

PORTRAIT OF A LITERARY CRITIC

A Satire

BY THOMAS WOLFE

THE personality of the celebrated Dr. Turner — or Dr. Hugo Twelvetees Turner as he was generally known to the reading public — was not an unfamiliar one to Joseph Doaks, the novelist. Dr. Turner's wider reputation had been well known to the public for fifteen years or more. And for ten years he had been the guiding spirit of the splendid journal he had himself established, the *Fortnightly Cycle of Reading, Writing, and the Allied Arts*.

The establishment of the *Fortnightly Cycle* marked, as one critic says, "one of the most important literary events of our time," and life without it, another offered, would have been "simply unthinkable." *The Cycle* came into being at the time when the critical field was more or less divided between the somewhat prosaic conservatism of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and the rather mannered preciosity of *The Dial*. Between the two, Dr. Turner and *The Cycle* struck a

happy medium; the position of *The Cycle* might be best classified as a middle-of-the-road one, and Dr. Turner himself might be described as the nation's leading critical practitioner of middle-of-the-roadism. Here, really, lay his greatest contribution.

It is true that there were certain skeptics who stubbornly disputed Dr. Turner's right to such a title. These critics, instead of being reassured by the broad yet sane liberalism of the Doctor's views, were seriously alarmed by it: they professed to see in Dr. Turner's critical opinions a tendency towards a disturbing — nay dangerous! — radicalism. Such a judgment was simply ridiculous. Dr. Turner's position was neither too far to the right nor too far to the left, but "a little left of centre." To such a definition he would himself have instantly agreed; the phrasing would have pleased him.

True, there had been a period in Dr. Turner's rich career, when his

position had been a much more conservative one than it now was. But to his everlasting credit, let it be said that his views had grown broader as the years went on; the years had brought increase of tolerance, depth of knowledge, width of understanding; ripeness with this valiant soul was all.

There had been a time when Dr. Turner had dismissed the works of some of the more modern writers as being the productions of "a group of dirty little boys." Indeed the first use of this delightfully homely and pungent phrase may be safely accredited to Dr. Turner himself; people on Beacon Hill read it with appreciative chuckles, gentlemen in clubs slapped the *Fortnightly Cycle* on their thighs and cried out "Capital!" It was just the way they had always felt about the fellow themselves, except that they had never found quite the words to put it so; but *this* man now, this What's-His-Name, this Turner — oh, Capital! Capital! It was evident that a fearless, new, and salutary force had come into the Nation's Letters!

A little later on, however, Dr. Turner's dirty little boy had been qualified somewhat by the adjectival words, "Who scrawls bad words which he hopes may shock his elders upon the walls of privies."

This was even better! For a pleasing image was thus conveyed to the readers of Dr. Turner's *Fortnightly Cycle* that brought much unction to their souls. For what could be more comfortable for a devoted reader of the *Fortnightly Cycle* than the reassuring sense that just as he was settling comfortably to attend to one of the most inevitable of the natural functions, he might look up and read with an amused and tolerating eye certain words that various dirty little boys like Anatole France, George Bernard Shaw, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and D. H. Lawrence had scrawled up there with the intention of shocking him.

If Dr. Turner had made no further contribution, his position would have been secure. But more, much more, was yet to come. For even at this early stage one of the salient qualities of Dr. Turner's talent had revealed itself. He was always able to keep at least two jumps ahead not only of his own critics, but of his own admirers. It was Dr. Turner, for example, who first made the astonishing discovery that Sex was Dull. The news at first stunned the readers of the *Fortnightly Cycle*, who had begun to be seriously alarmed about the whole matter, shocked, appalled, and finally reduced to a state of

sputtering indignation by "This, this Sort of Thing, now; Sort of Thing they're writing nowadays; this, this, why, this Filth! This fellow Lawrence, now!"

