned to America, as he said later, "in every possible sense."<sup>22</sup>

With him he brought the rudiments of a program designed to coordinate his personal ambitions with his wide-ranging sense of obligation. Maintaining his devotion to "poetry," he was also regaining his loyalty to society. This alliance of allegiances would allow him to fulfill his youthful goal to preach through poetry. Having gone to Paris to satisfy an obligation to the entity "poetry," he now saw poetry as both receiver of a debt (from poets) and owner of one (to society). Poetry's obligation, he was convinced by 1931, was to provide a cultural vision. The old romantic individualism was a dead concept. "The individual is no longer the unit, the sacred integer, the solemn end. He is a fraction. He is an agent" who "can only realize himself in his social role."<sup>23</sup> *The Waste Land*, MacLeish declared, had showed us the old dead world of individualism. Now we needed a vision of a world in which individuals were

genuinely free but found their significance in community—realized themselves in their social role. Poetry could provide this vision. “Poetry, which owes no man anything, owes nevertheless *one debt—an image of mankind in which men can again believe,*” (216, emphasis added).

If poetry owed such a vision, then poets had a public role to play. And in the act of fulfilling a social obligation, a poet could satisfy personal ambitions.<sup>24</sup>

## II

From the early thirties through World War II MacLeish was perhaps the most controversial poet in America. There were non-political reasons: his tone struck many as pompous and self-righteous; the sincerity of his views was attacked because he changed them often;<sup>25</sup> his poems were criticized because he followed stylistic and thematic leads of Pound and Eliot. Some thought him ambitious, opportunistic, and self-serving. Edmund Wilson eventually summed up such objections in his brilliant, vicious “Omelet of A. MacLeish”:

These and the Cantos of Pound: O how they came pat!  
Nimble at other men’s arts how I picked up the trick of it  
.....  
A clean and clever lad  
    who is doing  
        his best  
            to get on. . . . 26

But the core of controversy over MacLeish was at once aesthetic and political, and in the thirties especially it involved his theory and practice of “public poetry.” What public poetry is, and what *good* public poetry is, are disputed questions. According to Patrick Cosgrave, Robert Lowell is a public poet who “burns to judge men and affairs against an immutable and objective standard. The work is public, too, in a more obvious sense, in that much of it deals with the world of politics and public affairs.”<sup>27</sup> Public poetry need not, however, be fiercely judgmental, and it may cast a wider cultural net than politics and affairs. In some way it must engage the values and aspirations of a culture. Given this quality, what others—besides reaching a wide audience—make public poetry successful? The answer depends partly on whether we take the poet’s evident purpose into account. Judith Nantrell asserts that certain public poems of Rafael Alberti must be evaluated for their “instrumental rather than aesthetic value. The reader must, therefore, learn to approach the poem in a new way, namely as a verbal means to obtain a specific political end.”<sup>28</sup> But few readers will be willing to divorce aesthetics from political purpose in this way, or to see poems merely as instruments for political ends. Thomas R. Edwards argues for a more complex instrumentality:

If no new perception of the public case is achieved, the poem is dead; yet complete transformation makes the poem only a glibber version of the politician’s own magical rhetoric, which



smoothes all conflict into the glassy calm of easy solution. . . . It is the note of uncertainty or even dismay that I am looking for, the imagination's troubled recognition of its own involvement in the spectacle of power.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, von Hallberg insists that "poets who wish to speak from the center must accept a measure of responsibility for established institutions whose acts are beyond the control of any single writer. Centrist poets, that is, must live with their complicity" (4). MacLeish indeed accepted such responsibility. The problem was he demanded that others accept responsibility also—*his* idea of it. And seldom was he either flexible or reflective. This is why MacLeish's public poetry of the thirties (also his public prose) usually lacked power. It was true, as Marcus Klein asserted, that for MacLeish and others, public history during the Depression made possible "a refreshment of poetry" and "a new literary authenticity."<sup>30</sup> But MacLeish's poetry of that era did not show a mind exploring complexity or its own relation to power; it did often smooth "conflict into the glassy calm of easy solution." Nor is there much evidence that his poems changed minds or influenced behavior. His poems did not establish a sense of personal authority that would command assent.<sup>31</sup> He did not quite fit the role, and Louise Bogan was correct, though snide, in saying that, "His manner still irrevocably colored by private pathos, he came out for 'public speech.' The result was a curious one."<sup>32</sup> MacLeish was clearly one of Cary Nelson's "first" (naive, idealistic, pre-Vietnam) poets who imposed a unitary vision of America on the actual culture he lived in. It is the intensity, not the success, of his effort to relate poet, poem, and society that gives him his interest. Throughout the thirties MacLeish never deviated from his main point, that poetry should, and more than any other cultural force *could*, provide a common, sustaining vision of human hopes and aspirations. It took him a few years, however, to realize just how this idea implicated the poet in political activity: activity *as* poet.

At first he seemed to believe that the poet should not take sides on social issues. "Invocation to the Social Muse" (1932) portrayed poets as

Whores, Fraulein: poets, Fraulein, are persons of  
Known vocation following troops: they must sleep with  
Stragglers from either prince and of both views.  
The rules permit them to further the business of neither.<sup>33</sup>

Readers have always assumed that the speaker represents MacLeish's view. But the poem bears ambiguous witness; it reads most convincingly, I believe, as an ironic protest against "the rules" and poets' prostituted condition. Read this way, the poem certainly does take a position—it denies its presumed refusal to take political positions. Another poem from his supposedly pre-commitment period, "Background With Revolutionaries" (1933), takes a strong anti-Communist stance, and the volume in which it appears, *Frescoes For Mr. Rockefeller's City*, makes political judgments throughout. Why then is MacLeish considered to have refused during the early thirties to take stands? The reason is that *in*

*his prose* he was arguing that the purity of art needed to be defended from contamination by social and political allegiances. His prose did not always seem to know what his poetry was doing. Or possibly he was debating with himself in print, from poems to essays and back again, trying to discover his own true beliefs. But readers took each change in his position as final, an understandable reaction to his prose style, since MacLeish wrote with a tone of great finality, as though he expected each word to be carved in rock.

