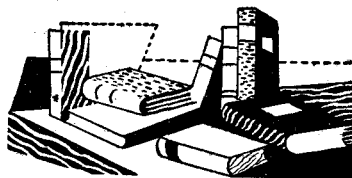

THE LIBRARY



FROM A LITERARY NOTEBOOK

by CHARLES ANGOFF

Epigrams. It seems to be a rule that the greater the writer the fewer epigrams are to be found in his works. Edgar Saltus and Oscar Wilde dazzle with pithy, caustic remarks, while Tolstoy and Thomas Hardy have so few that hardly anyone quotes them. Shakespeare is an exception, but, then, he is an exception to all rules.

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Horrible Thought. There has been discussion throughout the years concerning the abiding mystery of woman. Perhaps there is no mystery. Perhaps the women in the fiction pages of the mass circulation magazines reflect all there is to know about most women, and the mystery of women is largely the product of the romantic imagination of men.

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Marriage. Apparently no fiction writer has noticed this puzzling fact: when a bachelor, along in years, fi-

nally gets married, he finds that his married women friends resent it, while his unmarried women friends become more friendly.

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Hemingway as Stylist. When people talk about Hemingway they talk more about his style than about his characters. Herein lies the severest comment upon him, for in all literary history no fiction writer who has had chiefly his style to commend him has long endured. The Hemingway character who is most often mentioned is Catherine Barkley of *A Farewell to Arms*, but she is more an adolescent's dream of the ideal girl to sleep with than a real, breathing woman, with moods and regrets, tantrums and exhilarations, passions and neurotic silences.

Hemingway's bare, hard style amounts to the negation of style. If style reflects a mode of thinking about situations and of reacting to emotions, one's own as well as other people's, then Hemingway, one is forced to say, is deficient both in thought and emo-

tion. Hemingway seems to believe that the bare facts of a human situation tell their own story far better than any conscious literary artist can. The truth is that the bare facts of any human situation do not tell their own story or reveal anything else of genuine human interest. Whatever story there is in the facts is almost entirely the reaction of the beholder, the artist. His reactions must be instilled into the facts to give them artistic meaning.

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Hemingway and Character Portrayal.

Hemingway's apparent total inability to portray a woman is well known. His inability to portray a man is almost as flagrant. Lieutenant Henry, of *A Farewell to Arms*, hasn't the vitality even of Babbitt. He moves across the pages of the novel either like an automaton or an animal in heat. Indeed, Hemingway, on the whole, hardly seems to be dealing with human beings at all, but with residents of a zoo, whose inhabitants have been taught to talk in monosyllables and grunts.

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Sinclair Lewis. Lewis made his reputation with *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. Neither book can be read with complete satisfaction now; they are caricatures rather than true portrayals; they are, to a great extent, written with malice rather than with sympathetic

understanding; and they lack abiding pity. Lewis's one book that seems to have the stuff of endurance in it is *Dodsworth*. That is strange, indeed, for *Dodsworth* is mostly done in a non-Lewis manner. It is a quiet, traditional book about a quiet American couple, where the wife makes a fool of herself and then learns that her only comfort is by the side of her husband. A simple tale, honestly told. It might almost have been written by Edith Wharton — or the early Willa Cather. Both Fran and Sam Dodsworth live in the memory. They are completely believable human beings, done with affection and charity. They seem to take on more depth with every reading. When fictional characters do that they are here to stay.

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Women as Heroines. How many "good" women have served as heroines in great works of fiction? Becky Sharp, Mildred (in *Of Human Bondage*), Anna Karenina, Hester Prynne, Esther Waters, Madame Bovary, Molly Bloom, Esther Jack — all "bad," from the point of view of traditional morality. Why do writers so seldom take the trouble to sing the virtues of "good" women? Is it because the devil sings the sweetest tunes?

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Totalitarianism and Literature. Autocracy is not necessarily the enemy

of literature. The autocracy of the Czars did not prevent the emergence and flowering of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, Gorki, and Chekhov. The despotism of the German kings and emperors did not do much harm to the writings of Goethe, Hauptmann, Sudermann, and Heine. But under Communism and Nazism not one truly great work has been produced. The autocracies of old apparently left enough general human dignity intact to nourish gifted individuals, and some of the autocrats themselves were patrons of letters. Totalitarianism, however, destroys all human dignity and thus turns a nation into a cultural wasteland.

