

LETTER FROM THE EAST

By E. B. White



Photograph from Bert Hardy Advertising Archive / Getty

All kinds of new, interesting developments are taking place around me, and I feel always a little behind events. Our new post office, now nearing completion, has two picture windows in the front, and I think this is in preparation for the day when the mail arrives in town by rocket. The windows will give the postmaster an unobstructed view of the sky, so he will be able to see the mail coming. A rocket group over in Lincolnville have been making some test shots from their pad, and everything has been going pretty well. They have retrieved quite a lot of mail from Penobscot Bay, not much the worse for its trip, and I imagine their aim is improving all the time and one of these days a sack of mail will drop into the center of town or possibly go right through one of the picture windows. It will probably contain a letter for me from the National Geographic Society notifying me that I am now eligible for membership.

In addition to its picture windows, the new post office will have a flush toilet—another federal first for our town. The old office has no toilet; the postmaster just walks home—a pleasant break in any man's day. Soon, with the new conveniences, he will be cooped up in the office for the entire working session. In some respects, this is a backward step. I am a great believer in a person's getting out into the air every chance he gets.

We have a brand-new mail-delivery system in Maine now, called the Metro system. Instead of letters' being sorted in a nearby office, the way they used to be, they are now sorted in the county seat. This has greatly stepped up the distance a letter travels if it is just headed for somebody in the neighborhood. Many a letter that would formerly have gone a mile or two is now quite well travelled by the time it reaches its destination. If I write a letter to a friend in the village a couple of miles away and drop the letter at the post office that is nearest my house, the letter gets taken all the way to Ellsworth, which is about twenty-five miles in the wrong direction. There it gets placed in either the right sack or the wrong sack, according to the way things are going in Ellsworth that day, and then it is rushed back across the county and goes down the road to the addressee. A better way, really, would be for me to take the letter in my hand and start out on foot with it, wearing a bright-orange cap so as to negotiate the deer crossings safely, and hand it to my friend. This would get me out into the air.

Before the Metro system went into effect, I could put a letter for New York in the mailbox in front of our house toward the end of the afternoon and get an answer back

in four days. With the new, improved system, it takes five days. Postmaster General Summerfield is still not satisfied and is full of plans for a new kind of electronic “speed mail,” by which a letter can be flashed across the country in a matter of seconds. He says that although the letter must submit to being reproduced, the sanctity of the mail will be preserved, because “no one but the machine” will have a chance to read it. I have thought this over and am still undecided about letting a machine see my private correspondence. The modern machine is rapidly acquiring man’s characteristics, and nothing I have read lately has convinced me that machines are as closemouthed as we have always tended to think they are.

Railroad passenger service has also been modernized in my state. This was accomplished by the simple, bold act of removing the trains altogether, which is about as modern as you can get and gives Maine the distinction of being the first state on President-elect Kennedy’s new frontier. Settlers are arriving every day in covered station wagons. The last train between Bangor and Portland ran on September 5th, and the last State of Maine Express, between New York and Portland, ran on October 29th. This about winds up railroading. I noticed, though, that when a group of Democrats visited Bangor on a campaign swing just before the election, they arrived in what was dubbed a “victory train.” They had hired a truck and fixed the back end of it to look like the rear platform of a whistle-stopping Pullman car. The gubernatorial candidate, Frank Coffin, stood on the simulated platform and advocated a plan for developing a “progressive spirit” in Maine, in an effort to keep talented young people in the state. I think progress has already been made in that direction; there is certainly no way a talented young person can escape from this area by *rail*, unless he wants to be crated and shipped out as a live animal.

Some of the lobstermen along the coast are complaining about a new hazard in their business—skin divers. They say the frogmen swim down and steal lobsters from traps on bottom. The Sea and Shore Fisheries Department is taking the matter seriously and is thinking of hiring two skin divers as underwater enforcement agents. These, I guess, will be our first submarine policemen, and their work will be almost as complex as that of the United Nations troops in the Congo. I presume they will be armed with bows and arrows, and will shoot anyone found robbing a trap.

Over on Mount Desert Island, there has been a population explosion among white-tailed deer, and this poses a problem in game management. Hunting is illegal on the island, and the National Park Service people are faced with whittling down the deer population without actually killing any deer. The plan is to shoot about two hundred deer with tranquillizing pellets, capture them while they are tranquil, and remove them to the mainland, where they will be released in the woods, lose their tranquillity, regain their suspicion, and then be shot in the normal manner by licensed hunters with real bullets. You have to meet these modern problems head on. Of course, there are always a few deer that swim back and forth between Mount Desert Island, where hunting is illegal, and the mainland, where hunting is permitted. This constant movement back and forth keeps changing the population count in a very vexatious way, and it may become necessary to post extra skin divers beneath the surface along the principal water crossings. A deer will not be able to smell the frogmen, because of their being underwater, and the men can take a census by looking up from below. It is believed that if the tranquillizing program proves ineffective the deer on the island will be shot by game wardens with live ammunition, and the meat distributed to schoolchildren and hospital patients. This would save one step in the process of getting a piece of venison from the woods to the table.