Dr. Turner put these perturbed spirits to rest. Dr. Turner was neither appalled, shocked, nor incensed by anything he read about sex. He didn't get indignant. He knew a trick worth six of these. Dr. Turner was amused. Or would have been amused, that is, if he had not found the whole business so excessively boring. Even as early as 1924, he was writing the following in comment on a recent book of D. H. Lawrence:

This preoccupation with Sex — really not unlike the preoccupation of a *naughty* little boy with certain four-letter words which he surreptitiously scrawls upon the sides of barns — (*observe how the earlier exuberances of the Doctor are here subtly modified*) — would on the whole be mildly amusing to an adult intelligence who had presumed that these were things that one had lived through and forgotten in one's salad days, if it were not for the fact that the author contrives to make the whole business so appallingly dull. . . .

The readers of the *Fortnightly Cycle* were at first amazed, then simply enchanted by this information. They had been dismayed and sore perplexed — but now! Why, ah-hah-hah, the whole thing was very funny, wasn't it? The extreme

seriousness of the fellow about the Kind of Thing they had themselves forgotten since their Sophomore days — would really be quite amusing if he did not contrive to make it so abysmally Dull!

II

But there was more, much more, to come. The whole tormented complex of the 'twenties was upon good Dr. Turner. People everywhere were bewildered by the kaleidoscopic swiftness with which things changed. It was a trial that might well have floored a less valiant spirit than that of Dr. Turner. Hardly a week went by but that a new great poet was discovered. Scarcely an issue of the *Fortnightly Cycle* appeared but that a new novel to equal *War and Peace* was given to the world. And not a month passed but that there was a new and sensational movement in the bewildering flux of fashion: Charles Chaplin was discovered to be not primarily a comedian at all, but the greatest tragic actor of the time (learned adepts of the arts assured the nation that his proper role was Hamlet). The true art-expression of America was the comic-strip (the productions of the Copleys, Whistlers, Sargents, Bel-lowses, and Lies could never hold a

candle to it). The only theatre that truly was native and was worth preserving was the burlesque show. The only music that was real was Jazz. There had only been one writer in America (his name was Twain, and he had been defeated just because he was — American; he was so good just because he was — American; but if he had not been American he could have been — so good!). Aside from this the only worthwhile writing in the land was what the advertising writers wrote; this was the true expression of the Yankee clime — all else had failed us, all was dross.

The madness grew from week to week. With every revolution of the clock the Chaos of the Cultures grew. But through it all, the soul of Dr. Turner kept its feet. Turner hewed true and took the Middle Way. To all things in their course, in their true proportion, he was just.

True, he had lapses. In culture's armies, he was not always foremost to the front. But he caught up. He always caught up. If there were errors sometimes in his calculations, he always rectified them before it was too late; if he made mistakes, like the man he was, he gallantly forgot them.

It was inspiring just to watch his growth. In 1923, for instance, he referred to the *Ulysses* of James

Joyce as "that encyclopedia of filth which has become the bible of our younger intellectuals"; in 1925, more tolerantly, as "that bible of our younger intellectuals which differs from the real one in that it manages to be so consistently dull"; in 1929 (behold this man!) as "that amazing *tour de force* which has had more influence on our young writers than any other work of our generation"; and in 1933, when Justice Woolsey handed down the famous decision that made the sale of *Ulysses* legally permissible throughout these States (in a notable editorial that covered the entire front page of the *Fortnightly Cycle*) as "a magnificent vindication of artistic integrity . . . the most notable triumph over the forces of bigotry and intolerance that has been scored in the Republic of Letters in our time. . . ."

Similarly, when one of the earlier books of William Faulkner appeared, Dr. Turner greeted it with an editorial that was entitled, "The School of Bad Taste." He wrote:

One wonders what our bright young men will do for material now that the supply of four-letter words and putrescent situations has been so exhausted that further efforts in this direction can only rouse the jaded reader to a state of apathy. Is it too much to hope that our young writers may grow

tired of their own monsters and turn their talents to a possible investigation of — dare we hope it? — normal life?