MacLeish's prose self, at least, did not firmly decide until 1934 whether poets should take sides on social issues. We can see the development of his thinking in two essays published only two months apart in that year. In "The Poetry of Karl Marx" (February), MacLeish defined the poet's social role. "The real question," he wrote,

is not whether the poet should know and draw upon the existing world of his time, but whether he should know and draw upon that world as an artist with an artist's single and arrogant demand of artistic significance or as a partisan with the ulterior and calculated interest of the champion of a cause. Briefly the real question is whether the poet should serve a cause or serve an art. . . . He will choose one alternative or the other and cannot possibly choose both.<sup>34</sup>

Partisanship is incompatible with art, and the poet is only to be trusted when acting as poet with "artistic disinterestedness" (49), that is, resisting mere propaganda. Art precludes championing a cause. On this point MacLeish, having already changed his mind in poetry, was about to do so in prose.

"Preface to an American Manifesto" (April) signaled the change. MacLeish concluded that if poets were to present a sustaining vision of humanity, then one cause demanded allegiance. "What is above all necessary to the free writer, is to consider . . . the kind of world he himself would like to bring about."<sup>35</sup> For MacLeish only one such vision sufficed: "That world for all artists, for all men of spirit is the democratic world, the world in which a man is free to do his own work" (20). MacLeish felt he could devote himself to the cause of democracy without violating the integrity of the artist because *he saw democratic freedom as a precondition of art itself*. Artists who reject democracy also deny their art in longing for a "social womb" in which "the blood of a social organism is pumped through their hearts in substitution for their own blood, and the thoughts of a social mind are dreamed through their brains in substitution for their own thoughts" (21). Democracy permits, while fascism and communism destroy, the artist's individuality. Therefore, MacLeish believed that although the artist's choice to defend democracy is free, it is also necessary, since he owes to it his existence as an artist.

The growth of fascism in the early thirties had convinced MacLeish that poets must defend democracy. Perhaps the charge from the Left that he himself had fascist leanings influenced the intensity of his pronouncements. This charge originated in reactions by John Strachey and Michael Gold to "Invocation to the Social Muse," in which MacLeish attacked rich bankers, and "Background With

Revolutionaries,” in which a name (Comrade Levine, later changed to Devine) and a passage of dialect (“D’glassic historic objective broves you are brudders”) exposed him to the charge of bias against the lower classes, foreigners, and Jews. Strachey wrote: “Now where have these two emotions of revolt—of revolt against the bankers and of revolt against anything foreign—appeared together before? The answer is that they have appeared in the rank and file of every fascist movement in the world.” Strachey and Mike Gold, who made a similar accusation, allowed that MacLeish’s fascism was probably unconscious.<sup>36</sup> According to Daniel Aaron, the Left ceased to call MacLeish a fascist and anti-Semite in 1935, when he supported a strike against the Ohrbach Department Store and showed other signs of right thinking.<sup>37</sup> (The charge of fascism, however, would be revived again in 1939.)

MacLeish now set out to show why and how poets might involve themselves effectively in public life, through what he called “public speech”: poems directed at the people in order to affirm democracy. For the next several years MacLeish kept arguing that the nature of poetry, the demands of the period, and the people’s need required poets to perform this social and political role. The best poets in most ages, as he argued in 1938, had always been public poets anyway, had “known more of their time—and not only of its spirit but of its economics and its politics—than those among whom they lived. . . . Their poetry was public speech. It reached conclusions.”<sup>38</sup> But the nineteenth century reduced the poet to private experience, and although modern poetry started to regain poetry’s public scope, Eliot and Pound went only a little way in this direction; MacLeish felt that even Yeats

has moved only briefly and unwillingly at the point where the poetic revolution crosses the revolution in the social and political and economic structure of the post-war world, which so deeply concerns our generation in this country. *But it is precisely at that point that the greatest victories of modern poetry may be won.* (67, emphasis added)

By “greatest victories” MacLeish could only mean, in 1938, victories against fascism. For poets, living in “a revolutionary time in which the public life has washed in over the dikes of private existence,”<sup>39</sup> there was really no other subject. The destiny of the poet was to portray the public-private world of democracy under siege. The duty of poetry was to help rescue this world.

This was public poetry at its most instrumental. To accomplish such a task the poet must reach a wide audience with a compelling vision of democratic America. Fascism and communism were threats only because the people had lost faith in their democratic traditions and in themselves. The poets’ “image of mankind in which men can again believe” would revitalize their faith in themselves and in the democratic tradition of which “the people” are the core.



**FIGURE THREE: Deems Taylor, Archibald MacLeish and Mark Van Doren. From the Archives of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Reproduced by permission.**

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MacLeish attempted such an image in his art with the verse play *Panic* (1935) and the poems of *Public Speech* (1936). *Public Speech*, the less successful effort, affirmed values that could sustain us in an imperiled time. Thus "Pole Star" asserts that love, in a world of oppression, must become "like hatred and as bright," in order to fight the oppressors.<sup>40</sup> The point is well taken, but the poem is too obviously a package of symbol plus statement. "Speech to Those Who Say Comrade" argues that true brotherhood comes only from living and suffering together: "Hunger and hurt are the great begetters of brotherhood" (303). The poem identifies this need for brotherhood, but it neither dramatizes the need nor explores the nature of brotherhood between social classes. Will such brotherhood survive the immediate crisis?<sup>41</sup> "Speech to a Crowd" exhorts the people not to rely passively on authorities. "Tell yourselves the earth is yours to take!" (308) But MacLeish, in this and later poems, could not specify just what to take or how. He could articulate the general "image of mankind" that people needed in order to change their lives. But he seldom reached beyond surface statement and quick sketch. This inability to dramatize a precise, positive "image of mankind" is the core weakness in all of MacLeish's public poetry.

In his plays of the thirties, however, MacLeish framed his pronouncements within vivid dramatic situations, and the effects were at times compelling. If he could not forcefully fix an “image of mankind” in the minds of his viewers, hearers, and readers, he could at least dramatize the need for such an image. MacLeish’s first attempt was *Panic* (1935), a play about a powerful financier whose faith in the American democratic system is undermined by the despair around him. McGafferty initially has hope and courage and the will to fight:

What can we do but face it—raise the cash—  
Carry the wrecked ones till the wind blows over?  
.....  
It’s been done before  
Our fathers did it.<sup>42</sup>

And he despises the fainthearted who reject “Man’s burden of living their forefathers won for them!—/ Rid of the liberty!—rid of the hard choice!” (48). But McGafferty is surrounded by voices of fear: terrified bankers, a mistress who lures him toward a totally private existence, and a chorus of desperate men and women. Then a blind Marxist prophet appears, to whom the “fathers” are simply those who set up the system of capitalistic corruption. Now, he claims, the course of history is set; the doom is certain. When McGafferty, unsettled by all these negating voices, hears that another banker, whom he thought the strongest of all, has killed himself, he despairs also and jumps out the window. *Panic* thus demonstrates how the lack of faith and will can destroy. It shows that Americans need to believe in themselves and their history—by showing what happens when they do not.

