

YALE CLUB
FIFTY VANDERBILT AVENUE
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10017

December 21, '72

Dear O'Rourke:

I replied soon as I received your epistle. I only licked a page here and there. Of course, I believe it's cruel and ludicrous to imprison men for burning draft cards. But what dismays me is that you have now become a paper-bullet writer. There's more politics in literature than letters in the economics and policies of the State.

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It is kind of you to cite me at the conclusion of the volume, but do you realize your opening line you are closely paraphrasing me. And though I had no part in the making of this book, I believe, without bombast, that I have had a good deal to do with the making of William O' Rourke's mind. Atheist that I am, I add, For God's sake return to belles lettres, and bear in mind that a journalistic prose has nothing to with a man who wishes to be a litterateur.

do-

My affections, as always,
128 East 91st Street
Apartment 2 B
New York, N.Y, 10028
Tel: 289-4339

Paul O'Connell

EDWARD DAHLBERG: LETTERS TO A YOUNG WOULD-BE WRITER

Edward Dahlberg

With annotations by William O'Rourke

The letters found below are those I still have from the writer Edward Dahlberg (1900–1977), who was my teacher for two courses one semester at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. I had what is usually called a checkered history as an undergraduate. I went for one year to Rockhurst College (now University) in Kansas City, Missouri, did badly, and, after spending the summer working for the Santa Fe Opera, barely managed to transfer to the state university branch in my hometown, then a so-called streetcar university, insofar as it educated local students, not being the residential campus it is now. After a listless academic year there, with the exception of the classes I took with Dahlberg in the spring semester of 1965, I went to Cape Cod to work as part of the annual migration college kids take to become cheap seasonal labor. Though, unlike most of the hundreds who did so, I stayed on the Cape, in Hyannis, after the summer, rented a room “fit only for suicide” as a friend put it back then, and eventually secured a job at a craft shop that remained open for the fall and changed apartments to a cozier one above the store. The owners had decamped to Boston for work during Christmas time, making enamels on copper in a downtown department store window.

*I was attempting to write my version of the great American novel, a long piece of juvenilia titled *The Armless Warrior*. The Vietnam War, needless to say, was raging at the time. In order to delay being drafted I returned to Kansas City in January of 1966 and re-enrolled at UMKC.*

*Dahlberg had already written a great American novel/memoir, called *Because I Was Flesh*, which appeared in 1964 and is one of the most prominent of neglected and unread masterpieces by an American writer. There are a number of reasons for that, some revealed in his letters to me, others the product of the literary culture and marketplace. Dahlberg had returned to UMKC for the fall semester that I had forgone. When I returned in January, I learned that Dahlberg had decamped before the semester's end. It evidently took me a few months to summon the strength to write him. Dahlberg was 65 and I was 20 when the correspondence began (he was born in July 1900 and I in December of 1945.) I do not have copies of my letters to Dahlberg. They are among his papers kept at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, so what I wrote to him remains speculative to me. I'm sure they were*

inflamed and appropriately jejune. The letters that I have from Dahlberg are all similar in their physicality, mailed in small-sized Air Mail pre-stamped envelopes (8 cents!), chevroned around the edges with red and blue slashes, the letters themselves often typed on cheap yellow paper half the size of standard ms. paper. In between Dahlberg's letters that follow in chronological order I will comment, I hope where helpful, supplying context and explanation, if not excuses. It was on the phone, not in these letters, where Dahlberg once thundered into my ear, "O'Rourke, all excuses are perjuries!"

May 9, '66

Mr. William O'Rourke,
5431 Wyandotte
Kansas City, Missouri.

Dear O'Rourke:

I have your very good letter and thank you for what you say about me. Our situation at the university was almost similar. You had no human being there except myself and I no gifted student but you. I became so discouraged that I told Dr. Ryan, my only friend on the faculty, that I could not stomach the mediocrity of the teachers and the people who never came to learn anything and were quite successful.

These are doleful days, and I should feel quite crestfallen were you to be drafted. I read in the papers (if you can believe anything that is in them) that students now can either go into the peace corps or join the poverty program. Maybe this would be a solution, not the most felicitous one, for you. Unfortunately, it does not matter what college you attend the studies are a humbug; you might in the east meet more intelligent young women and men, but the professors, with the rarest exceptions, are dunciads everywhere.

Should you want me to write to Dr. Ryan in your behalf for any sort of kindness, be sure that I will do so at once. My influence in New York colleges is unmentionable.

I have three books coming out this fall, *Edward Dahlberg Reader*, a volume of my letters, and if I can repair some very bad sentences I wrote a few years ago, and put that logic into the words that is never in life, there should be another volume of mine appearing in Autumn, *The Leafless American*.

Believe me, in one way or another, those have feeling and do their utmost not to be stupid (for no man is wise except by accident) we are all torn piecemeal every day, and of every each hour.

I am very glad that you wrote to me, for I had hoped you would return,

and that maybe I could be useful to you.

Everybody wants to write, but very few wish to read, and so you know I never minded the fact that you chose to study good books instead of the usual, hackneyed scrawl one gets from students and most of our so-called celebrated writers.

Write me when you feel like doing so. Be sure that I always appreciated your character. Had I five O'Rourkes in Kansas City I would have remained there, but then I am demanding miracles of a surd universe.

I repeat, thank you very much for your letter; that is far better than the fusty and tepid best regards that one gets in an epistle nowadays. I lived on the Cape for 6 years, and just about lost my senses during the long, obituary winters when the small snowy hamlets were peopleless.

Edward Dahlberg

64 Rivington Street,
New York, 2, N.Y.

UMKC, back in the mid-Sixties was a much more parochial institution than it is now. Of course, all of America was more parochial in 1965. Dahlberg didn't gather too many friends, or acquire them easily. Academics are famously sensitive about their accomplishments, however puny, and often are prickly in the presence of large, imposing figures who come from either coast to the hinterlands. I hyperbolically ended a reminiscence of Dahlberg a year after he died with the remark, "At the end of his long life he had fewer than six people he would have called 'friend.'" When Jonathan Lethem in 2003 wrote about Dahlberg in Harper's he titled the piece, and the eventual book (2005) it appeared in, "The Disappointment Artist." Lethem quoted from my earliest pieces on Dahlberg in his article, but it was clear Lethem had no notion of anything else I had written.

