

Salvaging the national honor?

THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

by Richard A. Rand

If Publicity has done its job, then everyone will have heard by now of the Library of America—an ambitious series of books being funded by the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Everyone will have heard of the project's attenuated arrival (it was first proposed by the late Edmund Wilson in the early 1960s); of its plan to furnish the world with the works of the greater and lesser authors of this country, set forth in elegant volumes; and, finally, of the extraordinary collaboration that the project has prompted between forces normally opposed or estranged: The series is to be edited by the academic community, on the one hand, and manufactured and distributed by "the Trade" on the other. More than a hundred volumes of up to 1,500 pages apiece have been planned; the four inaugural volumes made their appearance last May (one each for Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Harriet Beecher Stowe), and they are to be followed, over the next three years, by another twenty-one volumes. The pace and the yield of the Library thereafter will be determined by the economics of the enterprise—the presence or absence of public funding and the response of buyers in bookstores and through subscriptions (there are meant to be no fewer than 250,000 of these).

All this, as we say, should now be common knowledge to the general public or, more precisely, to the public that *reads*. One of the most striking circumstances of the Library's launching is the particular means by which it was brought off: Intense and broadly cast, the publicity was almost exclusively confined to the printed word, to learned journals, little magazines, big newsweeklies, and the daily press. It has been a celebration *of* the printed word and *by* the printed word, one of those rare occasions when Literature affirms, through its own resources, its very existence, rights, and goals—its very self-image at home and abroad. A praiseworthy event of self-praise, full of high hopes and high claims, not the least of them being that each volume, printed on acid-free paper, is destined to last for five hundred years, a life-span perhaps exceeding that of the Republic itself.

We review the facts because of the questions they inspire: What is the point of this Library? Where did

it come from, and where is it headed? Is it needed? timely? functional? We are not the first to inquire. These very questions were raised in a brief prospectus for the Library by Professor Daniel Aaron of Harvard University, who, according to an editorial colleague, is "the head of the whole show." Before we peruse the inaugural volumes, therefore, let us turn to the prospectus itself.

According to Professor Aaron, the motives for launching the Library are twofold: One is mentioned in a sentence or two, the other at greater length; no connection is drawn between the two, and none, in fact, may exist. The first point, which is asserted in summary fashion as if beyond dispute, concerns nothing less than the National Honor and is a matter of Foreign Relations. To quote from Professor Aaron: "When Edmund Wilson more than twenty years ago called for a uniform series of works by American authors comparable in appearance and comprehensiveness to the French *Pleiade* editions, he was seconded by a number of voices both in and outside the academy. All of them agreed that the absence of such a series in a country as rich as the United States was a national disgrace." Disgrace, we are given to understand, occurs to nations when, on the one hand, they attain a certain material wealth, and when, on the other, they fail to produce a certain edition—a uniform and expensive edition—of the works of the men and women who happened to write in that particular country. This may come as news to the British, the Germans, the Italians, the Russians, the Japanese, and almost every other nation on earth, which, for all their wealth, have little that even remotely resembles the *Pleiade*. And if, for that matter, the French undertook the *Pleiade* from a sense of their own national disgrace, then their identity as a nation is very singular indeed, since the *Pleiade* includes the work of ancient Greece and Rome, and of East, West, South and North—the United States included.

Be this as it may, the Library's first aim is to amend the national disgrace. Its second aim is a pedagogical one—domestic rather than international—though not of the sort that we might first expect of a Harvard professor. These books, says Professor Aaron, are designed "to discover and hold a reading public," though they are "not primarily directed to students." Does such a public really exist? Perhaps. "We can't be

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sure," says Professor Aaron, "who our audience will be, or how large an audience our series will create." He is therefore free to imagine what kind of public might, after all, exist. He imagines two things: First, his audience will lack the sophistication and the patience of the academy, and each volume is therefore unencumbered by scholarly or explanatory material, except for "an afterword of about four pages on textual matters, a very limited set of annotations, and a brief chronology of the author's life." Second, his audience is highly sexed: If it is to read at all, its "desire" for reading will have to be "stimulated," then instantly gratified, through a "seductive" exchange of looks and caresses. To cite the professor once again: "The very presence of uniform, comprehensive, compact, elegant editions of American authors...will stimulate a need where there is now a gap. They will comprise the American Library of Last Resort, seductive in appearance and available when desired....It's a comforting thought to know that large numbers of people will at last have the chance to see and hold and read the attractively printed and bound works of American authors." Which goes a long way toward explaining the opulent, coffee-table (or bedside) format of the Library, decked out in silken ribbons, luscious bindings, and the really wonderful typeface of that most seductive coquette known as Mlle. *Pleiade*. (That she may also have a mind—as seen in her annotations, forewords, and indexes—is nothing to the professor's purpose, given the public he and his colleagues hope to conquer.)

