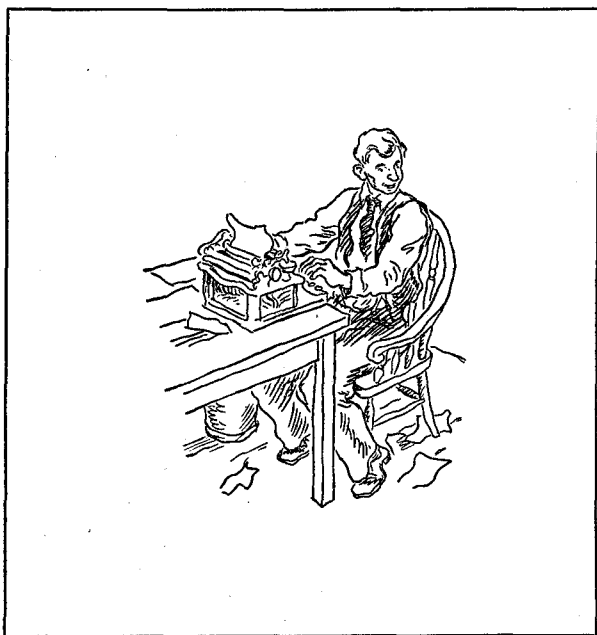


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# THE AMERICAN MIND IN LITERATURE

BY MARY M. COLUM

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Drawings by Donald McKay

THE INTELLIGENT reader demands two things from a book — one that it should entertain and absorb him and the other that it should in some way intensify his life, give him some wider sense of human experience than ordinarily comes his way. No matter what any pedant or theorist says, this is the basis of all sound literary criticism and all real literary appreciation: if these primary considerations are allowed to get snowed under by a welter of alien theories it is bad for both reader and writer; for the reader stops regarding literature as one of the desirable experiences of life, and the writer suffers from a lack of response. At present there are two terribly disintegrating forces in literature: one is what a French critic has called “the mania for argumentation which is the mark of ill-trained and disorderly minds,” and the other is that too many people have attached themselves to the production of books, people who in ages when the psychic needs of humanity were more amply filled would have

been occupying the village pulpit or carving gnomes in wood or fitting pieces of marble into cathedral floors or making tapestries or lace. Now there are too few artistic outlets, and so an inordinate number of men and women go in for some branch of writing. Literature is one of those activities which is not improved by the number of people who work at it. The intellectual and spiritual inheritance of mankind is not large, and can really stand being worked only by people who can add to it; and it is sure to suffer if over a long space of time a large number of persons are permitted to use any of this inheritance to give themselves ordinary, everyday self-expression.

In addition to these disintegrating forces there are a couple of major or minor curses: one is the prevalence of literary cliques and cénacles in every metropolis, each group with its own greatest novelist, greatest poet, greatest critic; the second is the number of people who, not having sowed their intellectual wild oats by attaching themselves to a cause with passion and generosity “in the laughing splendor of their youth,” now in the middle thirties or forties go after one with bad temper and intolerance. To-day a writer might spend a fair portion of his life writing a significant book as Hervey Allen has done in *Anthony Adverse* and not be sure but that it will be judged by the professional critics as it does or does not exemplify some social theory. One can start reading a review in certain publications and halfway down find oneself entangled in a discourse on Marxism or capitalism, just as a few years ago one might have found oneself entangled in a discourse on humanism. Political and ethical opinions are excellent for the character and for giving a regulating idea to one's life, but as a means of judging a book never have been nor ever can be of real value.

Of course the demands that a reader makes on

a book for amusement and intensification of life will be high-grade or low-grade according to his intellectual, imaginative, and emotional powers and to the training that these powers have received. Now judging by the best sellers I deliberately make the statement that the demands of the American reading public on literature are high-grade. Of course the reading public in any country represents a small fraction of the population; on the vast majority a new book makes no more real impression than a statement of the theory of relativity. *Anthony Adverse* is what is known as a best seller — that is, its sales in America are probably around one hundred fifty thousand — and if each copy is read by four or five people that means that it reaches roughly one-half of one per cent of the population.