Seeing the fate of *Panic* on Broadway--three performances, one underwritten by leftists so they could argue with him after the play—MacLeish turned to radio, which he thought would reach “an infinitely greater number of people” and then shape “sections of that greater number into a living audience which the poet and his actors can feel.”<sup>43</sup> His enthusiasm for the medium was short-lived, but *The Fall of the City* (1937) and *Air Raid* (1938) have genuine dramatic power. These verse plays were instrumental public poetry in that they did in fact alert many people to the dangers of events in Europe. *The Fall of the City* was one of the first dramatic hits in radio history. MacLeish in old age recalled “that CBS figured out, with great astonishment, that *The Fall of the City* [in two performances, from New York and Hollywood] reached an audience which was well over one million souls.”<sup>44</sup> *The Fall of the City* also had historical foresight or luck (somewhat like the film *The China Syndrome* in preceding the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island): it anticipated the *Anschluss* in Austria.<sup>45</sup>

Like *Panic*, *The Fall of the City* (1937) presented the people as impotent in the face of a threat which with resolute action they could overcome. Lacking faith in liberty, they give up before the fight, crying:

The city is doomed!  
There’s no holding it!  
Let the conqueror have it! It’s his!

The age is his! It's his century!  
Our institutions are obsolete.  
He marches a mile while we sit in a meeting,

leaving the Announcer [Orson Welles in the radio broadcast] to conclude:

The people invent their oppressors: they wish to believe in them.  
They wish to be free of their freedom: released from their liberty:—  
The long labor of liberty ended!  
They lie there!<sup>46</sup>

Thus MacLeish, anticipating events about to unfold in Europe, located the cause of the contemporary crisis in a weakness of the people themselves. His other radio play, *Air Raid* (1938), inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*,<sup>47</sup> presented the people as simply victims who mistakenly believe that the war will pass them by. *Air Raid* was neither so satisfying nor so successful as *The Fall of the City*, and MacLeish thereafter lost interest in radio. Perhaps he felt that the result did not justify the effort; perhaps he felt the frustrations of collaborative production, a mild audio form of the trauma many writers were having in Hollywood. In any case, his radio plays were significantly innovative, combining poetry with radio technology in order to impart the elusive "vision of mankind" and of America to a large and new audience.

Soon after abandoning this route, he undertook another collaborative effort, this time combining his verse with a collection of Depression photographs. He wrote a poem as "accompaniment in words" to photographs.<sup>48</sup> I do not know where MacLeish got the inspiration for this effort. Erskine Caldwell's pioneering collaboration with Margaret Bourke-White appeared in 1937, but in 1937 MacLeish already was writing the text for *Land of the Free* (1938). Perhaps the idea came from his *Fortune* boss, Henry Luce, who in 1936 sent James Agee and Walker Evans to roam the South collecting materials from which eventually came *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). MacLeish's work was not an active collaboration of that kind; rather, he began with a set of Farm Security Administration photographs, by Dorothea Lange and several others, and composed his "accompaniment," "a book of photographs illustrated by a poem" (89), in private. The book is a multi-media effort involving poetry, photography and a hint of film, for in the text the poem is called "the sound track."<sup>49</sup> In any case, the poem is intentionally subdued to the visual images and should be read in this context.

*Land of the Free* presented victims of the Depression, demoralized by the loss of their land and therefore their identity and autonomy.

Now that the land's behind us we get wondering  
We wonder if the liberty was land and the  
Land's gone: the liberty's back of us. (29)

However, these people were now receptive to a deeper understanding:

We wonder if the liberty is done:  
 The dreaming is finished  
 We can't say  
 We aren't sure  
 Or if there's something different men can dream  
     *[facing photograph of a political rally]*  
 Or if there's something different men can mean by  
 Liberty. . . .  
     *[facing photograph of a vote at an open-air labor meeting]*  
 Or if there's liberty a man can mean that's  
 Men: not land  
     *[facing photograph of a large, cheering group, with an  
 American flag prominently waving]. (84-87)*

The people were thus ready to receive an image of themselves in which they could believe, and MacLeish gave them a well focused political one. In the same year his essay "In Challenge Not Defense" considered who, given the people's inability to believe in themselves, could stimulate in them vision and desire.<sup>50</sup> Not economists: they can analyze the past but have no foresight. Not the church: it merely refers earthly problems to another world. From this problem "only poetry can deliver us" (215). Why *only* poetry? Because

Poetry alone imagines, and imagining creates, the world that men can wish to live in and make true. For what is lacking in the crisis of our time is only this: this image. Its absence is the crisis. . . . Once we know the thing that we desire to be[,] the things that we must do will follow of themselves. (218)

So he challenged "all those who quarrel about the means by which the people shall be saved to hold their tongues and be silent until the poets shall have given the people speech" (218).

Perhaps, if pressed, MacLeish would allow that "poetry" might include anyone whose work depended on words and images. But no matter: MacLeish was insinuating that some sort of aesthetic and moral elite wanted, as John Chamberlain was to say two decades later, to "compel individuals to a national purpose." MacLeish's challenge was of course rejected. In the next issue of *Poetry* Harold Rosenberg found only insolence and contempt in MacLeish's view of the people, not to mention his dismissal of "those who quarrel about the means." No new image or vision is needed, Rosenberg argued. "There is no lack of desire in the broad masses—desire for peace, for security, for decent living conditions, for social participation. There is no lack of conviction in the people that they want freedom and education. It is the means they are seeking."<sup>51</sup> MacLeish could not refute Rosenberg's point about "the means." He could only state his preference for poets against Marxists as shapers of the American people's imagination. (thus asserting that Rosenberg too was unwilling to let the people formulate their own vision).<sup>52</sup> It was a fair retort.