During the Presidential campaign, both candidates flirted around with America's farm problem; they discussed quotas, surpluses, the soil bank, price supports, and controls. To the best of my knowledge, though, neither candidate put his finger on the root of the farm problem; namely, that the farmer himself has disappeared. In his place stands a wholly new man, a fabulous fellow, part industrialist, part mechanic, part chemist. The farm as a source of individual needs and a supplier of personal wants has almost vanished from the scene. In its place is a sort of dirt-factory operation, and the land is not so much cultivated as it is mined for gold. Curiously enough, among the few farmers who are still doing things in an old-fashioned or backhanded way are fellows like me, not truly countrymen at all but merely dudes who have the time or the money, or both, for such bygone frivolities as raising some of the stuff they eat and drink.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

How to Write a New Yorker Cartoon Caption: Adam Conover Edition

Thirty years ago, almost every house along this road was hooked up to a family cow. In summer you would see her in the pasture or staked out in a field; in winter her presence would be known by the conical pile of manure against the barn, its apex under the window of the tieup. Most homeowners planted a garden, raised fruits and vegetables and berries, and put their harvest in jars against the long winter. Almost everyone had a few hens picking up the assorted proteins of yard and field. If you walked into a man's barn, you found a team of work horses shifting their weight from one foot to another. This pleasing rural picture has been retouched until it is hardly recognizable. The family cow has gone the way of the ivory-billed woodpecker. Householders no longer plant gardens if they can avoid it; instead, they work hard, earn money, and buy a TV set and a freeze. Then, acting on advices from the TV screen, they harvest the long, bright, weedless rows at the chain store, bringing home a carton of tomatoes with eye appeal and a package of instant potatoes. The family flock of hens has also disappeared. I still have a flock secreted in my barn, but it is not considered the thing any more if you are to enjoy a high standard of living. Hens, if kept at all, must be kept in multiples of a thousand. The largest building that has been erected in this vicinity in recent years is an egg factory—a handsome four-story ovulation arena housing about eight thousand birds. An elevator lifts boughten grain to a high bin, from which an endless chain carries it around the pens in troughs. The owner, one helper, and the Bangor

Hydro-Electric Company can take care of the whole operation. The pens do not contain roosts and dropping boards, which are now old hat. The modern hen just sleeps around.

A farm paper that I subscribe to recently sent a poultry reporter to the Maritime Provinces, and he came back with the news that the family flock is on the wane in New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia, and that farming in those regions is on the move. He attributes some of the new ways to television. A lot of farm families who used to rise early are now late sleepers, and this has worked changes in their husbandry. Both Nixon and Kennedy have been guests of Jack Paar, but I don't recall that they found any connection between the lateness of the hour and America's farm problem. "In travelling," wrote the reporter, "we could hardly get a cup of coffee before 10 A.M. We thought it interesting to see how quickly customs of people change with a little higher economic level of living." As a man who tries to keep his level of living high, I find it necessary to walk steadily back downhill toward where we all used to be. I still live fairly high on the hog, but it takes an unfaltering spirit of retrogression to accomplish it. The minute I follow the crowd, my standard of living goes down.

I heard a TV comedian the other day make a crack about one of the early-morning educational programs on the air. "It's O.K.," he said. "Anybody who watches television at six in the morning is stupid and needs educating." But I tuned in at seven one morning to watch a program listed as "Today on the Farm," hoping to find out what's the matter. The thing started off with a hillbilly singer plucking away at my early cobwebs and then swung into a study of modern pig farming. The picture showed a sow during farrowing. She was in a white-walled hospital room, under anesthesia. The farmer, dressed for surgery and sterile up to his elbows, was removing her uterus and its interesting load, in order that the pigs might come into the world without being exposed to disease germs. I watched for a while, but I had chores to do and had to turn off before I found out what the man did with the uterus—whether he replaced it in the sow or used it for packaging potato chips. Anyway, it was a clear picture of Today on the Farm, and it stayed in my mind while I was down in the barn cellar in a high state of unsterility, tending some females of a different order. There is still a pigpen in my barn, and it recalled to my mind certain delicious nights when I had sat up with a sow, receiving each tiny pig as it came slithering into the lantern gleam and placing it in a fairly sterile whiskey carton until such time as its mother was ready to receive it. I

couldn't help comparing the scenes I remembered with the progressive scene I had just watched on television. And I couldn't help feeling pleased that among the females with whom I was at the moment engaged every uterus was in place.

