

What Halifax did for the British name in India still endures.

Lord Birkenhead's book is a fine sustained achievement, though it is not free from weaknesses of presentation. The evocations of Yorkshire country life sometimes err on the side of sentimentality, and a more serious fault appears in a recurrent lack of flow in the narrative line. Points are anticipated and thus lose dramatic impact, and established points are sometimes needlessly repeated.

It is a far-ranging book and final judgment must rest on the general impression. This is entirely successful and one who for many years knew Lord Halifax, albeit at large removes of age and position, finds him here as a living presence. A reader who never saw or met him is sure of the same experience. He was an elusive man not to be caught and defined. Lord Birkenhead has not attempted this, but something better. He has amassed the evidence from many quarters and delineated the question mark with a sure hand. The answer is firmly implied.

## Cultivated Innocence

**The Reign of Wonder: Naïvety and Reality in American Literature.** By TONY TANNER.  
*Cambridge University Press, 47s. 6d.*

NEARLY TWENTY YEARS ago I visited a Teachers' College in Kansas and was given some of the students' essays to read. I cannot remember now exactly what the subject of the essays was, but it involved some discussion of the value of the study of history. I was much struck by one essay which opened with the flat statement that Americans were not interested in history since, unlike the old countries of Europe, they looked to the present and the future rather than to the past. History, in fact, was un-American.

Now in a sense this is of course a very naïve and indeed a preposterous attitude; nevertheless, it represents something very real and very deep in the American consciousness. *Homo Americanus* is, and ought to be, man without history, man responding to his immediate environment in innocence and wonder with the uncorrupted vision of a child, a primitive, a backwoodsman: this view runs with surprising continuity through American literature from Emerson (to go no further back) to J. D. Salinger. Emerson

not only exclaimed, "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe"; he also held up as the ideal observer "the child with his sweet pranks, the fool of his senses, commanded by every sight and sound, without any power to compare and rank his sensations, abandoned to a whistle or a painted chip, to a lead dragoon or a ginger-bread dog, individualising everything, generalising nothing." Thoreau not only exclaimed, "How much virtue there is in simply seeing!" He also noted in his journal his belief "that we should treat our minds as innocent and ingenuous children whose guardians we are. . . . Routine, conventionality, manners, etc., etc.—how insensibly an undue attention to these matters dissipates and impoverishes the mind, robs it of its simplicity and strength, emasculates it!" Whitman not only called on his Muse to "migrate from Greece and Ionia" to take up her habitation in the "better, fresher, busier sphere," the "wide, untried domain" that awaited her; he also wrote, "*I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*" Whitman's loafing reminds us of Thoreau's advocacy of "a true sauntering of the eye," of Huckleberry Finn's "lazying" while employing the naïve vision of the child and the outcast, of Gertrude Stein's protest against "letting remembering mix itself with looking" and her endeavour to redeem words from history and continuity in favour of "moment to moment emphasising." We may be reminded, too, of Sherwood Anderson's deep urge to record the "odd little things" that make up experience directly and naïvely without the patterning and interpretation of the interfering mind. And we may recall the famous passage from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* which concludes, "Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."

There is something refreshing, and there is also something dangerous, in this American tradition. At its best it can, in Tony Tanner's words, "refresh and revivify our vision of the world." To treat even the familiar as an object of wonder, to confront the external world afresh, redeemed from all the accretions of prejudice, presupposition and tradition, can result in a genuine new vision. It can also, if set beside more conventional ways of seeing and responding, cast a dark ironic shadow on convention itself and on the whole world of gentility and indeed of organised society. (Huckleberry Finn does this in one way; the heroine of *What Maisie Knew* does it in another.) *Innocence* can show up civilisation as corrupt. But it can also produce facility, sentimentality, even fatuity. If

every observer is to start afresh, with no help from the past experience of the race, civilisation of any kind will eventually become impossible since cumulative knowledge, on which civilisation is based, will not be allowed to develop. This is a heavy price to pay for freedom from corrupting conventions and distorting preconceptions. The price will include the loss of art, for art cannot exist long as a series of unrelated primitive productions. Gertrude Stein, for all her brilliance, and for all her influence on Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, preached the death of language as an art medium when she urged that words should be cut off from their history.