A few years later, however, when Mr. Faulkner's *Sanctuary* appeared, the Doctor had so altered his views that, after likening the author to Poe in "the quality of his brooding imagination . . . his sense of the Macabre . . . his power to evoke stark fear, sheer horror, as no other writer of his time has done," he concluded his article by saying darkly to his readers, "This man may go far."

Thus, although Dr. Turner was occasionally out of step, he always fell in again before the Top Sergeant perceived his fault. Moreover, once he got into the fore, he had a very brave and thrilling way of announcing his position to his readers as if he had himself been in the crow's nest and cried "Land Ho!" at the very moment when the faint shore of some new and brave America was first visible.

These then were among the Doctor's more daring discoveries; some of the more conservative of his following were made uneasy by such risky venturesomeness, but they should not have been alarmed. For, if the Doctor ever stuck his neck out, it was only when he had it safely armor-plated: his bolder sorties out among the

new and strange were always well-hedged round by flanking guards of reservations. Upon more familiar ground, however, the Doctor would go the whole hog in a way that warmed the soul. His praises of the Joyces, Faulkners, Eliots, and Lawrences were always fenced in by a parenthesis of safe reserve; even the Dreisers and the Lewises had their moderating checks; but when the Millays, Glasgows, Cabells, Nathans, and Morleys were his meat, he spoke out of the fullness of his heart — in vulgar phrase, the Doctor went to town.

And curiously enough, it was just here, when Dr. Turner was on what he himself was fond of classifying as "safe ground," that his judgment was likely to grow giddy and was prone to err. This exuberance caused him some embarrassment; at various stages of his editorial career he had described Christopher Morley as being the possessor of "the most delightful prose style that the familiar essay has known since the days of his true contemporary and, may I say, *almost* his equal, Charles Lamb. Aside from Lamb there is no other essayist since Montaigne's time to match him"; of Ellen Glasgow: "Not only our greatest living novelist, but one of the greatest

novelists that ever lived"; and of that lady's many works, as " . . . in their entirety comprising a picture of a whole society that, for variety and scope, has no parallel in literature except the *Comédie Humaine*, and that, in the perfection of their form and style, achieve a faultless artistry that Balzac's cruder talent never reached"; of the whimsy-whamsy of Robert Nathan as " . . . sheer genius. There's no other word for it; it's sheer elfin genius of a kind that not even Barrie has attained and that has no rival in our language unless perchance it be the elfin loveliness of the Titania-Oberon scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"; of the baroque pilgrimage of Mr. Cabell in his Province of Cockaigne " . . . our greatest ironist. . . . The greatest prose style in the language. . . Perhaps the only Pure Artist that we have"; and of a young gentleman who wrote a book about a Bridge in South America: "A great writer. . . . Certainly the greatest writer that the Younger Generation has produced. And the book! Ah, what a book! A book to be treasured, cherished, and re-read; a book to put upon your shelves beside *War and Peace*, *Don Quixote*, *Moby Dick*, *Candide* . . . and withal a book, that, without one touch of

the dreary and degrading realism that disfigures the work of most of our younger writers, is so essentially, splendidly American . . . as American as Washington, Lincoln, or the Rocky Mountains, since in its story are implicit the two qualities that are most characteristic of our folk: Democracy through Love; Love through Democracy. . . ."

The world being the grim place it sometimes is, it is sorrowful but not surprising to relate that there were a few wicked spirits who took a cruel delight in unearthing these lush phrases years after they had first been uttered, and after they had lain decently interred in old copies of the *Fortnightly Cycle* for so long that presumably they were as dead as most of the books that had evoked them. Then the worthy Doctor had to pretend he did not know that they were there, or else eat them, and of all the forms of diet this is the toughest and least palatable.

