

5.

Column Content and Structure

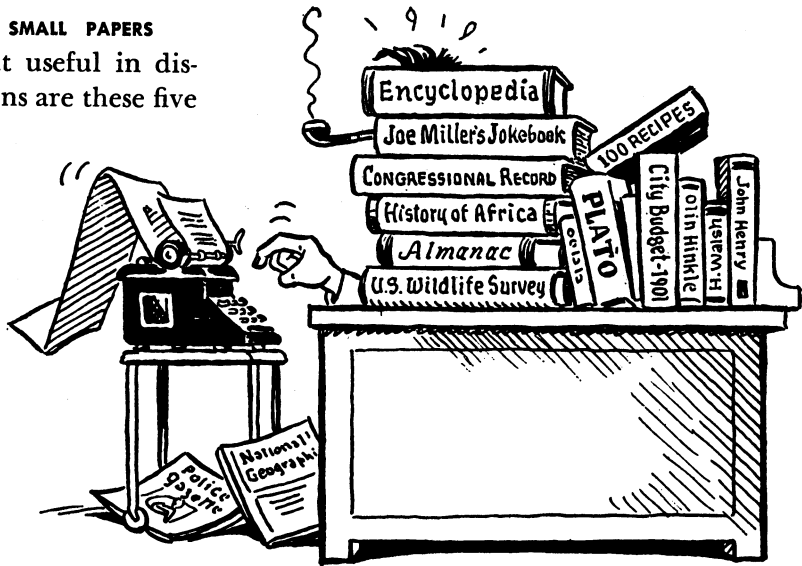
COLUMNS have drawn nearly every literary device known to writers. Subject matter has been combined in diverse ways, making classification rather difficult. One can say that some columns are humorous in tone, some are serious, and some run the scale of human emotions. Some are on a single subject. Others have as many topics as there are paragraphs.

Comment predominates in some, news items and anecdotes in others. Length varies, too. When is a department six inches long, or eight, or ten, a column? The answer isn't important.

FIVE GENERAL TYPES IN SMALL PAPERS

Open to challenge but useful in discussing small-town columns are these five classifications:

1. *Variety*. This type also is called the catch-all, the about-town, the hodge-podge, and the miscellaneous. There is a parallel between the



FOOTNOTES

Footnotes are marks of sound scholarship in formal types of research. They round out discussions, invite readers to consult other sources, and carry contrary opinions. In a sense, editor's columns can be footnotes to the local news report. In fact, many stories can hardly be written fully without footnotes. The delicate—or indelicate—handling of human angles in the columns completes reader understanding. Speculation and judgments are denied most reporters in spot news coverage.

A near-hit bolt of lightning can create a lot more Christian thinking than a long-winded sermon.—Algona (Iowa) Advance.

variety of the offerings and the diversity of contacts in an editor's day.

2. *Personal essay.* The essay column may have one subject, or several, but the distinguishing fact is that the writer takes a topic and proceeds to kick it about with whatever skill he possesses. The result may be hilarious or it may be as dry as the dour personality behind it. Words may flow from a personal philosophy set vibrating by a remark heard somewhere. Again, the latest news, accident, election, or flood may bring problems which need clarification.

Some columns actually are lay sermons. A few columnists have written Bible stories in news style on Sundays. And hard put for time and ideas, a writer may select a few facts from an encyclopedia and expand them and localize them in words reaching from chin to toe—and filling a column.

3. *Humor.* This classification may be used when the writer is trying to amuse and entertain. He may devise or refurbish jokes, humorous essays, or compress his humor into paragraphs of two to five lines. His style depends upon his point of view, his whimsical comments on life, and his ability to twist his philosophizing into sentences which crackle with paragraphs having rhetorical surprises. Some will call his output "corn," but if subtle truths nestle behind his exaggerations and absurdities he will be credited with more sense than he claims. Another variation is the amusing anecdote, tall tale, or "whopper." Such yarns are in the folklore of every region.

4. *Syndicated columns.* These deserve scant mention here. Small papers do not gain in stature by printing the output of a nationally known columnist. Almost invariably, local columns are better read than any outside contributions. Actually, we don't suppose "Baukhage Talking," for example, is any better or worse in a weekly paper than in a big daily, ex-

cept that the former hasn't the space for it and, in competition with rival papers and radio, needs to develop exclusive local features.