The effects of television on our culture and on our tone are probably even greater than we suspect from the events of the last few years. TV's effect on political campaigning was great, and, as Richard Rovere recently pointed out in these pages, not entirely healthy. The debates were not conducive to reflection and sobriety; they encouraged quick, cagey answers delivered in headlong style to beat the clock. TV has kept the farmer up late at night, has lured the unwary candidate to offshore islands, and has drawn quiz contestants first into chicanery, then into perjury. It has given liver bile and perspiration a permanent place in the living room—the world's most honored secretions.

John Crosby, who watched television for a living until he felt himself getting loopy, wrote a very instructive column about the whole business several months back. Viewers, he reported, are less concerned about the falsity and fraud of commercials than about the annoyance of them. This is true, and it is unsettling. But you have to go beyond the mere characteristics of commercials to get at the real source of the annoyance. The physical form of TV is so familiar to all of us by this time that we seldom examine it with a fresh gaze. I believe that the basic shape of the audiovisual world is inferior to the shape of the world of journalism and the world of the stage and music hall. The trouble with TV is not that the programs are poor and the commercials sometimes repulsive but that the advertising matter is not in direct competition with the editorial matter, as it is in newspapers and magazines. I see no hope of improving television until this structural fault is corrected.

Take the world of journalism, which is the one I am most familiar with. If you open a copy of the *Times* to a page that has in one column a Macy ad displaying a set of china and in an adjoining column a news story about China itself, your eye makes a choice; you read about Macy's china or about Mao's China, according to your whim. It's a free selection. But if you turn your TV set to a channel, only one image appears, and after you have watched for a few moments, an advertiser buttonholes you and says his piece in a loud voice while you listen or try not to listen, as the case may be. Thus, your attention is not just invited by the commercial, it is to a large extent preempted.

Preemption of this sort does not occur in periodicals. It cannot occur. There, advertising matter competes with editorial matter for the reader's attention, and it is fair competition.

Open *The New Yorker*. You may start reading a Profile and, in midcourse, switch to a shoe ad, either because the author of the Profile has allowed your attention to wander or because your feet are killing you. Or you may start reading an automobile ad and switch to the Race Track column, horses suddenly seeming, by contrast with cars, more amusing or more profitable. Whatever happens to you as you dip and sway in these pages happens because of competition. The text and the ads are on an even footing. The choice is yours. I think the cause of my own exasperation with television is that I resent having my attention preempted by anyone at all, whether pitchman or prophet. And because television has access to both eye and ear it presents a far more complex problem than do newspapers and magazines, which command only the eye. The problem is stickier, and no easy solution suggests itself.

Another structural difference between television and publishing is that in the case of magazines each article or poem or story is supported by the whole body of advertising, lumped, and not by an individual advertiser. In television it's the other way round; a TV show is usually identified with a sponsor and his product. The sponsor not only backs the show, he gets it up—with the help, of course, of his Madison Avenue outriders. Thus, Chevrolet has Dinah Shore for its girl, Kraft Cheese has Perry Como for its boy. Suppose this passionate arrangement obtained in the world of periodicals; you'd have Walter Kerr reviewing the theatre for Hart, Schaffner & Marx, and you'd have Walter Lippmann cleaning up the political scene for Fab. Such an arrangement would be unnerving, to say the least. If Hart, Schaffner & Marx happened to own a piece of a show, Mr. Kerr would twitch in his seat so violently that he would wear out his critical judgment before the first-act curtain.

In newspapers and magazines (good old newspapers and magazines!), a great number of advertisers (the sum total of those represented) simply join forces in supporting the daring venture of putting out an issue; they buy space and hope to attract some unwary reader's glance, but they don't buy a writer or an artist, they don't create material, and their products are dissociated from the work and the personalities of the men and

women who do create the editorial content. How different is TV, where the sponsor and his agency are in the saddle most of the time! Correction: the whole time.

The TV industry should realize that being in possession of a customer's ear is a responsibility unlike that of being in possession of his eye. The eye can reject an image, but the ear cannot escape from sound. TV from the start has seized this advantage and exploited it to the hilt, and from the start the audience has resented it. The exploitation mounts, the resentment mounts, and I think the resentment will continue to grow until something gives way and busts.