MacLeish tried once more, before his changing interests and government positions ended this phase of his writing, to present in a poem that elusive image of America for Americans to live by. *But America Was Promises* (1939) relied on evocations of the “fathers” (Jefferson, Adams, Paine), of American places, of the “promises” of America and their betrayal. America was promises, and still is: “Never were there promises as now.” “Dead men in the pits” of Spain, Poland, China are telling us: “The promises are theirs who take them.”<sup>53</sup> The promises are to us, and if we don’t take them, “others” will. But what are the promises? Who are the “others”? Who, for that matter, are “we”? The poem’s vague declarations generate frustration with each line, and in the end it resorts to pleading:

America is promises to  
Take!  
America is promises to  
Us  
To take them  
Brutally  
With love but  
Take them.

Oh believe this! (331)

What action is required? Revolution, union organizing, the New Deal? Poetic public speech of this sort had little power, and it was probably fortunate that MacLeish’s poetic career took a forced vacation in 1939, when President Roosevelt appointed him Librarian of Congress. The urgency of the war in Europe in 1939 and 1940 also drew him away from poetry into arguments in prose, which he felt the time demanded of him. MacLeish had been a fervent interventionist for some time; he had taken the appropriate lesson from the Spanish Civil War. He had also long since worked through his bitterness regarding World War I, and he rejected the isolationist thesis that the developing conflict in Europe was merely repeating that war. In these qualities he was unusual among intellectuals, and his official position now reinforced his isolation. As poet, former writer for *Fortune*, and Librarian of Congress, MacLeish was triply suspect of whoring after strange and incompatible gods.<sup>54</sup> All of these qualities magnified the impact of two essays of 1940, *The Irresponsibles* and “Postwar Writers and Prewar Readers,” which attacked American artists and scholars as unprepared and unwilling to face the fascist threat.

*The Irresponsibles* was the first influential assault on intellectuals for failing to oppose fascism, an offensive continued over the next few years by Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Bernard De Voto, and other culture-critics with strong unitary visions of American society.<sup>55</sup> Writers had abandoned the sustaining values of Western civilization, MacLeish maintained, and looked at the world “as a god sees it—without morality, without care, without judgment.”<sup>56</sup> They had failed, that is, to support the one “image” that gave hope for mankind in that troubled time: democracy. They ignored the public world.



Creative writers withdrew into their feelings, and scholars (MacLeish had mainly historians in mind) into their ideology of scientific objectivity. Meanwhile the Nazis were trying to destroy the world that allowed these writers to exist.

MacLeish's target included all those who live by words and ideas, and his guiding principle was that in a time of crisis, words and ideas are *weapons*. He attacked "scholars and writers," the scholars being mostly historians and the writers mostly novelists. They had failed to see the real danger in Europe, or, if they saw it, had done nothing with their distinctive weapons, their words.

The writer-artist will write a bloody story about the expense of blood. He will present the face of agony as it has rarely been presented. But not even then will he take the weapon of his words and carry it to the barricades of intellectual warfare, to the storming of belief, the fortifying of conviction where alone this fighting can be won. (33)

*The Irresponsibles*, itself a work of propaganda, blatantly called for the production of propaganda. Its notoriety was greatly increased because "Postwar Writers and Prewar Readers," published a few days before Hitler took Paris, named names.<sup>57</sup> Dos Passos and Hemingway were among those who had undermined the war effort: "The books they wrote in the years just after the war," MacLeish asserted, "have done more to disarm democracy in the face of fascism than any other single influence" (790). Now at least and at last writers must do their duty. MacLeish made this point in an ominous way. He identified himself as a former member of this offending group (thus becoming the only poet in it) and conceded that therefore "I have no right to judge them"—after having judged them rather severely. Then he suggested a solution:

Perhaps writers, having so great a responsibility to the future, must not weaken the validity of the Word even when the deceptions of the Word have injured them. Perhaps the luxury of the complete confession, the uttermost despair, the farthest doubt should be denied themselves by writers living in any but the most ordered and settled times. (790)

Finally, MacLeish insinuated that those opposing his point of view were leaning toward treason.

*Those who wish to see us weak* will employ every means of deception, of misrepresentation and of fraud to keep us so. They will suggest to us that we cannot defend ourselves against fascism without ourselves becoming fascists. . . . They will tell us that we cannot make judgments of good and evil without becoming ourselves burners of books and regimenters of men's minds. (790, emphasis added)

This pre-emptive strike of course misfired. No one was going to argue that the only way to fight fascism was to become fascist. The response was rather that some people—government officials, for example—seemed willing to use fascist tactics in fighting *freedom*. MacLeish's own guns were turned back on him. He appeared to want to burn books and regiment minds in the interests of a party line. "That is," Edmund Wilson responded in parody of MacLeish's position, "if you have ever suffered from falling a victim to somebody or other's phony propaganda, you should not expose it, but let it go on duping others, for fear of destroying the integrity of 'the Word.'" And Wilson found it unsettling, "at this moment of strain and excitement, to hear the Librarian of Congress talking about 'dangerous' books. . . . He makes it plain that he thinks certain kinds of writers should be discouraged from giving expression to certain kinds of ideas." Morton Dauzen Zabel judged that "an indictment of writers and scholars equal in severity to this has seldom been heard in public places in modern times, in America or elsewhere. Perhaps the maledictions of Hitler and Goebbels alone have surpassed it within living memory." And Burton Rascoe, hatchet man for *The American Mercury*, found it "rather appalling having him suddenly cast, or self-cast, in the role of Fuhrer. . . . Archie in his newly fashionable incarnation has the same idea as Hitler but doesn't know how to express it."<sup>58</sup> MacLeish was now a fascist with a vengeance: almost the arch-fiend himself.