There are, however, some regionally syndicated columns which have large followings. A recent success story is that of Henry B. Fox. Twelve years or so ago he felt an urge to make chiding remarks about his neighbors, the government, and anything else which pleased or annoyed him. His was not the art of the paragrapher; he sees many chuckles in a single subject. In time he shared his column with a fellow publisher, then another, and still others. Eventually fifty papers in half a dozen states were printing the weekly humorous essay of the "——— Philosopher." (Supply name of local creek.) He writes it so editors can insert name of local bankers, preachers, lawyers, and other standard citizens. The Taylor, Texas, man has become nationally known for his contributions in *Cosmopolitan's* "Main Street," *Country Gentleman*, and *Collier's*.

Other writers, too, have achieved regional fame and syndication. In some cases, they have inserted propaganda or promotional material paid for by organizations interested in safety, good roads, economy in government, and other subjects linked with their welfare. Their number is decreasing as newspapers realize that good will is lost when readers recognize hidden propaganda in columns and news stories. The material is not purified by the fact that editors agree with it.

5. *Specialized columns.* These include columns in the departments—sports, society, agriculture, hobbies, business, politics, religion, etc. Add the literary columns, how-to columns, reports from Congressmen, capital city comment, business trend reports, and letters from hometowners traveling in distant lands. Include gossip columns if you must. For additional comment on specialized columns, see Chapter 17.

What this country needs in October is a combination sun-tan lotion, mosquito ointment, and chilblain remedy.—T. A. Lally, Bridgeport (Nebr.) *News-Blade*.

We are the slaves of fear; courage is scattered rebellion.—Matador (Tex.) *Tribune*.

It will be nice when spring comes and the grass grows up along the roadside and hides the discarded beer cans.—Falls Church (Va.) *Standard*.

Columns could be classified in other ways, of course. They have tones—angry, quiet, egoistic, bored, inspired. They have attitudes—see no evil, see no good, flattering, bullying, etc. They have styles—terse, rambling, eloquent, flamboyant, poetic, prosy. Some columnists carry the world and its problems on their shoulders and in their words. Not so the cheerful boosters. Not so the flippant wags. Not so the columnists who best reflect the spirit of Main Street. These differences are traceable in the implied intentions of the writers. Some try only to entertain. Some try to show an erudition beyond that of the average reader. Others merely comment on the news of their day, pleasantly yet with a moral tinge, in remarks which are as timely and as briefly considered as repartee of neighbors across an alley fence.

The small-town columnist aims to please, to entertain, and to instruct. He does a lot of kidding. He writes as he feels, usually without any attempt to be literary, or profound, or infallible. He frequently confesses his own weaknesses. His method is to mix the light and lively with serious implications and inferred civic duties. A bit of whimsy increases his circle of readers. Columnists dwell in that enjoyable no-man's land between fact and fiction. And one columnist uses the title, "FACT AND FANCY—Let the Wise Man Make the Distinction."

It is characteristic of these columns that in content they are warmly personal, occasionally witty, and always clean. Some are entirely philosophical; others are based on the old maxim that "names make news." But not everything printed in column form is a true column. Some very dull editorial essays are run under standing headings.

It is typical of columnists that they know their readers and their environment. More than



He writes as he feels . . .

editorial writers, they speak the language of the people about them. For this reason future historians will give columns close study. What is popular in one region may be unacceptable in another. Paragraphs, characteristic of the crisp talk of New England and some of the middle states, give way to the anecdotes, philosophical essays, and newsy columns of the Southwest. Nostalgic references may bore a very old community, but in the West the old is still new; many persons living remember the last Indian depredations. Moreover, an item may be considered risqué in one community yet be tolerated in another. People become conditioned to a columnist's brand of humor.

All regions have had one fault in common: too much material has been reprinted without credit. Truly, as one reads in some paper every few months, "It is a wise crack which knows its own father." In the later years of the *Literary Digest*, papers sometimes picked up whole pages of briefs and set them as fillers, credit lines omitted. Proof of guilt, however, is not always possible to obtain. Coincidences will happen; two columnists may make the same jest from the same raw materials, such as wire stories.