A word can always express more than it means; it has a history. I do not mean simply an etymology: it has a past; it has lived in different works and undergone the influence of its environment; it has had adventures; it has had encounters; it has been helped, supported by other words, or else it has come to their aid, has sustained them; and it retains hazy recollections of all its former companions, like a halo around itself.

These words of Jacques Rivière, quoted by Dr. Tanner in his chapter on Gertrude Stein, sum up this aspect of the problem very well.

There is also the charge that can be made against Emerson and others of the American Transcendentalists that they sought an "unearned" vision; they imagined that they could move from naïve wonder in regarding particulars to a mystic view of the divine unity underlying everything simply by sliding from one to the other. Even Thoreau, who had a grainier sense of the stubborn reality of individual facts than Emerson, can move from "closeness to the physical fact" to a view of the language that records those facts as "the symbol of the spiritual" in a single sentence. Nevertheless, the realisation "that the writer need not surround native local facts with established 'poetry' but can entice fresh and relevant poetry from the facts themselves, *simply by stating those facts*, has had a profound influence on American writing." This is largely the theme of Dr. Tanner's book, which moves from the Transcendentalists to Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* in tracing this tradition in American literature.

THE THESIS IS NOT, of course, new, but the intelligence and perceptiveness with which Dr. Tanner has developed and illustrated it help to make his book a stimulating invitation to reconsider this aspect of American literature. Who would have thought to see Henry James in this company of strategic innocents? But it is possible to look carefully at *What Maisie Knew*,

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*The Awkward Age*, and *The Sacred Fount* and see in all three James' deliberate placing of the innocent observer of a corrupt or at least a complex society—not so as to indict society or glorify simplicity but rather so as to shadow forth, in all kinds of subtle ways, the relation of the artist (who is always to some extent an observer and an outsider) to the material in real life out of which he shapes his art. The artist is a special kind of innocent. This is an intriguing point, and persuasively argued; Dr. Tanner's accounts of these three works of James are among the best I have read, and I have found them genuinely helpful. But is this equation, or partial equation, of innocent and artist really in the great American tradition of naivety and wonder? If this is so, then the argument would apply to many more than James. The "alienated artist" (and, so far as society is concerned, the innocent is the alienated) is one of the commonest themes in modern literature both European and American—indeed, more often European than American. An American scholar has recently published a study of the artist as hero in European and American fiction in the late 19th and 20th centuries: there are thousands of them.

James, says Dr. Tanner,

took the untutored eye—so revered by the Transcendentalists—and subjected it to a dynamic, unprogrammed education. And watching the naïve person assimilating, misconstruing, digesting, regurgitating, concentrating, omitting, as he or she was faced with the task of visually appropriating the world, James learnt something profound about the whole question of veridical knowledge, about the whole problem of verifying impressions.

He concludes that in James' stories and novels we see that

for the truly naïve eye, the habit of wonder, there is no place in the social centre of the world: it must either give way to some more worldly perspective in the world, or flee, or die. And yet—and this links James with Emerson and Thoreau—it is the naïve wondering eye which most generously celebrates and responds to the full range of experience.