He wanted to stimulate voluntary restraint. He believed deeply in the national need to mobilize public opinion. How did he suffer such lapses of judgment? Perhaps his new public position combined unfortunately with his moral earnestness and social conscience to distort his perspective. MacLeish, however, had a long history of making impulsive and injudicious statements, some of which I have been quoting, and he clearly enjoyed a fight. Beneath the sombre moralist was a playful controversialist, an aspect that MacLeish first expressed publically in 1923, when with Lawrence Mason he perpetrated a hoax in the *North American Review*.<sup>59</sup> The most important reason, however, is that MacLeish fell into that common trap of government officials: identifying the government with the nation, and then using the implied power of the government to intimidate. This tendency only increased when he began in 1941 to direct Roosevelt's information and propaganda agencies, the Office of Facts and Figures and then the Office of War Information.<sup>60</sup> For example, he was advising the press in 1942 to "police itself, not only to avoid the necessity of a policing by government which neither government nor the press desires, but also to . . . perform the duties it has traditionally undertaken in American life."<sup>61</sup>

Frequently he made his case by blatant name-calling, as when insisting on the duty "of the loyal and honest press to hunt out and to expose by every instrument of truth the skulkers in the journalistic ambush—the cowardly, half-hearted publishers, and the venal editors of their staffs, who use for their own disloyal purposes the cover of the noblest right that free men boast of."<sup>62</sup> In claiming that recent Nazi influence in American political campaigns "aimed at the destruction of confidence in the elected officers of the people—and thus at the destruction of confidence in elected government itself,"<sup>63</sup> MacLeish suggested that criticizing governmental officials amounted to attacking democracy. Morton

Zabel responded fairly to MacLeish's rhetoric by quoting Montaigne, "that there are some things not allowed, even in fighting an enemy, . . . that all things are not permissible to a man of honor because he happens to be in the service of his king, his country, and the laws."<sup>64</sup>

In a time of great national stress, MacLeish's idea of public speech had degenerated into manipulative, coercive public speeches which no desire to persuade or to stimulate debate could excuse. Nevertheless, it is difficult now to agree with Zabel, Wilson and others that MacLeish's zeal flowed solely from an egoistic ambition energized by the exhilaration of public office. MacLeish believed that fascism threatened democracy, that the threat to democracy imperiled art, that words are weapons with unique persuasive powers, and that artists and intellectuals were obligated to use these powers to defend democracy—and so ultimately the world of art and ideas. His impulses toward duty and self-interest collaborated in a primarily admirable effort to serve both art and his country. These qualities served him well, for example, in his tenure at the Library of Congress, where, according to his colleague David C. Mearns, MacLeish's "spirit of mission was contagious; he gave libraries (and particularly his own Library) a consciousness of new duties and new responsibilities."<sup>65</sup>

But in what sense the spirit of mission is "contagious" depends on the relation between sender, message and receiver. When the leader of librarians attempted to guide both the people and the intellectuals, he learned what a delicate and thankless task he had undertaken: many perceived his spirit of mission as a disease.

### III

MacLeish always maintained that poetry has an important social role. Early during World War II, however, he ceased to think of poetry as the primary agent of social change. As late as 1941 he was claiming that

What a people can become is the accomplishment in act of what a people can conceive. What the people of a nation can conceive is what their artists and their poets can make actual to them and thus possible. It is the power truly to inhabit the present—the power to inhabit the possibilities of their own lives—which the poets of a people can confer upon them.<sup>66</sup>

But in the same year he tacitly acknowledged the inadequacy of his own public poetry. The occasion was his introduction to a collection of patriotic statements by recent immigrants.<sup>67</sup> MacLeish had been asked, he said, to make a statement, originally a radio broadcast, "because I had written a poem called *America Was Promises* which concerned itself with this country and the people who came to it." He went on to explicate the poem, first giving the meaning of the title and then of the whole poem. He outlined the major sections and characters, finally applying the poem's themes to recent events in Europe. No poet, I am confident, would do this to his or her own poem believing that it could stand on its

own, or could communicate as a prose paraphrase could not. MacLeish could have reprinted the poem, but in paraphrasing and explicating it, he showed that his faith in the special power of public poetry, if not public prose, had greatly diminished.

After 1941, therefore, his claims for poetry's social function moderated greatly. Perhaps his work in the government propaganda agencies showed him the power of other means of public persuasion. As he criticized the press for not supporting the war effort fully, he may have concluded that journalism, with radio, photography and film at its disposal, could help perform the social function he had previously reserved for art. Other forms of communication and other image-creators began to share the "one debt to mankind" that MacLeish had announced in 1931 to be poetry's alone. When he attacked the motion picture industry in 1942 for its "escapist and delusive" influence on public opinion, the potential of that medium was implicit in its responsibility, "along with the radio and the press and the book trade and the colleges and the schools and all the rest of us, for the failure of the American people to understand . . . the nature of the world they lived in."<sup>68</sup> As generators of national and democratic images, poets found themselves competing with journalists, film makers, librarians (for their ability to lure Americans to books) and "humanists." A humanist, MacLeish explained in 1944, was anyone who held "some notion of a universal dignity which men possess as men and by virtue of their manhood."<sup>69</sup> He hoped he was describing the educators who would create a democratic postwar world.

A guiding vision of the future might come from anywhere. We find MacLeish as early as 1942 looking beyond poetry for sources of the needed public vision. In a lecture of that year he asserted that "the idea of victory, the conception of victory, eludes us".<sup>70</sup> We lack the image of the world we want *after* the war. But we can develop this vision, MacLeish asserted, with the aid of the revolutionary invention of our time: *the airplane* might help us envision the coming world as the sea once helped men conceive of freedom and new possibilities. The image that the airplane makes possible (if we defeat the Nazis!) is of a democratic world, "a round earth in which all the directions eventually meet, in which there is no center because every point, or none, is center—an equal earth which all men occupy as equals" (188-89).

MacLeish published no new poems until 1948. Times and aesthetics had changed. Art as a social force was out of style; the private individual and the isolated artist were back.<sup>71</sup> Although MacLeish did not fully accept this postwar view, he was certainly influenced by it. He did not entirely abandon public poetry, but the tone of such poems changed from robust exhortation to pointed ironic criticism. The gain in power was substantial. His subject was still American goals and visions, but poems of 1948 and later, like "Brave New World" "The Black Day," and "Ship of Fools"<sup>72</sup> focused more sharply on issues (such as McCarthyism) than did any of his thirties poems. After he finally casting off the *roles* of the public poet and the public figure, his poetry was better able to define and examine the public world and the individual's place in it. When he set out, in *Actfive* (1948), to demolish various false images of modern saviors (including the state), what remained was the solitary individual who recognizes an obligation to endure and love:

The heart persists. The love survives.  
The nameless flesh and bone accepts  
Some duty to be beautiful and brave. (359)

This was still public poetry, aiming to influence people not to rely on or glorify industry, science, heroes, the state, the self and “the Crowd”! But the didactic quality of the thirties poems is gone, and with it the sense that he was trying to use poetry like a speech! *Active* does not give “the Word” or vaguely exhort to action; it describes what the citizen must accept in the cold postwar reality. Like his poems of the twenties, *Active* focuses on the individual, whose death MacLeish had announced prematurely in 1931. But now the individual is placed solidly in a social context. One is to maintain a singleness but recognize the obligation to keep striving, loving, enduring. *Active* stresses society’s false leads but still holds individuals responsible for creating a community.