Rewriting of paragraphs is common. A more acceptable practice is printing a credited excerpt, then commenting on it. Certainly neighboring editors can sharpen their wits and entertain readers by exchanging mild insults or bantering comment with each other. These need not lead to the extremes of a column by a pioneer editor who referred to a rival as being "the offspring of a razorback hog sired by a ringneck buzzard."

Reams of miscellany fill the minds of editors and reporters, but these may never reach their typewriters. By the nature of their work they see and hear things which fit nowhere in the paper unless there is a place for jokes, funny stories, random observations,

A regrettable aspect of columning in American newspapers is the widespread piracy of others' ideas. Fillers in editorial columns are so often reprints without source credits that one writer titled his column, "Original — at any rate." Early in 1950, a columnist wrote that a person always called a spade a spade until one fell on his foot. Other writers grabbed the idea, repeated it with or without credit, paraphrased it, and kicked it around in all the ways known to columnists. Finally, in 1951, a popular magazine versified it, with illustration. Originality is rare and coincidences do happen, but every columnist can meet the problem ethically. Syndication complicates the problem when sources are not shown.

If the worms weren't up so early there wouldn't be so many early birds, either.—New Ulm (Minn.) Journal.

The height of delicacy was displayed by the flag-pole sitter who, when his wife died, came down half way.—Albany (Ky.) *New Era*.

The man who invented the eraser had the human race pretty well sized up.—Glenn E. Bunnell, Hartington (Nebr.) *News*.

If the youngsters like you, there's nothing the matter with you.—Edmore (Mich.) *Times*.

thank-you's to readers, and other odds and ends. And many a sharp comment, in which a truth occurs to them in crystal clearness, may be lost unless they have a place for it—and with its loss goes much influence never exerted.

Readers, too, contribute column material—both in the mails and in oral offerings. This usually requires some polishing and close editing. It includes doggerel verse, platitudes, expressions of prejudice, verbal bouquets for friends, and potential libel. Satire and irony may seem innocent yet have overtones which will destroy friendships. Parodies and puns usually are discarded unless especially clever. Bits of verse from readers' scrapbooks may be used if credited to the source and if no copyright is involved.

Even in the arrangement of a column there is more skill than most people think. The editor's day, and possibly his mind, are a hodge-podge of unrelated items. The variety column may be a cross-section of his mind, but usually he considers his material long enough to fit it to some habitual pattern. Broadway and Hollywood columnists use a variety of subjects but their organization is repetitious. Arthur Brisbane and O. O. McIntyre were expert arrangers of miscellany.

The variety column appeals, as the name implies, to a wide assortment of reader tastes. It accepts many ideas, many subjects, many names. Using it, the columnist has no need to pursue an idea for more than an appropriate time.

READER INTERESTS GUIDE CHOICE OF MATERIALS

Since their efforts are aimed at the same readers as those of other writers in the newspaper, columnists are governed by the same considerations in choice of materials. They write about the topics that are of the greatest interest to the greatest number of people. So, of course, their columns carry much material about

the home, family, men, women, kids, teen-agers, and neighbors. People, almost without exception, make up the No. 1 classification in any list of general column content.

Second in rank, the surveys show, are the non-personal topics, such as philosophy, the seasons and weather, nature, pleasant nostalgia, and current public affairs.

In third place are the miscellaneous topics that are as varied as the quirks of nature: Verse, the columnist's hobby, historical and literary allusions, pet hates, travel abroad and in the township, where beauty is found, ugly streets, the mean man who poisons dogs, soil conservation, etc. The list is as long as the sum of the imaginations of more than eight thousand columnists, and so varied that any one writer, seeking ideas, can always find topics on which he has never written if he will dip into his neighbor's writings. For a list of one hundred ideas which columnists have used, see Chapter 13.

Choice of column material hinges somewhat on the basic literary methods of the writers. To get laughs, they use exaggeration, understatement, and incongruity. For pungent observation they coin or adapt an epigram. To drive home a point on which they have intense feelings, they fashion satire.

The examples which follow illustrate typical column materials:

MEN

A young man's fumblings and an old man's philanderings are much alike. And are laughed off by the same-age girl.

New Iberia (La.) *Iberian*

WOMEN

A foreigner visiting in the United States thought "oakie doakie" was the feminine of "O.K." He was, of course, mistaken. The feminine of "O.K." is "maybe."
—Everett M. Remsberg.