But on the whole the Doctor came through nobly. The sea at times was stormy and the waves ran very high but the staunch ship that was Turner weathered through.

Among his followers, it is true, there are some whose tendencies were so conservative that they deplored the catholicity of the Doc-

tor's tastes. And among his enemies, there were some who were cruel enough to suggest that he wanted to be all things to all people, that Turner was not only the proper, but the inevitable, name for him, that the corkscrew shaped his course, and that if he went around the corner he would run into himself on the way back. Doctor Turner's answer to both these groups was simple, dignified, and complete: "In the Republic of Letters," said he, "of which I am a humble citizen, there are, I am glad to say, no factions, groups, or class distinctions. It is a true Democracy, perhaps the only one that now exists. And as long as I am privileged to belong to it, in however modest a capacity, I hope I shall be worthy of it, too, and broad enough to see all sides."

III

In appearance, Dr. Turner was scarcely prepossessing. He was so much below middle height that at first sight it seemed that one of Singer's Midgets had enjoyed a run of extra growth. His little bread-crumble of a body, for in appearance he suggested nothing so much as a piece of well-done toast, was surmounted by a head of normal size which appeared too large

for the meagre figure that supported it. In its other qualities it resembled somewhat the face of the little man one so often sees in political cartoons, and which bears the caption of *The Common People*. It was such a face as one might see upon the streets a hundred times a day, and never think of later: it may have belonged to a bank clerk, a bookkeeper, an insurance agent, or someone going home to Plainfield on the 5:15.

Doaks himself was one of the good Doctor's more belated discoveries. When the author's first book, *Home to Our Mountains*, had appeared some years before, Dr. Turner had not been favorably impressed. The review in the *Fortnightly Cycle* had been a very gem of bland dismissal: "No doubt the thing is well enough," said Turner, "but after all, old Rabelais is really so much better" — a conclusion which the unhappy author was by no means minded to dispute.

Five years later, upon the publication of Doaks' second book the good Doctor was still undecided just what he was going to do about it or him. Three weeks before the book was released for general sale, in fact, the Doctor had met Doaks' publisher and, after confessing that an advance copy of the new work

had been sent to him, had added grimly: "I haven't made up my mind about Doaks yet. But," said he bodingly, "I'll make it up within a week or two." Within the next two weeks, however, Dr. Turner apparently felt the telepathy of moderating influences — "You can always tell," as he was wont to say, "when Things are in the Air" — to such a degree that when his critique ultimately appeared, it was much more favorable than Doaks or his publisher had dared to hope. Not that the Doctor was thoroughly persuaded, but he took a more conciliating tone. The book, he averred, "could hardly be called a novel" — he did not trouble to explain what could — it was really "a Spiritual Autobiography," and having arrived at this sounding definition, he discussed the volume freely in spiritual-autobiographical terms, and on the whole was pretty favorable about it, too, having neatly furnished forth a special little nest for Mr. Doaks, without in any way impinging on the jealous precincts of more splendid birds on more important boughs.

The way for a rapprochement was thus opened gracefully and when the author met the Doctor some months later their greetings were of a friendly kind.

"Darling," said Dr. Turner to his wife, "I want you to meet Mr. Doaks. By George! I can't get used to all this 'Mister' stuff, I'm going to call you *Joel*!" cried Dr. Turner with an air of bluff heartiness that was simply irresistible. "I know so many people that you know and I've heard them call you Joe for years, no other name seems possible."

Doaks murmured that he was enchanted to be thus addressed, meanwhile feeling a little helpless and confused under the hypnotic influence of Mrs. Turner who, still holding him by the hand, was looking steadily into his eyes with a slow, strange smile.

"You," she said at length, very slowly and decidedly, "*You!* You wrote the book," she concluded simply.

He felt definitely vague about this, but managed to mumble that he had. The lady's answer to this was to continue to hold the author by the hand, to regard him steadily with a fixed smile that seemed to harbor some dawning mirth to which no one else was a party.