MacLeish’s tone became more authentic when he admitted that poetry could not singlehandedly save the world and that public poetry was only one of several valid types. But it was still one valid type. Although the world has grown more complex and is dominated by science, he wrote in 1961, “so that there is no place for a poem to stroll but up and down inside,” we nevertheless have at least Yeats’s political poems to show that a poet can influence the public’s political perceptions. Discussing “Easter 1916,” MacLeish questioned whether the leaders of the rebellion “had changed everything or the poem itself which, five months after that tragic Easter, gave their deaths their meaning.”<sup>73</sup> The meaning of the rebellion, he intimated, did not exist in the public mind until the poem established it there. Clearly, public poetry remained for MacLeish extraordinarily powerful. A great poet might yet “give” an image or event its meaning and fix it in the public mind.

Insofar as MacLeish ever found his unifying image of mankind, however, it came from a machine, a modern improvement on that World War II airplane. In December 1968 Apollo 8 curved behind the moon and photographed the earth. The photograph so impressed MacLeish that he wrote a brief “Reflection: Riders on Earth Together, Brothers in the Eternal Cold” and published it on Christmas Day, 1968, on the front page of the *New York Times*.<sup>74</sup> Here was an image to replace that of modern science just as that vision had replaced the medieval Christian one.

No longer that preposterous figure at the center, no longer that degraded and degrading victim off at the margins of reality and blind with blood, man may at last become himself. To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers who know now they are truly brothers.

This widely reprinted prose poem has in fact been influential in establishing the idea of “spaceship earth.” If rocket technology provided the opportunity, if

a camera took the picture and the news media sent it around the earth, MacLeish's words helped to fix its meaning. It was a typical endeavor for MacLeish, whose faith in the power of the word never vanished. Nor did his intense concern for America, alternating and almost interchangeable with his fixation on "mankind," ever diminish. Those who study American culture today cannot afford to ignore either his purposes or his activities. If his mistakes are more instructive than his successes, his vision is dated only superficially. While scholars still examine the eclipse of citizenship (McWilliams), its planned obsolescence (Wiebe) and cancerous individualism (Bellah); while they hope to explain American society by the history of public culture (Bender), to unite scholar and society (Cheney), to restore authority (Nisbet); then MacLeish's values and methods merit attention. If it proves true, as Bellah hopes, that "because we share a common tradition, certain habits of the heart, we can work together to construct a common future,"<sup>75</sup> MacLeish may once again, and more happily than in *The Fall of the City*, anticipate history.

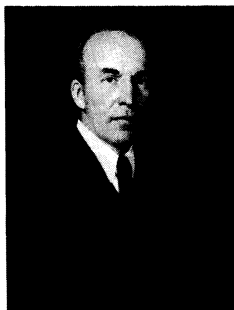
His defects are in little danger of being forgotten, they are so visible. He failed to explain in prose, or demonstrate in poetry, just how poets can influence society's vision and direction. During World War II he claimed to want a national dialogue but contrived to set limits of allowable debate. He misused the podium of public office attempting to coerce the image makers: poets and artists and historians and journalists and film makers, into supporting his position. Perhaps his later opposition to McCarthyism, or his primary role in securing the release of Ezra Pound, or his repeated public reminders throughout the postwar period that Americans must know what they are *for*, not just what they are against—perhaps such activities were his atonement. Not that he ever expressed a need to repent, or failed ultimately to prove his sincerity if not his judgment. Though Edmund Wilson always believed him a charlatan, MacLeish was doing, admittedly in a patronizing way, what Americans and all cultures need: exhorting them to conceive "a good idea of themselves." Thinking for a time that poetry alone could generate that vision, he eventually moderated this hope; and though he continued to seek a modern Dante to give our age its motivating vision, he lived to see no such genius appear. Certain of his enemies believed that MacLeish saw *himself* in this role; possibly at some point he did.<sup>76</sup> To think that the people merely need someone to *give* them their vision, this perhaps was his failure of faith. It was a weakness he shared with Walt Whitman.

And also—to descend from the sublime—with Amy Lowell. In MacLeish's pivotal year 1931 she had doubted whether MacLeish could play such a role. Perhaps, she mused, he lacked a certain "gusto." Perhaps we needed to wait for "some poet of grit and brawn, some prophet of grandeur and laughter, some cross between John Milton and Ogden Nash, to tell us the whole truth and save the world."<sup>77</sup>

If so, we are still waiting for this paragon to help us dare, like Momaday's Kiowa people, to imagine and determine who we are. In the meantime we can give Archibald MacLeish his due. Denying Malcolm Cowley's dictum that "duty is the greatest temptation to the poet and the worst,"<sup>78</sup> MacLeish acted as he believed a citizen and poet ought to act. He knew that for any citizen the

public and the private worlds intersect. Like Bellah and his associates, he understood what is wrong with the term "private citizen." When we say "private citizen," the authors of *Habits of the Heart* insist, "the very meaning of citizenship escapes us" (271).