This is true of Maisie and Nanda, and it is illuminating to have it put this way; but it is only part of the truth. Further, to argue, as Dr. Tanner does, that "Henry James was the first... writer to inquire into the fate of wonder when it is introduced into the clotted complexities of society and the turbulence of time" is to forget (or to be ignorant of) those numerous early American novels which show the innocent countryman confronting the complications of an urban society. "For early 19th-century America," observed Daniel Hoffman in his seminal book, *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, "the

Yankee villager is one expression of the myth of innocence, the Yankee peddler of the myth of competence." These two confronted each other in American fiction before James was born, and even if the confrontation represented a much cruder version of the innocent-observer-in-society theme than we find in James, the authentic theme is certainly there. "The usual pattern of one numerous *genre* of the American novel," wrote Hoffman, "is to move an innocent character from his country home into the temptations and evils of city life. This pattern conforms not only to that found in the 'young man from the provinces' class of novels, but also to the movement of populations in the American 19th and 20th centuries." It might be at least as interesting to set James in *this* tradition as to set him beside Emerson and Thoreau.

Just as it can be argued that this aspect of James can be related to other American traditions than that traced by Dr. Tanner, so it could on the other side be argued that some at least of the phenomena that Dr. Tanner sees as bound up with the American tradition of the innocent eye can be seen as having an affinity with an important European movement. The imagination's kindling at objects, an almost mystic sense of reality deriving from intense perception of things which on any traditional standard can only be considered trivial (and we find this in Thoreau, Whitman, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, among others), reminds us irresistibly of Joyce's "epiphany." Dr. Tanner does indeed suggest that Sherwood Anderson "at his best does sometimes achieve that which Joyce said short stories should aim at—an epiphany," though he denies that Hemingway's moments of clarity and meaning are epiphanies in Joyce's sense.

But isn't there more to it than this? The sense of reality as a private revelation coming to one unexpectedly as a result of chance confrontation of an object or objects which at any other time would have no special meaning and even now have no special meaning to anybody else—such a sense we find developing among European novelists (including British) in response to that breakdown in the public sense of what is significant in experience out of which one might almost say the modern novel was born. The feeling of living in a private world in which one finds meaning only through the personal epiphany is common enough in the novel of the 1920s and 1930s. When novelists find tradition untenable, find that their roots do not nourish and the patterns of significance to which society pays lip service have no meaning for them, they have travelled, as it were, to an America of the mind and sensibilities. They are like those ideal pristine Americans who pitted their virgin sen-

sations against a virgin country. "What is meant by reality?" asked Virginia Woolf in 1928. And she answered: "It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun." Doesn't this remind us of Sherwood Anderson's "little things," of William Carlos Williams' poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" ("*so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain/water beside the white/chickens*"), of Thoreau's feeling that nature "must steal on us when we expect it not," of Emerson's "power to fix the momentary eminency of an object"? When traditions fail, European novelists cultivate the innocent eye: to that extent, perhaps Dr. Tanner would say, they make themselves American.

BUT IT WAS LESS the failure of tradition than the renunciation of tradition that motivated the first American proponents of wonder. Language must be geared to what is actually seen (it is remarkable how *sight* is the one sense that matters to all these writers) uncorrupted by prior formulations, and to this end "children and savages" (Emerson's phrase) are the models, and a vernacular speech more effective than worn out literary modes. The search for a workable vernacular is one of the great themes in American literature, and the central achievement here is, of course, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Dr. Tanner's splendid chapters on this great novel are really the core of his book and constitute one of the most illuminating studies of Mark Twain I know.

It was Clemens who finally and completely inverted the pastoral situation and perfected the vernacular-child-narrator with a fruitfully naive perspective on life and a manner of speaking which was an adequate vehicle for the new point of view.

In doing this he was led into a deeper attack on the conventions of society than he must have been aware of. The final realisation that modern life has no place for innocence, that the American Eden which had once provoked the authentic response of wonder no longer exists and that this response is now available only to the outcast, darkened the latter part of Mark Twain's life and is surely responsible for the puzzling final section of *Huckleberry Finn*. Dr. Tanner charts this movement in Twain's imagination with sensitive particularisation.

This is one of the great crises of American experience, and if we understand it, it seems to me, we understand that fluctuation between



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## Painter's Proust

Marcel Proust. Volume II. By GEORGE PAINTER.  
Chatto & Windus, 40s.