I had returned in the summer of 1966 to the Santa Fe Opera, where I toiled as a scenic technician. Because of my friendship there with Susan Scott who worked at the opera as a "volunteer", I came to know her parents, the heiress Eleanor Metcalf Scott and the poet Winfield Townley Scott, who out of the blue Charles Baxter called earlier this year (Feb. 19, 2015) toward the end of a book review of H.P. Lovecraft in the New York Review of Books, a "grievously neglected American poet." Good for him. Scott (who had written early in his career on Lovecraft) was the second real writer I had come to know after Dahlberg and I don't find it entirely out of place at this point that my earliest encounters with authors involved the seriously neglected. What my letter from the opera (the

technicians lived at the ranch annexed to the theater) complained of specifically, I do not know, though I had a lot of complaints.

July 30, '66

Mr. William O'Rourke
P.O. Box 2408,
Santa Fe, New Mexico.

My dear O'Rourke:

I have your doleful letter, but what remedy is there for life at your age or mine? You know what feelings I have about our execrable education. But then there is bread, and how to get it, and into I have known many writers who fell into depravity of one sort or another, to fetch lucre.

There is a Hollywood scribbler whom I see on rare occasions who imagines he can debauch his own spirit and that of the populace and at the same time compose an honest book glutted with the truths of a soothsayer. While I was starving, he earned much money, but now that his hopes are wan, and he is hungry, but for fame!

The other day I wrote to a man at the University of Texas who is editing a small volume of miscellaneous essays and a tale, to excise some of my remarks about pathics. Then along came galleys of letters of mine to appear in the *Edward Dahlberg Reader* (which the editor had selected) and there are droll and harsh words about homosexuals, and so I now think I made a mistake, and must write him again to let it be, and take the consequences, for this brood of unnatural half-men, governs reviews and one's book is likely to be interred should one be as offensive as I have been. There will also be a volume of my epistles to be published in November by Braziller, and I have not the scantiest idea which ones are to be printed.

What else can you do but read the wise authors, and somehow you will come out of your tedious perplexities. There were long seasons of drought when no matter what I did I had no luck with women. I earnestly hope you will find one, but not a venomous bitch, and don't get married too early, for it takes a long time to understand anything at all about one's self, and by the time you have the least comprehension of your nature, you are likely to discover that you have wed a woman who is absolutely alien to you. But all advice is worthless, but I give it, anyway, for I have no other choice; for should I be mute I would blame myself if you blunder, and of course offering you counsel may be wrong too.

This is a barbarous, sullen town (no pun), and I feel that soon as I com-

mence to write I go into exile. But I think every man of feeling is banished.

Don't imagine that it is easy for me to compose a book, or that I am any less of a worm than you. It is always hard, and you do not know whether you are putting down elegant platitudes, wandering, or if you should not cast the whole idea away. Even so, what is a man to do with his life? I cannot be a drone, and have no thought of being a drudge either. The two dilemmas are: the woman who inflames the heart and the flesh, and the talent to do something with those heavy, endless hours.

Auden is another pseudo-male, and so you are quite right in rejecting him.

Write me whenever you wish to do that. I would suggest other books for you to read, but I imagine you have by no means consumed the list I gave you; however, if there are ancient sages you desire to be familiar with please let me know.

Wish my rejoinder were more useful to you; the truth is I have been in the dumps, since for months I have been taking elaborate notes and scrabbling what lines I know not for a literary autobiography.

Be sure of my friendliest regards, and that I always like to hear from you. I shall be here until about the middle of September.

Edward Dahlberg

820 Arguello Road,
Santa Barbara, California 93105

*Well, I can only surmise I mentioned that I was drawing the attention of a number of men at the opera, but none of the women. Some elegant paradox I was attempting, no doubt. In any case, Dahlberg's attitudes regarding gays in the 1960s mirrored the mainstream's (only in his prejudices was Dahlberg ordinary), though complicated, I'm sure, by those gay men who most admired him and were his patrons. And, however Dahlberg spoke, wrote, about women in his letters, and in person, what was clear to me was that he thought about them quite a bit. I've always considered the most common sort of misogyny displayed by men was their thinking about women not at all. And lest anyone thinks I rejected an overture from W. H. Auden, the reference, I'm sure, was to Auden's libretto, or some part of it, to Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, which Santa Fe was mounting that summer. When I encountered Auden a few years later at Columbia University (he was visiting a poetry workshop there) I refrained from telling him I had worked on *The Rake's Progress*, and had studied his libretto closely. I did, though, sit silently fascinated by the length of ash he maintained on the cigarette*

he was smoking, while a student, I think it was Hugh Seidman, recited a poem.

November 29, '66

Mr. William O'Rourke,
5431 Wyandotte,
Kansas, City, Missouri.

My dear O'Rourke:

I am always pleased to get your letters, and cannot help but notice some of the sharp and deeply-felt phrases. Would that I could in some way heal your despondency, but that is impossible. Each one carries his sack of suffering, and even could another help him, he would not know how to do it.

A pity too that your friend has been drafted. I prize my few friends, and who claims he has more than that is a liar and a braggart.

The Reader and a volume of my Letters will be published the latter part of January; and three of my books will be issued as paperbacks.

There is another volume of mine, *The Leafless*, which a San Francisco publisher will bring out in the close future.

Meantime, I am at work on a literary autobiography, and at this writing am dealing with those young enthusiasts of the Muses, Ernest Walsh, Kay Boyle, Robert McAlmon and Emanuel Carnevali, forgotten this day, but then that is the way it is. A parcel of this is supposed to appear in the *New York Times* in their Sunday Book Supplement.

Have been invited to go out as a Distinguished Professor (their wording) to a California university, but am fearful of accepting this. One has either to contend with academic bottleheads or untalented students. And the experience at Kansas City was a remorseless ordeal, and quite unreplenishing. I am not really a schoolmaster, for writing is my life, and my life otherwise is zero, except when friends come. I am very delighted to hear that you admire Dr. William M. Ryan; he is the only scholar out there and my dear friend.

I know this is a surd reply to your epistle; and what makes it so is that I would like to be useful to you, but at least now don't know what to do. Words should be curative, but it is hard to tell what they may be.