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### notes

1. (Albuquerque, 1969), 4.
2. "Nevertheless One Debt," *Poetry* 38 (1931), 216.
3. *National Review* 8 (18 June 1960), 395. See also John Jeffries, "The 'Quest for National Purpose' of 1960," *American Quarterly* 30 (Fall, 1978), 451-60.
4. Wilson Carey McWilliams, *Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley, 1973), 623.
5. *The Segmented Society: An Introduction to the Meaning of America* (New York, 1975), 190.
6. (New York), 287.
7. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American life* (Berkeley, 1985), vii, 278.
8. Carey Nelson, *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (Urbana, 1981), 23. This may seem a strange statement for one arguing that the Vietnam War destroyed poets' faith that their idealistic vision of America might coincide with historical reality. But Cary believes that although American poetry was forever altered by that war, it has maintained its power and increased its ability to confront history more adequately.
9. Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* (Cambridge, 1985), 2.
10. Christopher Clausen *The Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis* (Lexington), 131. (Like the authors of *Habits of the Heart*, Clausen enlisted Wendell Berry to support his case that contemporary poetry is isolated.)
11. John Bodnar, "Symbols and Servants: Immigrant America and the Limits of Public History," *Journal of American History*, 73 (June, 1986), 137-51.
12. Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* (June, 1986), 120-36. In a later issue of the *Journal*, respondents to Bender's article approved at least his goals. they agreed that historians should have a public influence and can gain it by developing synthetic theories of American society and by addressing these theories to the general public. David Thelen, Nell Irvin Painter, Richard Wightman Fox, Roy Rosenzweig, Thomas Bender, "A Round Table: Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, 74 (June 1987), 107-30. see also Herbert G. Gutman, "Whatever Happened to History?" *Nation* (21 November 1981), 521, 553-54.
13. Cheney assembled a panel of literary scholars and found that they disagreed as to the "health" of the humanities and the extent to which literary scholarship speaks to the public. They seemed to agree, however, that a public voice and influence for humanists is desirable. (While there is no reason to think anyone's views were insincere, participants were of course aware that NEH exists to foster the public role of the humanities, inclines toward certain traditional concepts of American society, and is a major source of funding for

humanities research. The position of humanists working with NEH, therefore, can be as delicate as that of historians working for the National Park Service.) Soon Ms. Cheney will expand her inquiry to include "the news media, museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions." Scott Heller, "Experts Convened by Endowment Head Are Divided in Assessing the Health of the Humanities," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (9 March 1988), A4, A11.

14. To Huber Gray Buehler (14 February 1909), *Letters of Archibald MacLeish 1907-1982*, ed. R. H. Winnick (Boston, 1983), 7-8.

15. To the Editor of the *Yale Daily News* (14 November 1914), *Letters*, 12.

16. To Francis Hyde Bangs (11 November 1916), *Letters*, 30; to Dean Acheson (30 December 1919), 64; to Dean Acheson (12 September 1922), 92.

17. To Ishbel MacLeish (31 May 1924), 137.

18. Videotape, *Those Paris Years: A Conversation Between Archibald MacLeish and Samuel Hazo* (International Poetry Forum of Pittsburgh, Robert Costa, producer and director, 1987).

19. *Riders on the Earth: Essays and Recollections* (Boston, 1978), 73.

20. Cowley's *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's* (New York, 1951) gives the classic account of the European experience of twenties expatriates. Robert M. Crunden's *From Self to Society* (New Jersey, 1972) is useful regarding the entire period between the world wars.

21. *Biography of Mr. Beck the Suicide* was accepted by the *North American Review* in 1923, but for some reason the *Review* did not publish it. MacLeish transformed the poem in 1924 or 1925, changing the title and adding a gloss, marginal notes referring to Einstein. He did not, however, significantly revise the main text of the poem. See Winnick's notes, *Letters*, 117, 120. A manuscript draft of *Mr. Beck*, a copy of which Mr. Winnick generously showed me, is at the Library of Congress.

22. Stanley Koehler, "A Conversation with A. MacLeish," *Pembroke Magazine* 7 (1976), 98.

23. "Nevertheless One Debt," *Poetry* 38 (1931), 210-11.

24. Of course MacLeish was reflecting a widespread aesthetic shift in the early thirties. As Malcolm Cowley wrote, "a new conception of art was replacing the idea that it was something purposeless, useless, wholly individual and forever opposed to a stupid world. The artist and his art had once more become a part of the world, produced by and perhaps affecting it" (*Exile's Return*, 287). Cowley's statement is, however, cautious and balanced whereas MacLeish's is assertive and dogmatic. He had no use for "perhaps."

25. As Dwight MacDonald admitted, however, "whirligig changes . . . were typical" of the thirties, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist: Essays in Political Criticism* (New York, 1957), 9. Many critics treated MacLeish unfairly in this regard. Eric Homberger discusses various writers who made swift shifts of political position, such as Edmund Wilson, in *American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-39: Equivocal Commitments* (London, 1986).

26. *New Yorker* (14 January 1939), 23-24.

27. Patrick Cosgrave, *The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell* (London, 1970), 24.

28. Rafael Alberti's *Poetry of the Thirties: The Poet's Public Voice*, (Athens, 1986), 9-10.

29. *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes* (New York, 1971), 5-6.

30. *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature 1900-1940* (Chicago, 1981), 133.

31. Patrick Cosgrave argued, *Robert Lowell*, 31-48, that modern public poems must rely on this authority and power of personality, since the poet lacks a strong supporting culture whose resources help carry the weight of social criticism. According to Cosgrave, the poet who was first forced to use his personality to compensate for this lack of cultural support was Samuel Johnson.

32. "Poetry," in Harold Stearns, ed., *America Now: An Inquiry Into Civilization in the United States* (New York, 1938), 59. Bogan went on to generalize about the public poetry of MacLeish and other converted leftists: "The new political verse was infused with a kind of gloom. Its hopeful tendencies were accompanied by no clear clarion voice. When it tried to be ambitious it became turgid and dull; when it strove to be vigorous and heartening it often gave off a shrill hysterical sound".

33. Archibald MacLeish, *Collected Poems, 1917-1982* (Boston, 1985), 296. Subsequent references regarding poems (except plays and *Land of the Free*) are to this edition.

34. *A Time to Speak*, (Boston, 1941), 46.

35. *ibid.* 20.

36. Strachey is quoted in Klein, *Foreigners*, 310. Klein summarizes MacLeish's social-aesthetic views during the early thirties, 131-33.

In his old age MacLeish remembered the event this way: In a radio speech Strachey "was referring to me as a 'fascist,' an 'obvious Fascist,' a clear supporter of Franco and Hitler, because in the 'Landscape with Revolutionaries' I used some dialect lingo for the talk of some of my revolutionaries. I guess Strachey had a right to complain about that, but still I'd do it again if I had it to do again. There are certain short cuts you ought to be permitted," *Reflections*, 91. Mike Gold's "Out of the Fascist Unconscious," *New Republic* 73 (26 July 1933), 295, was more influential than Strachey in labeling MacLeish an "unconscious Fascist."