"Impressions"
Vista (Calif.) *Press*

It's all right to tell a little boy not to cry because crying won't help. But that's really not honest advice to give a little girl.—
Kingsport (Tenn.) *Times*.

The "upper crust" is often made up of a lot of crumbs held together by their own dough.—
Wade Guenther, Sabula (Iowa) *Gazette*.

MAN AND WOMAN

Our friend has a neighbor who carries so much life insurance that his wife is mad at him every morning when he wakes up.—Edgar Harris.

“The March of Events”
West Point (Miss.)
Times Leader

PEOPLE

We have been thinking of developing a serum that would make people live forever, but after looking them over we have decided against it until we can develop an applicator that is very specific.—George W. Bowra.

“Rips and Tears”
Aztec (N. M.)
Independent-Review

KIDS

All these years I have been saving my Tinker toys, my iron soldiers, my wind-up alligator, for the time when I would have children of my own. But in the face of present-day events I keep them concealed with the other antiques in the attic. There isn't any use of bringing out those papier-mache soldiers that were imported from England—they would be shattered to bits by a blast from my little daughter's new supersonic, ultra-powered, jet-propulsed, recoilless, flash-proof six-gun. And God help Santa Claus when he comes down that chimney.—C.A.V.A.

Duncannon (Penn.) *Record*

CUSTOMS

One of the causes of high living costs is the fact that a family has to have so much more to have even a little more than the neighbor family.

“At Random”
DePere (Wis.)
Journal-Democrat

AT HOME

Many's the middle-aged wife and mother who had rather have her tired, aching back rubbed three minutes per night than get three or four kisses.—A. C. Jolly.

“Chuckles”
Cartersville (Ga.) *Herald*

TEEN-AGERS

The automobile took the children out of the home, and along about midnight we begin wondering where it put them.—John C. Herr.

“Thar's Gold”
Wickenburg (Ariz.) *Sun*

Have you ever lain awake at night listening to a rat gnaw on something? Have you ever eased out of bed and beat on the wall in the hope that you could go to sleep before he started gnawing again? The rat will stop for about four to five minutes and then, just as you are about to doze off, he will start up again. It is one of the most exasperating things in the world until you figure it out. Simply consider that you are causing the rat a lot of inconvenience too by beating on the wall, and you'll go to sleep plumb satisfied.—Earl L. Tucker, Thomasville (Ala.) *Times*.

PHILOSOPHY

The world is divided into three groups, viz: The small group which makes things happen, the larger group which watches things happen, and the multitude which never knows what happens.—Dora Barnard.

"I Heard That"
Harrisonville (Mo.)
Missourian

NATURE

We have a liking for the lowly sunflowers. They stand up so straight and look you in the eye. And they keep their faces to the sun, so the shadows fall behind.—Jessie L. Duhig.

"Musings"
Thermopolis (Wyo.)
Independent-Record

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Now it seems a transparent cellophane mattress is to be developed. We'll reveal those communists, one way or the other.—L. S. McCandless.

"A Shot of Scotch"
Craig (Colo.) *Empire-Courier*

LIKES AND DISLIKES

As for this Editor, he refuses to be pushed around by the press agents for these numerous "weeks," or regimented or told to do even the things he wants to do or was going to do anyway. The Editor can't remember what this "week" is, or what he's supposed to be doing, but whatever it is, he isn't going to do it.—Paul F. Watkins.

"In My Opinion"
Ashland (Va.) *Herald-Progress*

PLEASANT MEMORIES

A dance program and a bit of ribbon tumble from the diary into your hands. Ah, that was such a happy night! Your little silver-slipped feet danced and danced, your skirts swirled and frothed about your ankles, your cheeks were like roses, your eyes were stars. The night was laughter, music, and romance. It was a man's dark head close to yours. It was his low voice murmuring in your ear. It was the rhythm of your matching steps, the magic attunement of your hearts. At dawn you trailed down the ballroom stairs, arm in arm, hushed before the miracle you had found.—Mrs. Gene Davis.

"Topics in Type"
Boonville (Mo.) *News*

Folks in the country wouldn't argue the point to any great length but one of our rural philosophers took the straw out of his mouth, scored a bullseye on the spittoon, and sagely remarked, "We live in the section of the country where folks in the city save their money all year 'round to spend two weeks in."—Claude Eames, Elkhorn (Wis.) *Independent*.