#### A NEW OBJECTIVITY

A work of genius may be a best seller in its own time — in fact every work of genius has in it elements that should give it a wide circulation in its own or over a long space of time, or both together. It is necessary to say this because there are a number of readers who regard a book as they would a dress or an ornamental piece of merchandise and consider that it cannot possibly be high-grade if it has a wide distribution — that a best-seller cannot possibly be literature. Now Allen's *Anthony Adverse* and Bromfield's *The Farm* are both works of literature; they are even landmarks in American letters; but whether they have in them that perennial element which makes long-lasting literature is another question and one that really need not concern us very much at the moment. It is enough to know that a novel of such variety, such vitality, such imaginative sweep as *Anthony Adverse* has not been written in English since Smollett or Scott; it represents a combination of both Scott and Smollett.

We were all unutterably wearied of people writing about themselves, their own emotions, their own personal experiences. This novel of Hervey Allen's is a break with that worn-out subjectivism and may be the start of a new objectivism. It shows that the myth-making power which was thought by many to have passed out of literature needed only the man and the moment to come back with its old appeal to mankind. The book's communication

with life, its sympathy with strong emotion, with great adventure, restores to men a dignity that has been taken from them in so much of literature since the war. The love affair between Anthony's father and mother — the Irish officer Denis Moore and Maria the Scotch merchant's daughter — represents love as what it essentially is, a metaphysical reality with a physical expression; and the account of the slow-growing consciousness of the baby Anthony, bound with bandages to his back-board, is like the beginning of a world, the first chapter in the history of mankind. Indeed, throughout the narrative one feels that one is reading such a history, for there pass through the pages all the typical figures that humanity has produced — the hero, the lover, the priest, the warrior, the adventurer, the explorer, and in addition the minor types peculiar to the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like many contemporary Americans Hervey Allen too has discovered that the French and Spanish material of this country — the early Spanish conquests and the French missions and explorations — are a rich vein for literature. The use of this material from American history brings abundance, contrast, color, and humanity into what has been up to our time a lonely and somewhat inhuman literature, as was all that dominated by the New England mind.

#### NEW ENGLAND OVER-REFINED

THE LONELINESS and inhumanity of that literature — a great literature, let it be said — and of the New England intellectual mind never had a better revelation than comes out of the journals of Gamaliel Bradford, who seems himself to be almost a character out of a Hawthorne novel. His was not the New England mind at its most vigorous; what in the early settlers was a sharp aridity like dry wine and an intellectual sensuality becomes in their highly literate descendant an over-refinement, an over-gentility, a flight from life as from something dangerous. Nothing could better illustrate the difference between the life of a real writer and that of a librarian who wrote books than a comparison between the outline of the life of Hervey Allen which appears on the cover of *Anthony Adverse* and the life and character of Bradford which emerges from these