- A useful discussion of fascist ideology and the basis of its appeal to Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, is Cairns Craig, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry* (Pittsburgh, 1982).
37. *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York, 1961), 276. Aaron describes MacLeish's political relations with the Left, 264-67 and *passim*.
38. "Public Speech and Private Speech in Poetry," *A Time to Speak*, 63.
39. "Poetry and the Public World," *Atlantic* 163 (1939), 826.
40. *Collected Poems*, 303.
41. McWilliams charged that in this poem MacLeish, "like so many of his fellows, ignored the obvious question: Are the 'hurts' that intellectuals feel and suffer the same as those of their brethren?" *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, 541.
42. *Panic, A Play in Verse* (Boston, 1935), 23-24.
43. "Foreword," *The Fall of the City, a Verse Play for Radio* (New York, 1937), xii-xiii.
44. *Reflections*, 108-09.
45. By eleven months. Memory operating over years could reduce that interval to ten days. A classmate said to MacLeish in later years: "Did you know that the Nazis were going to enter Austria and just at that time?" Telling this story to interviewers, MacLeish acknowledged that he wasn't sure of the dates and would need to look them up. *Reflections*, 108.
46. *The Fall of the City*, 29, 32.
47. "Preface" to *Air Raid, Six Plays* (Boston, 1980), 97-98.
48. *Land of the Free* (New York, 1977; facsimile of first edition, New York, 1938), 89.
49. At this time MacLeish was collaborating with Hemingway in producing the film *The Spanish Earth*. Perhaps he was also remembering that Pare Lorentz had used MacLeish's *Fortune* essay entitled "The Plow That Broke the Plains" as the basis for the film. On his activities regarding *The Spanish Earth*, see MacLeish's letters to Hemingway, 8 August 1937 and 6 August 1938, *Letters*, 289-90, 294-95, and Winnick's note, 290. On the Lorentz film, see *Reflections*, 80, 243.
50. "In Challenge Not Defense," *Poetry* 52 (1938), 212-29.
51. "The God in the Car," *Poetry* 52 (1938), 340.
52. "A Letter from Archibald MacLeish," *Poetry* 52 (1938), 342-43.
53. *Collected Poems*, 330.
54. MacLeish worked on *Fortune* for Henry Luce, fellow graduate of Hotchkiss and Yale, who allowed him to spend part of each year writing poetry. *Fortune* during the thirties was a hotbed of leftists; see MacDonald, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 8-11. Alice G. Marquis describes thirties magazines in *Hopes and Ashes: The Birth of Modern Times 1929-1939* (New York, 1986), 91-139.
55. For an impartial discussion of this controversy, see Charles C. Alexander, *Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth-Century America* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1980), 246-55. For a partial one, see Dwight MacDonald, "Kulturbolshewismus & Mr. Van Wyck Brooks," *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 203-14 (and *passim*, for nasty comments on MacLeish).
56. *The Irresponsibles*, (New York, 1940), 31.
57. "Postwar Writers and Prewar Readers," *New Republic* 10 (June, 1940), 789-90.
58. Wilson, "Archibald MacLeish and 'the Word,'" *New Republic* (1 July 1940), 31, 32; Zabel, "The Poet on Capitol Hill," *Partisan Review* 8 (1941), 3; Rascoe, "The Tough-Muscle Boys of Literature," *American Mercury* 51 (1940), 370, 374.
59. "The Next Philosophy," *NAR* 217 (1923), 698-704. MacLeish admitted the hoax, in which he and Mason celebrated a nonexistent philosopher, in "Notebooks 1924-1938," *Poetry* 72 (1948), 40.
60. As director of OFF and especially as assistant director of OWI, MacLeish tried to influence these agencies to disseminate not just daily facts about the war but the values and goals behind it. In this effort he was rebuffed, and he resigned from OWI in early 1943. On MacLeish's involvement see Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information 1942-1945* (New Haven, 1978), 9-42.
61. "The Strategy of Truth" (address delivered April 1942), *A Time to Act* (Boston, 1943), 27.
62. "The Responsibility of the Press" (address delivered April 1942), *A Time to Act*, 13.
63. "Divided We Fall" (address delivered March 1942), *A Time to Act*, 121.
64. "The Poet on Capitol Hill (Part 2)," *Partisan Review* 8 (1941), 145.
65. Quoted in Eva M. Goldschmidt, "Introduction" to Archibald MacLeish, *Champion of a Cause: Essays and Addresses on Librarianship* (Chicago, 1971), 6.
66. *The American Cause* (New York, 1941), 39.
67. Robert S. Benjamin, ed., *I Am an American: By Famous Naturalized Americans* (Chicago and New York, 1941), vii-ix. The twenty-six contributors included Thomas Mann, Claudette Colbert and Albert Einstein.
68. "The Power of the Book" (address delivered May 1942), *A Time to Act*, 150.
69. "The Belief in Man," *Freedom Is the Right to Choose* (Boston, 1951), 157.
70. "The Image of Victory" (address delivered May 1942) *A Time to Act*, 179.
71. As Charles C. Alexander has argued, that "what intellectuals and artists did should contribute directly to social change . . . fell into critical disrepute. Both the idea of a national culture and the idea of socially purposeful art, according to the postwar critical consensus,

expressed an inherent fallacy about a necessarily idiosyncratic creative process." *Here the Country Lies*, 242.

72. *Collected Poems*, 382-84, 403, 429-30.

73. *Poetry and Experience* (Boston), 118, 142.

74. Reprinted in revised form as "Bubble of Blue Air," *Riders on the Earth*, xiii-xiv, and elsewhere, e. g., Erich Lessing, *Discoverers of Space: A Pictorial Narration*, John Drury, tr. (West Germany, 1969), 4.

75. *Habits of the Heart*, 252.

76. Rosenberg, for example, scorned MacLeish as "the Poet Leader who has put poetry in the place formerly occupied by God ("The God in the Car," 338, 340), and Zabel surmised that the opening of World War II gave MacLeish "his chance to impress on his fellow-citizens the fact that a Milton not only should be living in this hour but by miraculous good fortune is ("The Poet on Capitol Hill," 4).

77. "Comment: Archibald MacLeish," *Poetry* 38 (1931), 155.

78. *Poetry and Experience*, 119.