Maybe, if you can manage it, you ought to get out of Kansas City unless that means relinquishing affectionate companions. I may be doing some teaching at an eastern college, nearby, but don't know yet. Then there is that devil, lucre, which always haunts us. But tell me what you would like to do,

and let me see whether I can help. Be sure I want to do that if possible.

I don't hesitate to tell you about a brother, but there is little to divulge, would that it were not so, but then our real kin are those who share our conceptions and feelings. Anybody who thinks is an orphan in the earth.

A renowned Italian author came here with two other people and we did a tape-recording together and this will be heard on the principal Rome radio. The Italian translation of *Because I Was Flesh* has had a real reception among serious readers and the intelligentsia in Italy. This I did not know until I was informed.

Write when you feel inclined to do so.

Be sure of my warmest thoughts for you. I always had a strong feeling that you had a different sort of nature, not at all average; I consider the mediocre man insane.

Edward Dahlberg

64 Rivington Street,
New York 2, N.Y.

*Dahlberg had returned to New York City from Santa Barbara and I had returned from Santa Fe to UMKC. It was, officially, my junior year of college. Looking back it is clear I see-sawed from remarkable summers to below ordinary college semesters. Dr. Ryan taught Chaucer and other medieval subjects. I had retained from Santa Fe a 1946 Studebaker pick-up truck, with a metal load bed, painted turquoise in the New Mexican manner, equipped with Atomic Energy Commission tires (they were so stenciled on the sidewalls.) I had a cowboy hat and cowboy boots, but, soon realized that this was no draw on anyone wandering the campus, since all my fellow Midwesterners at UMKC were fleeing such rural and roughshod backgrounds, hoping to be educated and economically advanced. Had I been a student at an east coast university it may have been different. I would have been the other, not the all-too familiar. This is doubtless why Dahlberg keeps referring to my missives as "doleful", as I went on about my somewhat self-imposed cloistered existence. Given the time lapses between letters their doleful qualities might not seem quite so redundant as they do now read collectively. All these "doleful" years I recounted in my 1981 novel, *Idle Hands*, which I demi-dedicated to Dahlberg. During the later 1960s Dahlberg was having something of a renaissance, at least in the publishing world, since *Because I Was Flesh* had been widely praised, if not read.*

February 10, '67

Mr. William O'Rourke,
5431 Wyandotte,
Kansas City, Missouri 64112

My dear O'Rourke:

I believe you know how sympathetic I am with your perplexities. Nor can I tell you how pleased I am that Dr. Ryan is your friend. This pedantic noddle, I am referring to French, of course, who calls me pompous, would not associate with students as Dr. Ryan or I do, and even that sounds, as I write it, like a bombastic remark. This hack was motivated by ferine jealousy and malice. I would not trouble about it except that he was assailing not my book but my character. Not that I go about babbling about my paltry virtues. Be sure, I have been assailed all my life, for one cause or another; that I ever desired to be respectable, a pecuniary adjective, is a foul lie. Since my youth I fled from the petit-bourgeoisie in the academies or in the business world.

I know nothing about the draft board. But I am to be a professor at Columbia University in the Fall and am supposed to teach writing, if one can do that, or be a benison to one human being in the earth.

I believe I told you I had the most rueful experiences with women at your age, and am not suggesting that all the darlings now are falling at my feet. There are scholarships at Columbia, and I could endeavor to secure one for you. But as you say, there is conscription, and then I don't know what you would be relinquishing should you leave Kansas City. I don't think much, except, of course, your family, and that is extremely important. And should you have friends there, and even one female who fetches your imagination, that, too, is a vital consideration.

As Dr. Ryan is a learned medievalist, and language so important to the living waters in the soul, I should not like to see you lose the advantage of hearing his lectures and learning from him,

Everything is a dilemma, and a Burden of Tyre.

You might, if you have a mind to do so, write to Thorpe Menn, the book-editor of the *K.C. Star*, provided you do not afterwards become the victim of his boundless spite. Never fear the strong, but be on guard against the weanling and the feeble mind.

You have, as ever, my very warm thoughts, and if you at any time think I can be useful to you, well, that is what man is born to do.

Edward Dahlberg

64 Rivington Street,
New York 2, N.Y.

I was living at my family home while attending UMKC and that condition obviously affected my mood and demeanor. I read a lot, but wasn't attentive to my studies and was, more or less, affronted by having to sit in, say, a Shakespeare class. I wandered in one day and discovered that there was to be a mid-term exam on three plays I had yet to read. I did summon enoughchutzpah to ask the professor if I could take the exam the next class. I wasn't sure I would ever finish the degree. Dahlberg, meanwhile, published one of the volumes he had mentioned and it was lambasted in the Kansas City Star and I dispatched my own attack of the review to the Star, which, no surprise, ignored it. The "French" Dahlberg mentioned in the letter would be Warren French, who may have done the referenced Star review. He taught 18th century literature at UMKC, which I took, having, at least, exhausted all the literature courses the English department offered. Attacking one of my own professors wouldn't have been out of character for me back then.

April 2, '67

William O'Rourke,
5431 Wyandotte
Kansas City, Missouri.

Dear O'Rourke:

Please forgive me for being so dilatory in replying to your letter. It was kind of you to send a letter to the *Star*, but by now I think enough people know how squalid and malicious was his review.

I rejoice in hearing that you have found female companionship, and hope she is the darling you require. Women nowadays are not very good. It was Homer who called the serving-maids of Penelope bitches, and everything is about the same, but just worse since the days of Attica.

Students are supposed to be coming from England and Europe as well as the United States to attend these alleged courses in writing. I understand the director is endeavoring to secure scholarships for those who cannot afford the tuition. It might be good for you, and maybe I could get this for you. I don't know. There is another and real quandary. Should his girl be what you deeply need, I would be most hesitant to suggest that you come to New York, for here you might be lonely, and though I could introduce you to people, who can take the place of a woman? Let us see what will occur?

How much shall I relish the task? I came to New York when I was twenty-three, and I was a solitary, a halved male for a year, and it was a bleak experience. So I don't want to give you counsel that might be hellebore for you.