Ever notice? The man who never made an enemy never made anything.—T. A. Lally, Bridgeport (Nebr.) *News-Blade*.

Have you noticed those dachshunds of low, rambling architecture, two and a half dogs long by half a dog high? They are comparatively inoffensive and a nice thing for one of my Scotch friends who got one so all his six children could pet him at one time.—Wallace Barnes, Gallup (N. M.) *Independent*.

THEN AND NOW

When our youngest paused in passing to dry his tears on our pant leg, we were struck by the sudden realization that the lady of the house no longer wears aprons. Since women have discovered the mild, every-day elegance of house dresses, aprons have become a thing of the past. Our children are now deprived of the convenience of having that vast area at hand for the wiping of eyes — or noses.—Wayne D. Allen.

“Sun Beams”

Morning Sun (Iowa)

News-Herald

LOVE

Whatever the mathematicians may contend, the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. What you think of her nose, plus what you think of her hair, etc. cannot begin to equal the effect of the girl herself.

Colfax (La.) *Chronicle*

CHARACTERS

A lot has been accomplished in this world because some neurotic woman drove her husband nearly nuts.

Bethseda (Md.) *Record*

MAN AFTER WOMAN

A jingling sound adds a note of sincerity to the whistle.—Billy Arthur.

“Down East”

Jacksonville (N. C.)

News and Views

Commencement address: Be honest with yourself and others, work hard, be prompt, and always be willing to learn something new and useful.—Fred Roble, Granville (N. D.) *Herald*.

The methods of columnists are as varied as their subject matter. To present a picture, they use a metaphor. To preach a little, they find the aphorism or homily a convenient tool. For the bitter comment that “ends that comment,” they choose irony. And always, to get the attention which may be difficult otherwise, there is paradox. To spark a reply or enjoy reflected glory, they quote another person and comment on the quotation. Quite often, of course, they raise a hortatory voice and demand, “Hear ye, hear ye!” And when the columnist wants to have fun, just fun, he begins grinning at his typewriter, more or less idiotically, and tossing puns.

Further comment on these methods including ideas

on how to make column items quotable can be found in Chapter 11.

CONTENT GUIDES ARRANGEMENT OF COLUMNS

Most columns are written to a pattern, or several patterns, because writers form habits just as other people do. Their verbal menu may consist only of a main dish and more of the same. Such writers may merely comment on things which come to mind as they sit down to fill their column space. Opening sentences may read like these:

“As I was walking to work this morning, I saw . . .”

“President James Brown of the chamber of commerce is to be commended for. . . .”

“Have you noticed how many teen-age drivers have been involved in automobile accidents lately?”

“Joe Smith is a lucky man. . . .”

“Back from market, William Davis of the Davis-Green Hardware tells an interesting yarn he heard last week. . . .”

In an *a la carte* column, however, writers often serve their quips and comments in courses already well known to readers. They may open with a five-paragraph discourse followed by an anecdote, or begin with an anecdote followed by one paragraph. In physical appearance a column is known by the length of its paragraphs, its indentions, and the order of its elements.

To develop a formula for purposes of illustration, it may help to assign letters to units of content one may wish to use. These might include:

A—Current news item, preferably exclusive to the column.

B—An interesting fact, possibly related to the readers.

C—Comment by the columnist.

D—More comment by the columnist.

A railroad passenger on a limited train cannot help feeling vicariously important when the carrier goes whistling through the small towns without stopping. And similarly anyone standing at a railroad station when a fast train goes gliding by without a pause cannot escape the feeling of inferiority.—Dallas E. Wood, Palo Alto (Calif.) Times.

It isn't unlucky these days to come into possession of a \$2 bill. It comes in handy to buy a dollar's worth of most anything.—Warren C. Nelson, Lebanon (Ohio) Western Star.

Youth ends and manhood begins when you stop studying your face in the mirror to find an excuse to shave and when you start studying your face in the mirror to see if you can possibly put it off until tomorrow.—Glenn E. Bunnell, *Harrington (Nebr.) News*.

- E—A witty paragraph, two to five lines.
- F—An anecdote or funny story.
- G—A bit of verse.
- H—Brevitorial—a paragraph of opinion.
- I—An apology, or some praise.
- J—Clipping or excerpt.
- K—Local quote or brief item in dialogue form.
- L—Half-minute interview, or biographical sketch.
- M—Letter or excerpt of letter, from reader.
- N—Announcement or request.
- O—Name-item or newsy note about local resident.