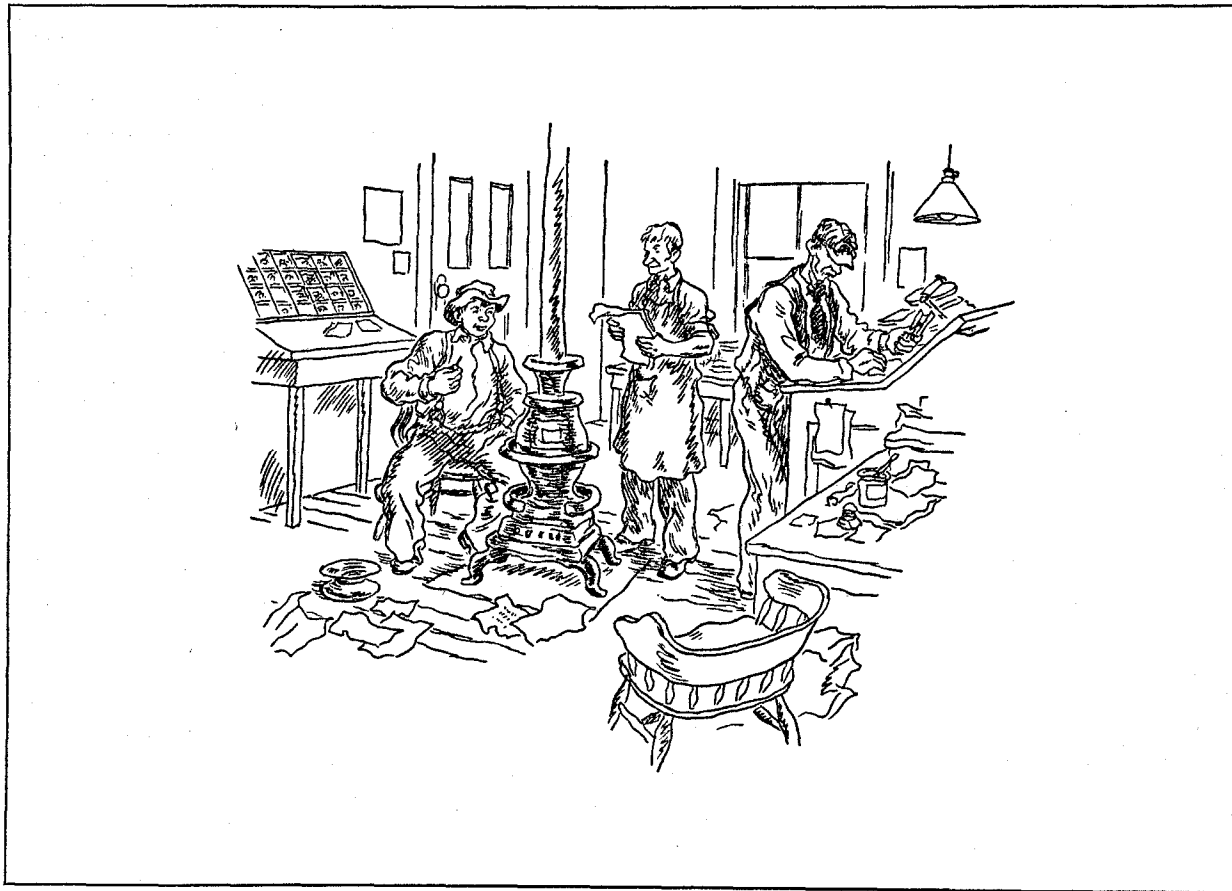
journals. The life of one was an adventure as a soldier, student, teacher, and wanderer, dotted with an occasional piece of published writing until about the age of thirty-five, when with a full mind and the knowledge he had gleaned from living he settled down to "write out true the life he lived, the dream he knew." Bradford on the other hand from the age of nineteen, when his *Journal* begins, to the age of sixty-eight, when he died, arranged his life so that he could get in as much reading as possible; his *Journal* is simply the history of the books he read and of the books he himself was to write from the matter drawn from these books. He was only occasionally conscious that literature was about life — was a thrust from life. His shrinking from life and from his fellow men was the more easily possible for him because he had inherited a comfortable house and income. At the same time he burned with a passion for glory and success: he was too shrewd a Yankee not to appreciate both money and success and, having one, he longed for the other. The schedule of his day as he tells us of it has the inhumanity of an ant's schedule of work. He wrote until half-past eleven in the morning. Then, whether he felt like it or not, he read poetry for half an hour; and he divided this reading into a systematic arrangement of authors and literatures, each having his own period in the month. The few minutes before lunch he gave to "the delicious reperusal" of his own work. After lunch he played the piano for half an hour; for fifteen minutes he read four pages of Shakespeare; and so this incredible schedule goes on. The literary criticism with which this journal is crammed is most of it of limited interest: it is of an academic nature and belongs to an age when literary criticism was a branch of pedagogy.

Mr. Mencken is quoted on the cover as saying in effect that it was Bradford who discovered the method for which Lytton Strachey got all the credit. This is nonsense. Bradford's method was taken over from Sainte-Beuve, whose work he studied all his life and some of whose portraits he read until he knew them almost by heart. Strachey's method was a combination of Sainte-Beuve and Gibbon to which he added his own individual if not first-rate intellect and temperament; he never got any-

thing from Bradford. Bradford's vogue began with his *American Portraits* and this vogue coincided with a period when America, becoming conscious of the great figure she was going to cut in the future of the world, began prematurely to long for a past. In his *Portraits* he presented the country with some picturesque characterizations out of that past. He himself was a link with history: he was a descendant of Governor Bradford of Plymouth; he was a grand-nephew of Sarah Ripley of Concord; his mother was the daughter of the partner of Daniel Webster; and all of this along with his *Portraits* will doubtless give him his niche in American literary history. A curiously distinctive figure, he was possible only in America; in America possible only in New England; and in New England possible only within easy reach of Boston. A sort of museum piece, he yet gives out a curious flavor of life like a character in a book, like a character out of Hawthorne; he seems in fact a sort of blood relative of the New England Willingdons in Louis Bromfield's *The Farm*.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF THE FRONTIER