This is a garbaged, septic city, where you can meet people with whom you can talk, but the women I see are savages in skirts half a meter in length, and though they look like amorous morsels you are likely to starve to death on such a sparse meal. I wish I could be clear about this. But I am endeavoring to do the best I can. I still don't know how desperate is your desire to be a writer, a good one. We have a plethora of scribblers and require no more. Then I would not like you to pay the cruel price I had to become an author, and then to be reviled by a pismire like French. Should he have a particle of the masculine in him I would be startled. Quite oddly, what raised his bile was my divulgation of Melville's homosexuality. Had he been willing to accept my challenge, then I should have cut him to pieces. For he has neither wit nor learning. Nobody in American letters ever heard of French, and almost every pedant scrabbles a few drossy books which are forgotten within a few weeks after they have come off the university presses.

I expect to go to Long Island to the shore the fag-end of May, and to continue writing, and, of course, reading.

I'm not always so tardy in answering your epistles, and please don't think I was indifferent. I myself was in the dumps despite the national encomia I have received for my books. *The Leafless American* went back to the printer who was drunk when he was setting up type, and so at the end of the book there are one or two lines missing.

You have, as always my warm thoughts; write whenever you have a mind to do so, and I promise to respond straightway.

Professor Edward Dahlberg

64 Rivington Street,
New York 2, N.Y.

Who was the "darling I require" mentioned in his letter? I have no recollection of any relationship in Kansas City at the time. I was getting out a bit more, in my fashion, and had a few friends and I was aware I could make women laugh, my best trait. The reference must have been to Susan Scott, whom I may have mentioned to him. She was writing me and we had been a suspect item for a short period toward the end of the previous summer in Santa Fe. But, in December, I received a Dear John letter and recklessly took off over Christmas break in the Studebaker pickup for Santa Fe in order to attempt to reclaim her.

The pickup threw a rod near Wichita, Kansas, and, after selling a truck I did not own, I continued on to Santa Fe by train. Susan refused to see me, but her mother made me a cup of hot tea, after Susan left me standing, abandoned, on East Alameda as she drove away with her new beau. I was standing forlornly on the dirt road by the meager river with a dunce cap of snow on my head. In the summer of 1967, instead of returning to Santa Fe (the opera had asked me back), I traveled to the Cape to work for my friends, the shop owners, the Karekas, who were doing well. The Santa Fe Opera burnt to the ground that summer. But the season went on and they rebuilt. At the end of the summer I left the Cape and visited Dahlberg at his apartment on Rivington Street. New York City in the Sixties hadn't gone through any real estate revolution yet and much of it, including the Village, appeared unchanged, remaining as it had been for a number of decades. Rivington Street, though not in the Village, certainly retained the atmosphere of the shtetl in the late '60s and Dahlberg's narrow apartment could have housed fresh immigrants. I recall black accordion metal gates guarding the two long front windows that abutted a fire escape. I suppose one of them must have been open, since this would have been the window where Fanny Howe claimed in Poetry magazine a few years ago (July 2008) to have jumped through, escaping Dahlberg's pants-down advances back then. For my visit, Dahlberg sat rooted at his desk, which was prominent in the apartment's front room and I in a chair across from of him. If we had a meal I don't remember it, but there might have been cheese, crackers, fruit. This was the first time I had seen him apart from a classroom in Missouri. Dahlberg spoke as he wrote, whereas I, at the time, strove for mere coherence, lacking eloquence. Though it was my early inchoate talent for aphorism that I showed which doubtless interested him in the first place.

January 26, '68

Mr. William O'Rourke,
5431 Wyandotte
Kansas City, Missouri 64112

Dear O'Rourke:

I have filled out the forms and am mailing them this day. I shall not be at Columbia, but am going with my wife to Ireland, and we expect to remain in Europe for a year.

You can get a student's loan; that I have learned from those in my group. What you will learn in the department of writing is zero. The teachers are dunderheads, with no passion or erudition. Actually, though Kansas

City is a corpse town, you will not find a Dr. Ryan in this profane institution. I wanted you to study medieval English with Dr. Ryan, and learn a good deal about the origins of language just about at its end today. But I know you must have feminine companionship, and I don't understand why it is so difficult to find a savory and delectable female in the mid-west. I certainly am not telling you that they are there, and that the onus is upon your head. I should be most unkind and not truthful were I to speak so to you.

Please forgive me for not replying to your last letter; I had some accursed sickness, and was so phlegmatic thereafter that I did no work, could not read, and was entirely worthless.

I knew your direful plight when you were here, and even then I could not help you, and that made me quite ill. We are not born for ourselves alone, says Cicero.

It is a fierce tomb to be alone, and I have known it and been in that sepulcher too often in my life not to appreciate deeply your own sorrow. The tragedy is that we can do little or usually nothing for others. I believe you know that if I knew someone here who would be a companion for you I would convey her to you.

It is futile to console you, and even dishonest. And I won't do it.

I send you my affections for what they are worth, not much, and wish I could at this time be advantageous to you.

I have had numerous mishaps myself, but won't bore you with them.

My book, *The Carnal Myth* will be out in May, and in the meantime I am laboring over the literary autobiography, sidereal drudgery, and I can't be sure that I know what I am doing.

Professor Edward Dahlberg

64 Rivington Street,
New York, N.Y.2.

I had returned to UMKC for my last year and applied to the fledgling graduate creative writing program just begun at Columbia. Dahlberg wrote me a letter of recommendation and I applied to one other school's program, the University of Iowa, its storied writers workshop. In both cases I had applied as a poet, of all things. I was admitted to both, but wanting to flee the Midwest I turned down Iowa and accepted Columbia. I was elated by the acceptances. At the same time I had entered a volume of poetry in the Yale Series of Younger Poets contest and it was eventually rejected, but even the rejection seemed like something. Dudley Fitts was the judge that year, his last (really his last—Fitts

*died the same year). Dahlberg, however, had only lasted a year at Columbia and, after I arrived there, I heard stories about the cause of his departure, though the one I believed is that he had failed Piers Paul Read, Herbert Read's son, and that got him fired. Years later I heard other stories. Read published in 1974 *Alive*, a book about disaster-inspired cannibalism. Cannibalism everywhere.*

March 21, '68

Mr. William O'Rourke,
5431 Wyandotte,
Kansas City, Missouri 64112.

Dear O'Rourke:

Please forgive me for not replying to your last epistle. Since I had the virus, of some kind or other, I have been lumpish, and have found it very hard to work, though I have. But after that I am undone, and this as a paltry apology, but please accept it.