Let these and more of your choice be the ingredients of potential columns. Combine them according to the subject matter, but remember that readers like to see favorite items in the same place each time.

With the above letters as keys, it is possible to show in brief form the pattern of a column. Arrangement of a variety column is relatively unimportant compared to content, but it is worth some study. Here are typical column patterns:

- 1—EEEE-A-C-D-G-F-J-C-N-E-H.
- 2—N-E-A-C-E-F-E-K-C-F.
- 3—G-EEEE-F-E-J-D-K-L-E.
- 4—N-F-M-C-J-C-E-OOOO-H.
- 5—A-C-DDD-M-C-J-C-EEEE.

People still talk about the weather, but now it's because everybody is doing something about it.—Somerset (N. J.) *Messenger-Gazette*.

For greater simplicity and fewer subject changes the following formulas reshuffle the same letter symbols:

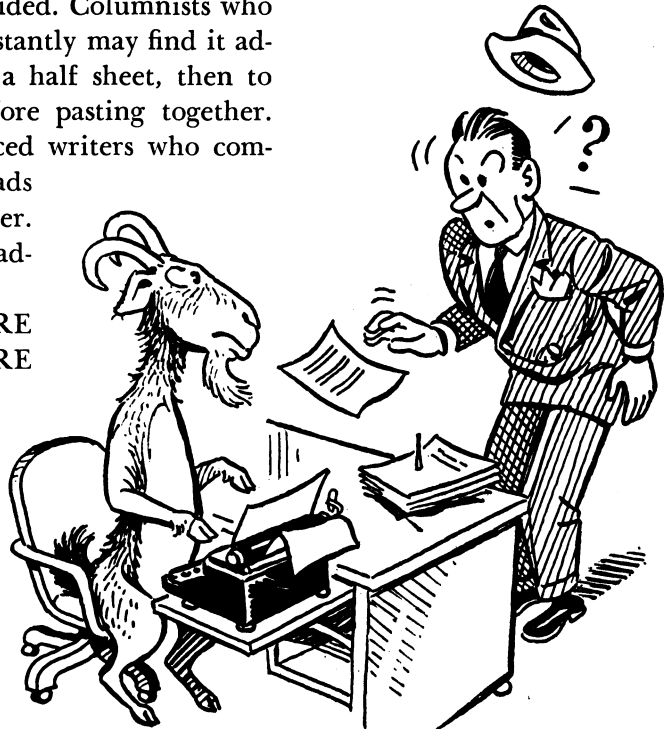
- 1—A-C-DDDD-M-C-D-F-H.
- 2—EEE-FFF-L-H.
- 3—N-C-I-C-DDD-J-C.
- 4—B-C-DDDD-E-K-C.
- 5—EEEE-F-E-F-E-F.

Choice of subject matter is usually haphazard, yet here, too, certain patterns are kept in mind. Lewis Nordyke, whose column in the Amarillo (Tex.) *News-Globe* had an exceptional response from readers, makes this comment:

The formula for my column is basically inspirational. Each day there is a tear, a chuckle, a touch of nostalgia, bit of mild controversy, maybe a little story about people who seldom are mentioned in a newspaper. Mixed with this is an occasional shot of seriousness on politics and other current topics. In a good many instances, I make myself the goat. This works wonderfully well and brings a tremendous response. Publication of a note bawling me out brings a lot of letters telling the critics to go straight to hell. This formula was worked out on the notion that the average human being on an average day has in his system a tear, a bit of sentiment, a prayer, a touch of nostalgia, some sunshine and some seriousness, and that he likes having them pricked just a little. The column seldom varies from this formula.

It should be remembered that readers cannot change moods as readily as writers who already have the facts in mind. Frequent shifts from the sublime to the ridiculous should be avoided. Columnists who keep notebooks with them constantly may find it advisable to write each item on a half sheet, then to arrange in a logical order before pasting together. Exceptions are those experienced writers who compose and arrange in their heads before committing ideas to paper. To paraphrase an old bit of advice:

"THE BEST COLUMNS ARE NOT WRITTEN: THEY ARE REWRITTEN."



"I make myself the goat . . ."