DESPITE HIS revolt against the New England values and the New England tradition, Bromfield himself is intellectually the product of that tradition. In his book there is the bleak loneliness and meagerness that is in all New England writing and that ruthless power of disinterested social criticism that is New England's intellectual legacy to America, and which is not at all a quality of the western states. *The Farm* is in form a fictional autobiographical narrative with almost no dialogue, and though the style is simple and direct, the technique is very subtle, and is related to that modern French method called *unanimité*, where the ideal is to reveal the psychology of a crowd, and where there is no particular hero. It is the picture of a whole society in a pioneer community for over a hundred years. Johnnie, the descendant of the original group of people who travel from Maryland to Ohio, is rather a commentator on the life the author essays to reveal than the hero of the book. The characters have the veracity of a history: these pioneer men and women are drawn with a psychological power possible only to a man sunk in the life he describes and moved and molded by it as



Bromfield seems to have been. Perhaps his portraits of the pioneer women have more truth than the pious depictions to which we have been accustomed. The violent Marianna, the wife of Thomas Willingdon, with whom "he slept in a welter of hate and passion for fifty-seven years" — at the end arranging the bedclothes each night so as to keep their hated bodies from touching each other — confused love with a sense of ownership and so maimed forever the character of her son. She seems to be one of the types of pioneer women that are emerging from the works of the younger writers — she is own sister to the woman in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* who served and enslaved everybody with whom she was connected. Apart from its value as literature *The Farm* is a social document of great value: in it we can view the past that has produced the present America; we see how the dominant ideas were evolved, how the problems that harass the present generation came into being; it is even a help to understanding the kind of mind behind a certain type of literature.

From this same pioneer stock described by Louis Bromfield, from that same Ohio with its

materialism and rationalization sprang Hart Crane, who ended his short life by jumping into the sea from a ship on which he was returning from Mexico over a year ago. His ancestors had gone west from New England in covered wagons, and all the life described in *The Farm* and in addition the whole New England inheritance with all its loneliness was in his bones. Of all contemporary American poets he has been the most extravagantly praised by certain other poets. Good poets have to be good critics, but poetry in this country is reviewed too exclusively by poets, and the very intensity of their gift is likely to give them an inclination to praise most highly work that has points of resemblance to their own. So it happened that Hart Crane was intensely admired in one group and ignored in others. He was hard to read for those whose poetry-reading had been confined to the rather facile lyricism of the nineteen tens or twenties, and in comparison with his rich sense of language and his intellectual power he was, emotionally, meagerly endowed. He did not seem to be driven toward his subjects by an urge from within, but rather by deliberate intention, as if he were setting himself a theme. *The Bridge*,



though there is in it some of the most fascinating poetry written in contemporary America, has about its whole structure the air of having been willed (*voulu*, as the French say). One might describe him as the most determinedly American poet of our time; he wanted to be a great American poet, wanted America to express itself through him as he thought it had done through Walt Whitman, and to achieve this ambition he was inclined to will his subjects. It has been said that he was influenced by the French symbolists; and though their poetry, in which will and deliberateness played so great a part, has a strong fascination for Americans, I doubt very much if Crane was really affected by it. Where the symbolists all followed Verlaine's advice about eloquence which was to "wring its neck," Hart Crane actually restored eloquence as poetic force. *The Bridge* contains passages of an eloquence so magnificent that it makes us remember that in the Beginning was the Word and that that Word was not written but was spoken by a voice which came shattering through chaos. Even the purely lyric portions of his work have this eloquence:

O, like the lizard in the furious noon,  
That drops his legs and colors in the sun.  
— And laughs, pure serpent, Time itself, and moon  
Of his own fate, I saw thy change begun!

And saw thee dive to kiss that destiny  
Like one white meteor, sacrosanct and blent  
At last with all that's consummate and free  
There, where the first and last gods keep thy tent.

#### MR. CRANE, MISS STEIN, AND EXPRESSION

IT CAN BE said for Hart Crane that he was one of the dozen or so important American poets of his time, one of those who foreshadow an American literature which gives signs that it may yet be the greatest of all modern literatures. Crane, too, played his part in that movement which is concerned with the renovation of language, and was one of the signers of the "Manifesto" which *Transition*, the organ of that movement, issued. Among the claims made in this document was the right of the writer to use words of his own fashioning and to "disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by textbooks and dictionaries." It was also announced at the end of the "Manifesto" that "the writer expresses, he does not com-

municate"; and the last sentence was, "The plain reader be damned."