I was glad to speak for you; but then what will you derive at Columbia University? There are four she-professors who know nothing and cannot talk about it eloquently. So you would not find their humid lectures of any value. Would you find feminine companionship here? You know I would have introduced you to one did I know her. It is woeful that I can give you no counsel that is beneficial, and this is hurtful to me. It always has been this way, as far as I can recollect. I knew these long spasms of stupor and solitude, and that is the way of the one and not the many, though I believe the disease of the multitude is solitude.

We leave on May 28th and it is very kind of you to suggest that you see me before leaving. Two young women are in my group, one married, and the other is looking for lucre and a man of social position, so that is very fine to tell you.

Meantime, I have been taking elaborate notes making ready to attack American education and our tepid females, and love in North America, pretty sodden and moldy.

Now I have to correct page-proofs, and they came so late that the publisher will not allow me to mend a sentence here and there or even take care of the errors of printers. The other volume, *Edward Dahlberg American Ishmael of Letters* should be issued shortly, within a few weeks.

This contains sundry essays written about my work.

To repeat, it is good that you have Dr. Ryan as a friend. He doubtless has told you what Kansas City is as if you required more empirical evidence than you already have.

I wish I could be your teacher, for I notice that you strain for your language, a metaphor or a trope, and though that is inevitable at the start, and many authors who should know better still do it, you might go on doing it.

Try if you can to be a natural prose stylist, and that is hard, very. Study Swift's *Journal to Stella*. Write sentences that fetch you, and also jot down idiomatic phrases.

I guess one should ask another to pardon him when he is unable to be useful to him.

You have my affections which would be had you a young nymph in your arms.

Professor Edward Dahlberg

64 Rivington Street,
New York, N.Y. 2.

I doubtless had written thanking him for opening Columbia's doors to me. I am sure his recommendation made the difference. During my time at Columbia I learned, one, that I was the student who had the lowest undergraduate grade-point average ever admitted to any of Columbia University's graduate schools, and, two, that Dahlberg's recommendation consisted of one sentence, saying that I was the only intelligent person he had met in the Midwest. It did feel odd that he left the City just as I arrived, but his absence, doubtless, let me settle into Columbia unencumbered.

October 30, '70

My dear O'Rourke:

Thank you very much for your epistle gorged with a rare probity in a putid, raging, and nihilistic age. How rueful it is to hear that you are alone. It is even related that one of the great sorrows of Our Blessed Mary was solitude.

Well, you will have to make your own mistakes although I had fervently hoped you would commit mine! But do, though nobody takes advice, try to compose your novel in a noble English. One can be a Bottom Dog in fiction, or in life and language it well.

Do you have the *TriQuarterly*; it will also be published as a book. Any number of persons have spoken of your tribute to me, and in a most complimentary vein. But my dear O'Rourke, when did I ever ask a student of mine to peruse my books. Never! That is a trifling matter, and though every

author is vain, I did not indulge in that sort of egolatry.

Do you wish me to send you a copy of *The Confessions*, now ready, that is, the trade edition, but to be published February 1st. You are right you can't be a reviewer whilst hoping also to be a man of letters. Of course, you can say what you must about books in the Nation, though also your load of Babylon since most of your books offered to you by the editor, are draff.

Am glad you wrote to me; it was no pleasure to rebuke you, but it is said in the Book of Proverbs that if you reproach fat Jeshurun he will kick you, but if you reprehend a wise man he will thank you. Forgive me anyhow for being so severe with you. I always wanted you to have only a trull or a tart if that is what was available, but I felt that your other simple was work. Love.

Edward Dahlberg

In handwriting in the letter's margins: If you're ever hungry, or out of pocket, you know that though my querdon [?] from books have been small, I'll never turn away from you. If you're ever in trouble call me collect—724-1108. I'll do my best to find a publisher for you if you wish me to do that.

57 West 75th Street
Apartment 5 H
New York, New York 10023

Dahlberg had returned to New York City in late 1969. I became an aide-de-camp of sorts, helping out however I could. Some of this was amusing, some not. I've written about these times before, so I won't recount them here (see my Signs of the Literary Times [1993]). While at Columbia I began to publish prose; one of the first things to appear was the reminiscence of Dahlberg that appeared in the fall, 1970, issue of TriQuarterly. (I wrote the piece in 1967, having been told by Dahlberg around the time of my visit to his Rivington Street apartment that some sort of volume was being put together and I might submit a recollection.) I also began to do short reviews for The Nation in 1970, having met the poetry editor, Allen Planz, at a party and we furthered our drinking at a bar on lower Broadway (the St. Adrian Company in the Broadway Central Hotel, which collapsed, the entire building that is, in 1973). Planz then introduced me to the literary editor, Beverly Gross. She liked what I did, always a necessity, having an editor who likes what you do. I saw Dahlberg intermittently through the spring and, finished at Columbia, and, after working during the summer for the N.Y. Shakespeare Festival, took myself off to Provincetown at

Stanley Kunitz's suggestion. Kunitz taught at Columbia and even though I had switched immediately from poetry to prose at Columbia, he had me to his townhouse for a memorable night with Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. Kunitz was involved in the creation of the Fine Arts Work Center and in 1970 he persuaded two fresh Columbia MFAs, myself and Louise Glück, to quit the City and spend the long, vacant off-season in Provincetown. For whatever reason, I have no letters from Dahlberg to me at my initial New York City addresses—I lived on West 76th Street and on East 8th Street, between B and C, when I was a student at Columbia.

November 5, '70

William O'Rourke,
355 Commercial Street,
Provincetown, Mass.

My dear O'Rourke:

I replied to your very good letter the other day, and this feature article just arrived, and I hope that it will give you some pleasure.

So if I am laconic, I've been toiling over notes for the book on *The New World* for hours and my back is sore and fatigued.

You have my love, and although I've been your taskmaster, I never reproached you with vipry thoughts, Never; be sure of that, although in the main nobody has one certitude.

Anyway, I want to get this off to you; cleave to, my fine boy (this is not patronizing but affectionate), and you'll one of these days, if you'll now heed my exhortation, read, read, read, and then write, and write and write. Chase any lissome trull that you fancy, that you fancy, drink a bottle of small beer, if it eases your entrails, but as I have oftentimes told you, By Zeus earn the right to be a lecher.