IT HAS TAKEN George Painter six years to bring out the second half of his biography of Proust, instead of two as originally announced. Evidently he underestimated the length and scope of his labours—a habit which he may well have caught from his master. For it was only while actually writing *A la Recherche* that Proust came to discern its true proportions, and despite his initial chagrin the long delay in publishing *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs* turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The postponement (from 1913 to 1919) enabled him to round off the pattern of his experience, pursuing the possibilities of his nature further than he would have dared before, and also gave him a chance to expand and refine his masterpiece until it tallied with his inner vision. The material which he added during these years was bone and muscle rather than fat, not self-indulgent but essential to his artistic purpose.

The inception and growth of *A la Recherche* naturally overshadow everything else in Mr. Painter's new volume. Where previously a touch of the gossip-columnist was called for, he now needs to be far more the patient editorial excavator. This is a role in which he shines, as anyone who recalls his masterly handling of Proust's submission to Ruskin in the first volume will know. In the present volume he begins by showing how Ruskin's influence waned, a process as fitful and long-drawn-out as the *oubli* which eventually dissolves a Proustian love-affair. The introductory essay to Proust's translation of *Sesame and the Lilies* marks a crucial break, all but standing Ruskin on his head in its denial of the direct moral benefits of literature. It must be taken in context, however, as a declaration of independence, the expression not of a settled Proustian attitude (which if only in view of his powers as a critic would be absurd), but of his mood in 1905. A further stage in his struggle to emancipate himself from his literary forbears came three years later with the series of brilliant parodies prompted by the Arsène Lupinesque affair of Sir Julius Wernher and the Lemoine Diamonds. These in turn

pointed forward to *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, which Mr. Painter analyses step by step, emphasising that passages which were once taken as intimations of the masterpiece to come are in fact more likely to be reworkings of earlier drafts. The moment of transfiguration was close at hand, however. In a sense it had already come: the episode of the *madeleine* (in reality, a rusk) took place just as Proust was embarking on the second version of *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, at the beginning of 1909, but at first he failed to appreciate its significance for him. Continuing to revise the essay, he juxtaposed two novels in the section on Balzac—*La Recherche de l'Absolu* and *Les Illusions Perdues*—and stumbled towards his title. Finally, a month or two later, the revelation of the *madeleine* came home to him. By July 1909 he was hard at work on *Swann*.

Mr. Painter's treatment of *A la Recherche* is as admirably methodical as one would expect. He unscrambles the chronology and separates layer after layer, revealing a Proust who was ready to feed his immediate experiences of wartime Paris into the stream of recollection, and even to go out in deliberate search of material. (He hired musicians in order to help him distil the Vinteuil Septet.) Some persistent fallacies about the history of Proust's reputation are cleared up—*Swann* was by no means a complete flop, nor was *A l'Ombre* an instant success; and there is a blow-by-blow account of his dealings with publishers, notably his efforts to extricate himself from Grasset once he had overcome the suspicions of André Gide and the NRF group. Judged by ordinary business standards Proust doesn't come particularly well out of this episode, but where the future of his novel was at stake he could be like a tigress defending her young, and he knew the value of the NRF imprint. (He could also be decidedly unsentimental in money matters: when he left the Boulevard Haussmann he arranged for the famous cork walls to be sold to a bottle-manufacturer). In the end his manoeuvres helped him to taste the glory which he was quite frank about wanting to enjoy before he died, although he owed even more to the exertions of his friends—notably Léon Daudet, who led the backstairs campaign which secured him the Prix Goncourt.

Despite the incidental excitements of literary politics, the ructions and intrigues, it is inevitable that the life of a middle-aged novelist should make drier reading than that of a young social climber. Few periods in a writer's career are as humdrum as the ones when he is actually engaged in writing, and Mr. Painter is hardly to be blamed if much of his material is less immediately colourful than it was in his first volume. But he also has murkier or more