Gertrude Stein, whose *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* happens to be written in comprehensible English is one of the leaders of this movement which "expresses" but "does not communicate." The characteristic work in her *Portraits*, her *Tender Buttons* is said to be derived from the technique of painting, and to exercise a hypnotic power on the reader. I give here an average sample of it so that the plain reader may try it on himself. This particular piece is *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*:

Give known or pin ware.  
Fancy teeth, gas strips.  
Elbow elect, sour stout pore, pore caesar, pour state  
at.  
Leave eye lessons I Leave I lessons I Leave I Lessons I.

I confess that this *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is the first work of Gertrude Stein that I have ever been able to understand, and I commend the ingenuity of it to any one who wants to write a book praising himself and making himself the unabashed hero. It would have been difficult for Gertrude Stein without being accused of lunacy to have said in the first person that she herself is one of the three great modern geniuses, but it is simple to make Alice say it naïvely. There is little use in surmising whether or not the latter is a real person. Alice is nothing in the book but a lay figure. For the rest this autobiography like so many others is gossip about its author and about the celebrities she has met, but it is very interesting gossip and covers the whole movement of modern painting in France. Most of the celebrities are famous painters and so are more colorful than social celebrities. Miss Stein herself emerges as a very intelligent woman, easily flattered, with a lot of physical energy, and a certain amount of American Rotarianism; but a woman who was undoubtedly a good art critic and probably a picture-dealer of genius.

It is interesting to note that all these books, with the exception of Hervey Allen's, are still, even in the revolt they display, dominated by the New England mind. Still there are signs that this strain like all the others is becoming dissolved in the melting-pot which is modern America, and that some new type of literature is emergent.

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# LIQUOR CONTROL IN CANADA

BY WILLIAM PHILLIPS

*Under Secretary of State*

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Scissor cut by Hunt Diederich

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum

EVER SINCE the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment became something more than a rosy vision of the future it has been common to hear eager opponents of prohibition refer importantly to "the Canadian plan" of liquor control. The inference in the remark is usually one of confidence — Canada has solved the problem; let us tread her footsteps. It is unfortunate perhaps but true nevertheless that probably not a tenth of the persons who venture to mention Canada in this connection have more than a hazy notion of what actually is the so-called Canadian plan. The late Senator Thomas J. Walsh of Montana once remarked that all the people who came to Washington fairly bursting to tell the country's legislators of the virtues in the Canadian method were unaccountably reduced to silence or incoherence when pressed for details. Hence it has seemed to me that a few facts on what has been going on in Canada may not be amiss.

In the first place, as far as sweeping statements about the "Canadian plan" are concerned, we can dismiss them at once with the simple assertion that there is no such thing, nationally speaking. Liquor control in Canada is entirely in the hands of the individual provinces; naturally these have not adopted uniform ways of dealing with the problem, any more than we should expect our own forty-eight states to legislate uniformly on the question if the power to deal with it should be returned to them. But as a return of this power

now seems probable within a month, our situation becomes directly analogous to that of Canada.

There was never a national prohibition act in Canada. It is, however, doubtful that this fact has much bearing on the comparison of the situation there with that in the United States, for all of the Canadian provinces adopted blanket prohibitory legislation during the war — roughly at the same time that the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified. All of them, too, came to the realization that such drastic measures were far from perfect in operation about the same time that we in the United States began to see the final failure of our own plan — along in the middle nineteen twenties. The difference is that it has taken us until 1933 — possibly until 1934 — to accomplish a change; in Canada each province modified its legislation as its voters demanded, and expeditely. There was no stiff machinery of constitutional amendment to set in motion.

The Canadian provinces were influenced in modifying their prohibition legislation chiefly by the same general considerations which have prevailed in this country. There under prohibition the bootlegger flourished as he has in the United States. If he did not become linked so spectacularly and openly with organized crime of all sorts it is probably because the Canadian people stepped in to stop him — as we did not. Drinking among young people was thought to have increased; in general Canadian social conditions paralleled those of the United States during the flamboyant post-war period. Finally, the loss of revenue from liquor taxation was felt. This was probably not so great a consideration in the repeal of Canadian provincial prohibition as it is with us, but only because modification was there accomplished before the great depression set in.

My first-hand knowledge of liquor control in