With love,
Edward Dahlberg

[On back of envelope:]

Edward Dahlberg
57 West 75th Street
Apartment 5H
New York, New York 10023

Unfortunately, the FAWC only provided the smallest of stipends in its infancy (\$100 a month) and, having no other source of income, I worked for a fish-

packing enterprise (Atlantic Coast Fisheries) in Provincetown for three months and then, more comfortably, as a night guard for the Chrysler Glass Museum. At the museum I wrote a short story, my first to be respectably published, set in the fish factory, called "The Maggot Principle"; first and last, insofar as I abandoned the short story as a form (or it abandoned me) and I turned henceforth only to book-length fiction.

November 18, '70

William O'Rourke Esq.,
355 Commercial Street,
Provincetown, Mass.

My dear O'Rourke:

This won't be a reply to your own enchanting epistle, for which I thank you very much. But I must get this to you with the same haste. As the Angels demanded of Lot, that he flee Sodom at once.

I want to see about 40 to fifty pages of your novel about Kansas City, and if it's good (no patronizing remark; for one is always a prentice; beware of the writer who calls himself a Master), I think I can get it published for you.

So please forgive this laconic note, and along with this, I am mailing to you a copy of *The Confessions of E.D.*

So forgive this drossy note; what is important at the moment is haste, or as the Angels said to Lot: Haste thee out of Sodom.

[And in handwriting below signature:]

I earnestly hope you will be able to laurel Sorrentino's book; simpleton that I am I told him O'Rourke is reviewing it! Alas, I shouldn't have said it; for if you impugn it I'll be to blame! But one must not tell lies! Should I so counsel you what a sharper your teacher must be! I wrote a moiety of that scurrile book of mine, *From Flushing to Calvary*, on Commercial St., Provincetown in 1931:

Love,
Edward Dahlberg

I was still doing the short reviews for The Nation and was sent Gilbert Sorrentino's novel Steelwork (1970) to review, along with a few others. It never ran, or the one I wrote never ran. It must have been critical in some way and Sorrentino (who died in 2006) was a favorite of the literary editor, and, I pre-

sume, he (it was no longer Beverly Gross) just killed the review and ordered up another. The fact that Dahlberg had written some of his early proletarian second novel on the same street in P-town I was writing from must have startled me, though since Provincetown was a place many writers had passed through over the decades (as well as the entire east coast, all of New England) and it shouldn't have been surprising, even to a youngster like myself.

December 13, '70

William O'Rourke
355 Commercial Street,
Provincetown, Massachusetts.

My dear O'Rourke:

I did not reply straightway for two causes: one I have had a plethora of work, really, no nonsense or bombast about this, and the most sovereign reason is that I do not wish to hurt you.

What I importuned you to do you did not do: eschew figures of speech; only in one or two instances were you lucky. Then I begged you to write about your own experiences, a poor Irish Catholic in Kansas City; if later on you portrayed your life, and that of your father, mother and sisters, I cannot in all fairness to you, tell you, since I did not get beyond fifty pages. What is the point of humdrum conversations you offer the reader which he can hear in the streets every day, and that which he wishes above all to shun. I had emphasized this to you, namely, that colloquies should be ideal rather than real, and that not one line should be written that does not nourish the soul, enhance the wisdom of the auditor. This too you failed to do. Now, I am still of the mind, and without equivocation, that you have talent, a friend of mine, not much older than you, said the best piece of writing in the *TriQuarterly* is your portrait of me as a professor at Kansas City. And he's no simpleton. Should I be your flatterer, or dissembler, and really harm you. That I cannot do. But I can say soon as you do what I ask of you, and that is to divulge the secrets of your own identity, and experience in Kansas City, I shall peddle your heart. But not yet; when will you be ready? when you are. Now, I have no dicta to proffer you but do, please, as I ask, do not make my squalid mistakes. And you will then display the regal talent I believe you have. Is this guess-work. doubtless. But what else is there?

Now, you lauded the work of Sorrentino, and in some large measure, the fault and onus are mine. You wanted to please me, but I told you not to tell lies, and alas maybe you didn't. One cannot ascribe your weak judgment

to me; it is always your defect. It is a very bad and salacious book, not erotically, or genuinely masculine. No, I am not asserting that Sorrentino is not a ripe male, but that he is somehow or other though a man in the depths of his forties, or so I suppose, had adopted the cult of youth, and one nowadays is young if he employs four letter words, or composes a latrine novel. What am I to say to Sorrentino, the truth? What will it bring me, maybe a foe who is at present a friend of my work. Have I any other choice? So I become the hard, the truculent man, and not the flaccid, pragmatical one.

Once more I exhort you, do what I suggest; this is not egotatry, but a great desire on my part to see you write a book, and not acquire a quick reputation, and be a churl among upstarts, or mushrooms in our merchant agora.

Do not for one moment imagine I like writing to you in this vein. Do you not think it would be a cornucopia of pleasure for me to relate that you have genius, and that nobody except a food would or could gainsay it.

I know how difficult it is to be obscure, impoverished, and to get a letter of admonition instead of a laurel of parsnip from me. But be patient; it is very stony counsel. Meantime, if I can get some money for you, I shall do it, but I am not certain of this. I must ask some one.

You have my love, and please believe me, it pains my pulses to write you so, and to tell you to sit down and write what you know, the Kansas City blood in your veins, and not scrawl all sorts of talk that is useless to you, me, and anybody else.

Should I, far older than you, and yet with the same quandaries, be your pickthank friend, you would abhor me, later.

Edward Dahlberg
57 West 75th Street,
Apartment 5 H
New York, New York 10023

Will return your MS.

Evidently I sent Dahlberg the pages he requested. And I must have sent what I wrote on Sorrentino, though Dahlberg evidently thought it was praise enough, unlike the Nation. The novel I was working on was my first, published eventually in 1974, entitled The Meekness of Isaac. I had written a long unpublished novel my first year at Columbia called The Armless Warrior. I am not clear on what I sent Dahlberg, since I was looting the earlier novel here and there, though The Meekness of Isaac was, in its final version, written mostly fresh. I did send the same pages doubtless to an editor in New York who had contacted me and he repeated more or less the same thing Dahlberg said, though of course,

more simply. Even then I had no desire to emulate Dahlberg's prose; I only wanted to write as well as I could, which I thought then was well enough.