If, then, the Library prospers, it will be happy in love as it rescues the National Honor. These are wonderful motives, and we wish it every success. But will it, and can it, actually succeed? For an answer we must turn to the Library's four inaugural volumes.

SELECTION & INCLUSION

Each volume is devoted to the work of a single author in a specific genre. Thus, in the Melville volume there are the three early novels (*Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*); in the Stowe volume three novels written at different moments in her career (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Minister's Wooing*, *Oldtown Folks*); in the Hawthorne volume a hundred sketches and tales, along with two volumes of the children's tales; and in the Whitman the *Leaves of Grass* (1855 and 1892), *Specimen Days*, and other works of nonfiction prose. The Melville and Hawthorne volumes are elements of a more inclusive enterprise (four volumes each), whereas the Stowe and Whitman are selective, one-shot affairs. Finally, all four volumes are reprints of material published before. The Library, indeed, is a massive reprint operation, and it is as such that its reputation ultimately stands or falls.

Common sense would seem to dictate that reprinting is so modest and straightforward an endeavor that it cannot fail; it simply prints what was printed before. But common sense is sadly misinformed on this point. There are at least three ways in which a reprint can fail. First, it may duplicate a reprint that already and currently exists in a cheaper and better form and so will fail by virtue of its sheer redundancy. Second,

WALT WHITMAN

Complete Poetry and Collected Prose: *Leaves of Grass* (1855); *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92); *Complete Prose Works* (1892); Supplementary Prose
edited by Justin Kaplan
(1,380 pp.)

HERMAN MELVILLE

Typee; *Omoo*; *Mardi*
edited by G. Thomas Tanselle
(1,333 pp.)

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Uncle Tom's Cabin; *The Minister's Wooing*; *Oldtown Folks*
edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar
(1,477 pp.)

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Tales and Sketches; *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*; *Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys*
edited by Roy Harvey Pearce
(1,493 pp.)

(The Library of America; distributed by the Viking Press; \$25.00 each)

it can package its reprint in a manner that renders the text essentially unintelligible. And third, it can reprint its materials in a sequence that makes them entirely different from what they were in the first place—in which case the "reprint" is really a fantastic invention of dubious value. The Library, alas, stumbles into all three pitfalls in its inaugural volumes, with the sole exception, perhaps, of the Melville. The three Melville novels do exist in various cheap reprints, but these are progressively harder to come by, and in any event they fit together very nicely in a single volume—both in their status as early works and as works on the common topic of the South Seas.

Turning to the other three, we begin with *Whitman*. As the world well knows, Whitman is famous for *Leaves of Grass*—take that away and there is little left to discuss. But which *Leaves of Grass*? The Library tells us that the book went through a half-dozen major revisions between 1855 and 1892 (the so-called "death-bed edition"); and recognizing the importance of these revisions, the Library has reprinted the first version as well as the last. To which we reply: Why not publish one of the intervening revisions as well? (The famous *Pleiade* does precisely this in the case of Rousseau's *Emile*). Had it done so, the Library would have escaped the embarrassment of utter redundancy, for it is merely redundant to print yet again the death-bed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, this being the one and only edition that Americans will have on the bookshelf (Whitman ordered it thus). Moreover, there is already available a better edition of that particular edition, from the Norton Critical Library—better because it includes a number of tantalizing left-overs in an Appendix.

Where the *Whitman* is a nonevent, the *Stowe* is more nearly a disaster. Stowe, like Whitman, is the author of one justly celebrated book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It would make sense to reprint her other novels if, and only if, the Library intended to publish her complete works. Eight of Mrs. Stowe's novels have