I'm a firm believer in the system of having private enterprise support public utterance; advertising is the safest and best foundation for free speech. It is also diverting and instructive in itself, being the showcase for our national dream, and people like to study advertising, provided they do so of their own free will. Advertising becomes objectionable and irritating only when it gets the upper hand, and that is exactly what it has got in television. The basic design of the medium is somehow defective.

Ideally, if TV is not to preempt the attention of the viewer and is to permit him a free choice of material, such as he enjoys with newspapers and magazines, a TV set should have two screens, one right next to the other—a delightful, if chaotic, situation. One screen would be the showcase for advertising, the other the showcase for editorial matter. The revenue from Screen 1 would support the material on Screen 2—the debates, the panels, the drama, the weather, and the news. Stations and networks would be in the same boat with publications; the editors would put the whole show together, without one single assist from advertising genius. Ronald Reagan, instead of appearing for General Electric, would appear for Ronald Reagan. Advertising would be regularly scheduled and would have its separate listing in the guide. A master switch would be at the viewer's hand. If he desired utter confusion, he could watch both screens at once. If something occurring on one screen seemed more diverting than the thing occurring on the other, he could flip. The viewer would enter his living room and find both screens going full blast—bedlam. On the advertising screen Zsa Zsa Gabor would be giving the news of underarm security; on the editorial screen the Secretary of State would be giving the news of national security. The viewer could decide which presentation, which person, seemed the more attractive or instructive. No program would have a patron, every program would enjoy the support of the entire field of advertising, and Dinah

Shore could see the U.S.A. in a moving van if she wanted to. I do not sketch the outlines of this dizzying structure to show the solution to the problem of TV, merely to show what the problem really is—or what I think it really is. The problem is how to support the editorial stuff with the advertising stuff without subjecting the viewer to a thousand indignities and without compelling singers and actors and reporters and philosophers to identify themselves with hair sprays, bug sprays, floor wax, and marshmallows. If television advertising were truly in competition with editorial matter, instead of being in command of it, the quality of TV advertising would immediately improve. It would have to, in order to stay alive.

The most troublesome result of television's format is that, slowly but surely, the industry has pushed almost every celebrated performer into the role of pitchman. There is hardly a person of any note in the TV world who does not lead a double life; right in the middle of whatever he is saying or doing there comes a pause, and the performer holds up a can of cleaning fluid and recites the lesson. Prior to this unseemly pause, the actor or the singer or the ballplayer was obviously a person whose opinions and ideas were spontaneous and his own; then it suddenly turns out that his good opinion of the sponsor's product has been prefabricated and is, in reality, the opinion of somebody else. (Next week the sponsorship may change and his good opinion will shift smoothly to the new product, for the same or more money.) This is a relatively new cloud in the American sky, this practice of commandeering people in the arts for advertising and promotion. Across the TV screen marches an endless procession of peddlers. There is no parallel to it in the publishing world. Some TV performers like it, some hate it, some, like Godfrey, are switch-hitters, as happy in one role as in the other; most (I think) simply accept it as an occupational hazard. No matter what a man thinks of it, he is not in a good position to hold out against it; the pressure is always on.

As a viewer, I feel demeaned. I hate all kinds of fuzziness. I believe that when a TV personality speaks disinterestedly one moment, interestedly the next, it does something to the performer and something to me. Even after so many years I experience a slight internal twinge, as though I had taken a tiny bullet from a distant gun.

A year or so ago, payola was in the news and TV was in the doghouse. Americans were shocked at the way money was being passed around for sly promotional services. But payola strikes me as much less disquieting than pay. Payola has been around since the

invention of money; it will always be around, because there will always be a new crop of alert characters willing to take money for undercover service. Payola is simply an evil associated with the human character, which is less than perfect. But the steady drift of people from the lively arts into the ranks of advertising is not an evil; it is a mist settling on our pond. The old clarity simply isn't there any more. In its place we have the new, big, two-headed man, one mouth speaking his own words, smiling his own smile, the other mouth speaking the words that have been planted, smiling the smile that has been paid for in advance. This is nationally demoralizing.

If anybody thinks I'm implying that TV artists have compromised themselves by giving the pitch, he fails to understand my complaint. I do not think anybody has compromised himself; I think everybody has fallen heir to a system that is disagreeable, disenchanting, interruptive, and unhealthy. Any person who, as a sideline, engages in promoting the sale of a product subjects his real line of work to certain strains, and fogs the picture of himself in the minds of all. It seems sad that the TV industry, on which ride the country's hopes for entertainment, education, and information, should have felt it necessary, as a first step, to equip its pundits, its clowns, its reporters, and even its children, with something to sell. ♦

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