December 22, '70

William O'Rourke
355 Commercial Street,
Provincetown, Massachusetts,

My dear O'Rourke,

I have just filled out the form you sent to me, and be sure I have offered the warmest words about you. Make no mistake about it. It is the least that I can do.

It was a deep pain to return your MS., for I had hoped, and quite fervently, that you would write about your early boyhood as a poor Irish Catholic in Kansas City. Build your experiences as a mason might; don't wander here and there, or set down lines that reader can relinquish. A book must be essential to a person's identity; any other sort is deceit. I am glad you did not laud that scurrile book; I feared your own perceptions might be marred by my own desire that he receive laurels, but not false withered ones.

I know a man who says there is some foundation that gives money to talented young men who have not yet published a book, and soon as he is out of hospital I shall speak for you. Please know that I'll do all within my paltry powers to help you. Alas, I have small influence in this fell and caitiff world, but I have a few friends, and I'll do all I can.

Know that you have my love, and my profound concern.

Poor Dr. Ryan has just lost his Mother, a very dear Woman, and he is in the dumps; it is a wound that can never be healed.

Be sure to write of your Mother and Father as they are, and also of your sisters and brothers, and the harsh penury that both of us have known.

Please know, above all, that I am not the Moses of the Muses bringing down the ten commandments the canons of prose style; break my tablets if you must, but abide by our great English.

As you see this letter was written on the 22nd of this month; many ills, and also the depravity of melancholia prevented me from finishing this epistle.

If I've hurt you I beg your pardon; we must ask forgiveness of those whom we have not harmed, lest they suppose we do not love them.

Edward Dahlberg
57 West 75th Street,

Apartment 5H
New York, New York 10023

Again, I'm not sure what forms I sent him. For a Guggenheim? Hardly, since at the time I had published almost nothing. Most likely, it was a general recommendation for a file I was opening at Columbia, a service the school provided to its graduates, future job seekers, of letters of reference. Dahlberg didn't unlock any monies from his patron, or, at least the one he seemed to have in mind (Coburn Britton?), though he did extract some funds for me a few years later from the Authors Guild (the Authors League Fund) around 1974. I think it was \$2,500. He then did it again, but I refused the additional money and both he and the Fund took some offense at that. Over the years I have donated money to the same Authors League Fund that had funded me back then.

May 13, '71

William O'Rourke,
355 Commercial Street
Provincetown, Massachusetts 02657

My dear O'Rourke:

At last I have word from you; you must needs know that it was a load of pain for me to annul your manuscript. But you must, and nothing else, write about your experiences as a young, impecunious Irish Catholic in Kansas City. But in a traditional English, no jargon, and no counterfeit spermal lines. I had to write just as plainly to Sorrentino, and after he had inscribed his book to me with genuflexional words. What else could I do? If I lie to you I'm your foe, should I be truthful you're silent as the sphinx. What should be my conduct? I cannot be other than I am, and take the blows of one who is morose. Again and again I implored you to do what I am now asking of you. What the Grub Street hacks tell you at Columbia is dross, and they have duped you. You were a glory there, and some day you may be, but not at this writing. You must be a novice, now and always, as I am. Each book is a battle, and nobody knows whether it will be won or lost, no matter how many books of worth he has published. Nothing helps; you blunder, stumble, or as Gloucester says, "I stumbled when I saw."

Now, don't be perverse; take my counsel though you pay no Mammon for it; despite the fact it is good advice, for people commonly heed a varlet, a criticaster, and though you are an oracle at the moment, and know that what he's doing is wrong, he will return you a peevishness, a long night of

stillness.

I am now writing a novella for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and with a plethora of luck should complete it within six months, but I have been mumbling this for a lustrum, beginning it at Soller de Majorca, then in Dublin, again in Santa Barbara, in Kansas City, New York, and Barcelona. You see then I do not write easily, but fumble just as you do. Age does not make you wiser nor does youth. If the Muses are kind, then you'll compose a book to be lauded.

Please don't expect falsehoods from me. I try not to decoy myself, and why you?

When the book is right it will pleasure my soul to tell you so and on the heels of Mercury.

Of course, your plight troubles me, but I must perforce gamble my heart, here and there, peddling it for francs as Stendhal said, and I have never reached that reposeful El Dorado. But I must write one book, then another, or else Rumor advises me, I shall soon be forgot, although never remembered.

Why did you not review *The Confessions*? I never saw what was said about me in the *Nation*, and only have read about six or seven articles about me, some were panegyrics, others worm-eaten and scullion attacks, with no comprehension of the book. To be quite candid, the *Confessions* has been widely noticed from coast to coast but never divulged. Here you could have done me a signal service. Why no, do not ask me. How do I know anything about another person, even my student whom I have friended best I can. And still wish to do so. So this is no pile of spleens, just wonder.

You have, as ever, my warm affections, and when You do what you are, for what deeds, good or bad, are the consequence of your character, I think you'll get off an autobiographical novel that will be worth the time and expense of the soul, and then I shall do all that I can to find a publisher for you.

Edward Dahlberg
General Delivery
Post Office, Sarasota, Florida.

I'm not sure why I didn't review his Confessions. My book review connections were not many and The Nation, I think, did have someone else in mind for the book. I did review a book for the New York Times Book Review in 1971, arranged by Richard Elman, one of my former teachers at Columbia. It was the only review I ever did for the Times, being, as it was, as my friend Craig Nova would have put it, a "vicious attack." I had stopped working at

the Glass Museum and got a job for the summer as a dune buggy driver, taking tourists for rides over the high parabolic dunes outside, or astride, Provincetown. And, during that summer, I met the woman who led me to Harrisburg, Diane Schulder, one of the lawyers for the defense.

YALE CLUB
FIFTY VANDERBILT AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

[early October 1972, via postmark]

William O'Rourke,
4 Milligan Place,
New York City 10011.

My dear O'Rourke:

I am exceedingly sorry that I failed to reply to your last two epistles. Fearful of this criminal city, I went to Florida, which I could not stomach. I had withal two bouts of Hong Kong influenza, and a hemorrhage.