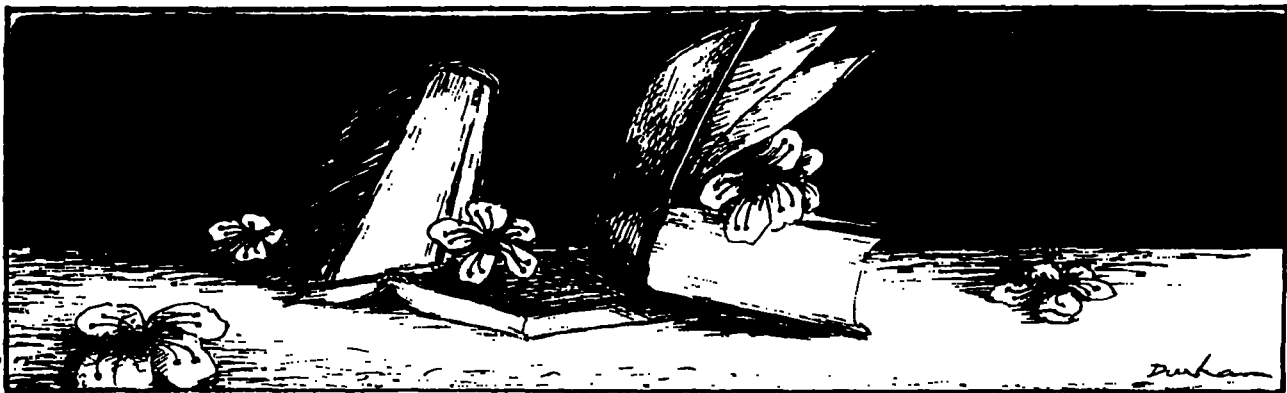
fallen into oblivion, and it makes no difference which two or three of these one may elect to retrieve; they all fell into oblivion because they richly deserved it (Edmund Wilson, the patron saint of this Library, is especially devastating on the topic of Mrs. Stowe's fiction in his *Patriotic Gore*). But what, on the other hand, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? Can we, in the years 1982 and after, be entirely confident that we will actually be able to read that book? Straight off? There are many codes at work in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and all of them are dated: the codes of the sentimental novel, of the antislavery movement, of nineteenth-century Puritanical Christianity, not to mention the code of a highly evolved and problematic nineteenth-century feminism. Now it happens that Mrs. Stowe herself was only too well aware of this situation: Less than a year after its publication, she came to the rescue of her very own novel with a long and fascinating *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Why wasn't the *Key* included here, along with Mrs. Stowe's many clarifying (and unreprinted) essays on theology, politics, and household economy? A great chance has been missed, for, if the ancillary materials had been included, the novel would stand an excellent chance of being "recovered" by an otherwise baffled readership. In its current form, it is merely brought down to the level of Mrs. Stowe's other, inferior fiction.

What, finally, of the *Hawthorne*? Here the Library has fallen into the worst trap of all: It has published something that Hawthorne never wrote, never published, and indeed went out of his way *not* to publish throughout his entire adult life. At question is the way in which the volume is organized. It claims to reprint, among other things, the *Twice-told Tales*, the *Mosses from an Old Manse*, and *The Snow Image, and Other Twice-told Tales*. These are certainly excellent works and very much in need of a reprint. But the Library does not see fit to reprint them. Rather, it has taken the individual pieces comprising those volumes, along with other pieces that were never collected by Hawthorne, and has printed them in the sequence of their periodical publication (which is not even the sequence of their composition). This is an act of amazing violence. Hawthorne took exceptional pains to assemble his volumes, just as a florist assembles a bouquet: He culled certain pieces written at widely different times and on varying subjects, combining them according to a logic that he alone, perhaps, understood but which he always asserted with the high-

est sense of artistic seriousness. Hawthorne did not write for periodicals; rather, he wrote volumes of stories embroidered with framing material (prefaces, notes, peculiar ascriptions, and the like). Indeed, his first major endeavor in publication was to circulate such a volume of stories in the hopes of finding a house. When no one would publish his volume, Hawthorne's agent made its individual stories available to various magazines, a liberty for which Hawthorne never forgave him. In 1854, some twenty years after the event, he was still writing angrily about that man who "cut up" his volume of stories. More than a question of tact is involved here. Who, for example, would dream of dismantling *Leaves of Grass*, publishing each leaf in chronological order? Does a florist arrange his bouquets according to the spectrum? What, indeed would happen to the *Pleiade* if it had treated Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* as the Library of America has treated Hawthorne's tales?

The blunders of the Hawthorne volume—and, to a lesser degree, of the Stowe and Whitman volumes—are of a thoroughly American kind. As with any reprint operation, the Library came into being to recover an ancient and partly forgotten asset. In the words of the prospectus once again, "many students and the public at large have only a limited idea of the variety and richness of literature so long neglected, buried, compartmentalized, and patronized." Allowing that Americans do indeed need assistance in the difficult business of remembering the past, does this Library provide the assistance needed? Not really, or at least not yet. Like the Interstate Highway System, it has been launched on a grand scale with the laudable aim of opening up the literary countryside; and, like the Interstate Highway System, it is in danger of paving over the very landscape it hopes to disclose.

This is not surprising, for, if Americans forget, then its professors necessarily forget also; they, like everyone else, are a symptom of the disease they so eloquently deplore. We may hope that the situation will change, but as of now the *aficionado* of American letters must turn to the very sort of library (in the words, once again, of the prospectus) that this project was designed to supplant—"a hodgepodge of assorted publications, odd paperbacks, and copies picked up in secondhand bookstores." As for the Library of America, it seems in danger of going the way of The Modern Library, The Syntopicon, and President Eliot's Five-foot Shelf.



Robert Durham