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Literary Asthma. Our supply of good short stories far outruns our supply of good novels. When attempting a novel, many of our writers appear to lose wind around page fifty. Willa Cather was at her best in her stories — “A Wagner Matinee,” “Coming, Aphrodite,” “Paul’s Case,” come to mind at once. *A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy*, both very good, are really longish stories. Dreiser’s *Twelve Men*, a collection of short stories, stands up far better than *Jennie Gerhardt*, *Sister Carrie*, and *An American Tragedy*. Edith Wharton’s long stories about New York and such tales as “The Other Two” and “Xingu” seem more compact and more meaningful

than her prose works in the larger form. Melville? To at least one reader there is more abiding pleasure in *The Piazza Tales* than even in *Moby Dick*. If Hemingway lives at all, it will be for some of the stories in *In Our Time* and *Men Without Women*. Faulkner’s novels, especially the later ones, are unreadable despite all the imaginary profundities the obscurantist critics see in them. The Faulkner who has stature is the one who wrote such magnificent stories as “That Evening Sun Go Down” and “Hair.” Fitzgerald? *The Great Gatsby* is good, of course, but Fitzgerald never did another novel nearly as good, while he did many short stories that seem destined for a very long life. “Crazy Sunday” and “Absolution” alone would seem to guarantee him an audience for many, many years to come.

Not only in the realm of prose fiction do our writers seem to suffer from short wind, but also in the realm of the drama. Is it heresy to say that O’Neill’s early one-acters will, in years to come, probably prove more satisfying than his longer works? Isn’t *Waiting For Lefty* the best work of Odets? Isn’t *Bury the Dead* Irwin Shaw’s only good play?

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Mother. The psychologists and psychiatrists tell us that as a nation we suffer from what they call *momism*, by which they apparently mean an

unhealthy dependence upon one's mother and her precepts for guidance throughout one's life. Mother is the oracle to many men, women, and adolescents. She is too much in our minds and in our hearts, and this stunts our mental and emotional growth. She is extravagantly loved and bitterly hated. Why, then, does she play so small a part in our literature? The only mother of major fictional size in all reputable American literature who comes to mind at once is Eliza Gant in *Look Homeward, Angel*. The mother in *Grapes of Wrath* is less a heroine than an editorial by Steinbeck.

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Fictional Biography. This is not the bastard art form that some critics claim. "Factual" biography is an illusion. All biography, like all history, has a large fictional element. The "unity" in orthodox biographies and histories is imposed by the writers; so are the gradations of importance of events; so are major influences, both upon and by situations under consideration; so is the final judgment on an individual or an era. These are not "facts" in themselves, however much they may appear to be based on facts. They are the colored glasses of a point of view, and therefore just as "fictional" as an imaginary conversation or midnight dream. What makes most fictional biographies so feeble

is not their "fictional" character, but their inferior fictioneering. That, at bottom, is why Mrs. Catherine Drinker Bowen's lives of Justice Holmes and John Adams are superior to Howard Fast's lives of Thomas Paine and George Washington.

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Creative Women Writers. England has had its Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Edith Sitwell, and Elizabeth Bowen. France has had its Madame de Staël, George Sand and Colette. At the moment no major German woman writer comes to mind, and no major Italian woman writer, and no major Russian woman writer. The United States? The number of important women writers we have produced is truly amazing. Emily Dickinson, Helen Hunt Jackson, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Amy Lowell, Margaret Fuller, Dorothy Parker, Elinor Wylie, Katherine Anne Porter, Elizabeth Madox Roberts—these are only some of the names that occur. It would seem that the English and American languages have a greater attraction for creative women literary artists than have several of the other world languages. This is puzzling, especially when set beside the fact that for men writers the language difference is not so significant.

THE CHECK LIST



BIOGRAPHY

ROOSEVELT IN RETROSPECT, *A Profile in History*, by John Gunther. \$3.75. *Harper*. As a work of insight this book has no value. Mr. Gunther reveals only a superficial understanding of FDR and his times, and writes about the whole era like a moon-struck girl: "Roosevelt was a man of his times, and what times they were! — chaotic, catastrophic, revolutionary, epochal — he was President during the greatest emergency in the history of mankind, and he never let history — or mankind — down." But the book is filled with many interesting sidelights about FDR — what he thought about women, what his favorite drink was, how he managed a Cabinet meeting, how he wrote his speeches, what he thought about fishing as a hobby, the important part Fala played in his life, how he and Mrs. FDR really got along, and how he loathed the newly rich.

D. H. LAWRENCE. *Portrait of a Genius But . . .*, by Richard Aldington. \$3.75. *Duell, Sloan and Pearce*. Another profile of Lawrence by one of his many friends, and probably the best of them all so far.

Mr. Aldington attempts little criticism of Lawrence's works — though the little he has to say about them is sensible. He is chiefly interested in the man behind the works, or, rather, the sort of man who wrote the sort of books he did write. He points out that Lawrence was essentially a poet (his novels and criticism were really forms of poetry), that he was a Puritan despite his emphasis upon the importance of whole physical union between man and woman, that he was inconsistent and selfish and cruel and kind and tender, and that he was very shabbily treated by many editors and publishers. These facts have been known for some time, but Mr. Aldington supplies new details and, what is more important, a fresh tenderness of approach. There are several good photographs.

CAPTAIN SAM GRANT, by Lloyd Lewis. \$6.00. *Little, Brown*. This is the first of a projected three- or four-volume biography of the Civil War general which the late Lloyd Lewis planned to write. A man who probably knew more about the Civil War than any other American of his day, Mr. Lewis had looked forward to his labors upon Grant as his master-