"You," she said presently again. "I don't know, but somehow you make me laugh. You amuse me. There is something about you that is like — is like — an Elf!"

"Yes," said Dr. Turner quickly

and, meeting Doaks' bewildered eye, he went on with an air of hasty explanation in the manner of people steering away from well-known reefs: "My wife was *awfully* interested in that book of yours. *Awfully*. Of course, we *all* were," he went on rapidly. "Matter of fact, I wrote three full columns on it," he went on with just a tinge of nervous constraint, as if he hoped this would make everything all right. "I believe it was the longest review I have done since *An American Tragedy*. I was *awfully* interested in it," said the Doctor, now like Yser, rolling rapidly. "Did you see my review, by any chance?" he asked, and then quickly before the other had a chance to answer, "I was really *awfully* interested; I called it a kind of spiritual autobiography," he went on. "I mean," he said quickly, as the other opened his mouth as if to speak, "it really made me think of *Wilhelm Meister*. Not," the Doctor quickly cried, as Doaks started to open his mouth again, "not that that was all of it — of course there were passages in it that were *very* much like *War and Peace* — I remember saying to Mrs. Turner at the time, 'You know, there are times when he is *very* much like Tolstoi.'"

"And like an — *Elf*," said Mrs. Turner at this point, never for a moment relinquishing her grasp on the author's hand, and continuing to smile steadily at him in a slow, strange way — "So- like- an- *Elf*," she said and laughed deliberately.

"And, of course," said Doctor Turner rapidly, "there's the *Moby Dick* influence too. I know I told my wife at the time that there were passages, magnificent passages," cried Doctor Turner, "that were very much like Herman Melville —"

"And- like- an- *Elf*!" the wife said.

"And *very* much like *Moby Dick*!" the Doctor said decidedly.

"And *very*," Doaks, whose mind at last was beginning to work slowly, thought, "oh, *very, very*, like a whale!"

Meanwhile the critic's lady continued to hold him by the hand, looking steadily at him, smiling a slow smile.

In this way, after so long and perilous a voyage, the storm-tossed mariner, Mr. Doaks, came to port. And if he was not berthed among the mighty liners, at least he now had anchorage in the slips where some of the smaller vessels in the Turnerian haven were.

SHALL WE DROWN THE UNEMPLOYED?

BY FRED C. KELLY

THE other day one of our Senators proposed exporting 2,000,000 Negroes to Liberia, on the theory that the government would then have 2,000,000 fewer recipients of PWA and Relief money. Thus an old fallacy persists in our august Congress, as it does elsewhere. If, say those who currently encourage this fallacy, everyone now on public works, Relief, and so on were banished (or persuaded to drown themselves, as so many have) the government would be able to stop the huge Relief and public-works payments, balance the budget, and, most important of all, lighten the tax load on John Citizen, Esq. This notion, for all its beauty, is sheer nonsense. Facts and figures show that removal of the present unemployed would only create a new batch requiring care.

Here are a few figures statisticians have prepared, proving that *unemployment is not an independent problem, but one which has inter-relationships with other aspects of our whole national economy*. According to the 1930 census, there were 48.8

million gainful workers in the United States, out of a total population of 123,000,000. The average number of dependents for each gainful worker is thus about 1.5. If we assume that the 11,000,000 workers currently unemployed have the average number of dependents (of course, many are ahead of the average) about 27.5 million persons may be classed as unemployed or dependent on the unemployed — about 21 per cent of the total population. So if the unemployed workers were drowned, their dependents would still remain. We should have to dispose of these dependents, too, or else the cost of Relief would decrease only slightly, and the government would lose the compensating value of those now on public works.

About 2,500,000 are on Federal work projects; another 1,500,000 families and single persons are receiving Relief from State and local agencies. In addition 1,500,000 are receiving aid under Social Security. Since 1933, government expenditures for Relief and secur-