Now, I am very delighted that you have published your book. Frankly, I know nothing about the two unfrocked priests and the nuns save what I have read in the press, which is to say, I know nothing.

Your book just arrived, and I haven't had a chance to look at a line to see whether you have eschewed our boorish jargon, or if you, my fond hope, have consulted the masters of the English language. I realize this is not a work of literature, but let me inform you that there is more politics in belles lettres than there is literature in political writings. Balzac was alluded to as a statesman.

Of course, you can use a sentence, or more, from *The Confessions* as an epigraph to your novel, and I am heartened to learn that you are relying upon your own experience (Whose else can you borrow?). When we fail to comprehend a work of a seer the cause is that our feelings and life do not equal his. I have said somewhere is that I all I have to do is to open my mouth to sow dragon's teeth. So if you have not sufficient character to acquire foes you're sure to be a nobody as an author.

You can call me almost any day at about one o'clock of the afternoon.

Why not do me a signal kindness and review *The Sorrows of Priapus* which has just been reissued a brace [of] days ago. The publisher is Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Ask for Mrs. Lindley. Tel: 572-5000.

Spite of my silence you've always had my friendship and love.

Edward Dahlberg

128 East 91st Street
Apartment 2B
New York, N.Y. 10028
Tel: 289-4339

The book was The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left. The trial was over the beginning of April of 1972 and the book was published in October 1972. The haste, oddly, was not a hindrance, at least from my point of view. It was written entirely on the Cape, three months in Provincetown and three months in Barnstable, at my friends', the Kareka's, new home on a bluff overlooking the salt marshes of Sandwich. I wrote it with intense, single-minded concentration, and it showed.

YALE CLUB
FIFTY VANDERBILT AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

December 21, '72

William O'Rourke,
Thomas Y. Crowell Company
666 Fifth Avenue,
New York, New York 10019

Dear O'Rourke:

I replied soon as I received your epistle. I only licked a page here and there. Of course, I believe it's cruel and ludicrous to imprison men for burning draft cards. But what dismays me is that you have now become a paper-bullet writer. There's more politics in literature than letters in the economics and politics of the State.

It is kind of you to cite me at the conclusion of the volume, but do you realize in your opening line you are closely paraphrasing me. And though I had no part in the making of this book, I believe, without bombast, that I have had a good deal to do with the making of William O'Rourke's mind. Atheist that I am, I add, For God's sake return to belles lettres, and bear in

mind that a journalistic prose has nothing to do with a man who wishes to be a litterateur.

My affections, as always
Edward Dahlberg

128 East 91st Street
Apartment 2 B
New York, N.Y. 10028

The opening line Dahlberg refers to is: In the logic of our time, it is better to have a bad experience that turns out well, than to have just a plain good one. I'm not sure why he sent the letter to my publisher. I may have been traveling. A biography of Dahlberg was being prepared at the time and he set its author, Charles DeFanti, to scour my book, looking for examples of my plagiarizing of his words. As I have written elsewhere, on reflection years later, that line, my own, owes a bit more to Camus than Dahlberg, but it's probably a toss up. DeFanti's forced reading of my book did lead to our friendship that continues to this day.

April 11, '74

William O'Rourke, Esq.
306 Front Street,
Key West, Florida 33040

My dear O'Rourke,

I never looked for such a benison as an epistle from you. St. Augustine said he would never have become a Christian had he not believed in miracles. A brave man and also a gullible one.

I tremble when I ponder your return. The age is void of truth. The quandary is: how can I be useful to you. I've spoken to Nick of another contract for you which you can gulp down in a brace of hours.

You always can utter your woes to me. I'm not that sort of poltroon.

I hope you've been the kindest weather for your companion. Everybody, except liars are alone nowadays, so you're quiet. Ruskin asserted that inaction was the ruin of a nation. But what's that to do with Hecuba or you. The meanwhile, you have my deepest affections.

Edward Dahlberg

[On back of envelope:]

128 East 91st Street,
New York, New York 10028

This was the last letter I received, or have, from Dahlberg, and it is entirely hand written. Though sent to my friends', the Kareka's, shop in Key West, it was forwarded to me when I returned to my apartment at Milligan Place. By then my first novel must have been in production and I had gone to Key West for a visit, and not alone. I took Joan Silber, my girlfriend at the time. (You'll have to ask Joan if I was "the kindest weather" for her.) I always thought it strange that I had arranged for a publisher for Dahlberg, rather than he arranging one for me. I introduced him to my Harrisburg 7 editor at T.Y. Crowell, Nick Ellison, who I had met when he was an editor at William Morrow, while I was a student at Columbia. I, along with Craig Nova and Irini Spanidou, worked there as part-time (at least Craig and I, Irini being full-time) copy editors, more or less rewriting Temple Fielding's Guide to Europe during that period. He is the "Nick" that Dahlberg refers to in the letter. Nick published Dahlberg's The Olive of Minerva (1976), which I reviewed in the Soho Weekly News, and I got Nick to bring out, at the same time, an omnibus volume of Dahlberg's three early novels. I was often at Dahlberg's 91st street apartment during the early 70s (1972-74) and then he returned abruptly to Ireland around the end of 1974, then rushed back to NYC and stayed at the Hotel Chelsea for a while (circa 1975) and I helped him find a small apartment on the upper East Side which he abandoned suddenly and then went, finally, to Santa Barbara, California. I'm not sure why there aren't—or I don't have—any California letters from him, or any written reaction to the publication of my first novel. I did record my last conversation—on the telephone—with him in a eulogy I wrote that appeared in the San Francisco Review of Books a year after he died, his last words to me before he emphatically slammed down the phone ("No university has ever paid me \$12,000!"). I had just told him I had been hired by Rutgers University in Newark for my first real academic job. So, we must have spoken on the phone in 1975/6. His many chastisements in the letters were always a delight to me, whereas in person or on the phone, the same sort of lambastements were more painful, revealing to me the stark difference between the literate and oral forms. Perhaps we were estranged. And it was on a PATH train to Newark in 1977 that I learned he died, during my second year teaching at Rutgers. I was reading the New York Times commuting to school and happened upon his obituary. The train car was filled with dusty bright sunlight. I looked up and away from the paper that I had let fall onto my lap. The great man who had buoyed my youth and stoked my nascent ambitions and who had paid me all that unwarranted loving attention like no other, gone.