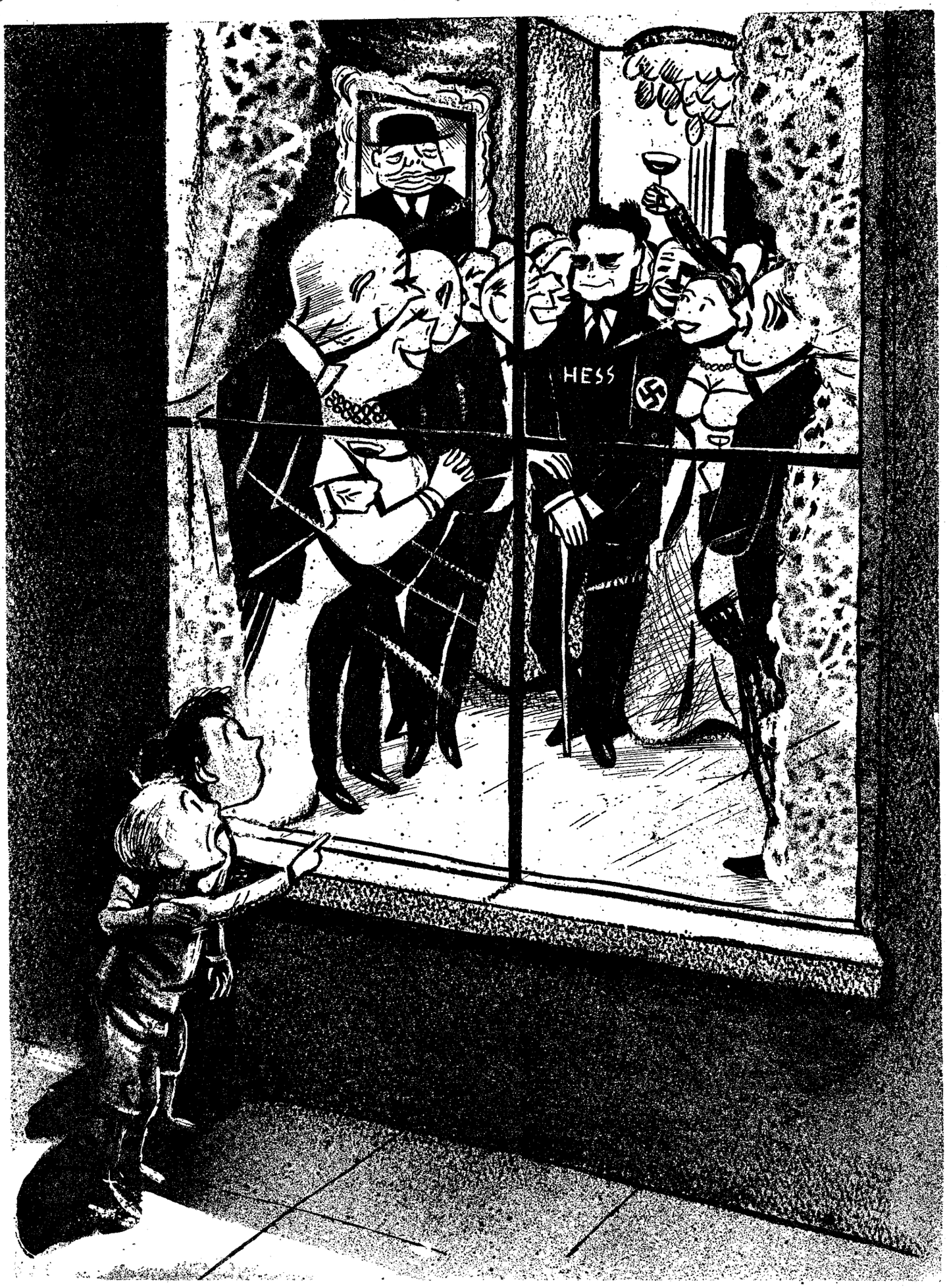

Michaels

"That's the enemy."

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SERMONS OF SACRIFICE

The laureates of pessimism call for a more endearing portrait of life as we know it. Van Wyck Brooks repudiates himself. The goals of a creative literature discussed by Samuel Sillen.

VAN WYCK BROOKS has just published an essay *On Literature Today* which raises a pertinent topic for discussion on the eve of the Fourth Congress of American Writers. Mr. Brooks will not be present at this Congress, for he has seen fit to dissociate himself from its position against the war and in defense of a free culture. Having lent his support to the expansionist aspirations of Mr. Roosevelt, he has repudiated not only his political stand in 1917, when he was a co-worker of Randolph Bourne on *The Seven Arts,* but the literary attitudes which were linked with his opposition to monopoly and reaction. To an earlier generation his work was a challenge to remake America in the interests of a truly creative life—"On the economic plane," he wrote, "this implies socialism." To the youth of our own day, again facing the agony of an unwanted and unjust war, he reads a sermon of sacrifice reminiscent of Lewis Mumford's ironically titled *Faith for Living.*

Mr. Mumford is one of the two contemporary writers cited by Mr. Brooks (the other is Robert Frost) in whose work "one feels a joyous confidence in human nature, an abounding faith in the will, a sense of the heroic in the human adventure, good will, the leaven of existence." Mr. Mumford, it will be recalled, has joyously and heroically proclaimed the need for labor camps to toughen up our cynical youth. He has celebrated the values of unemployment and domestic drudgery. He has declared that "Our new economy must assume that hardship, difficulty, and poverty are normal aspects of life," and that "Poverty, hardships, wounds, and death will be our daily pay." It seems incredible that Van Wyck Brooks should accept this faith for dying, this profoundly cynical outlook for humanity, as a token of good will and the leaven of existence. But the war has gone far enough, it has turned enough good minds, to accustom us to the incredible.

WHAT is more notable is that the author of *Wine of the Puritans* and *Letters and Leadership,* once the leading critical spokesman against complacency, shallow optimism, and provincialism as the besetting vices of our literature, is now devoting himself to a campaign against pessimism. Mr. Brooks is concerned over the mood of doubt and despair which he feels has dominated literature in the last two decades. Joyce, Eliot, O'Neill, and Dreiser, he says, were bent on proving that life is a dark little pocket. Most of our books since the last war have been written by "adolescent minds" like Mencken, Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. Great numbers of American writers are cynical and fatalistic. They see only the ugly in life. The literature of negation which they have created represents a "death-wish" whose influence is disintegrating the national morale.

With much of what Mr. Brooks has to say regarding pessimism there is no quarrel. One agrees wholeheartedly, for example, that Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Farrell "seem to delight in kicking their world to pieces, as if civilization were all a pretense and everything noble a humbug." One agrees that their nihilism has become increasingly sterile as a creative force. One appreciates the quotation from Chekhov's letters to the effect that the best writers "are realists and paint life as it is, but, through every line's being soaked in the consciousness of an object, you feel, besides life as it is, the life which ought to be, and that captivates you."

But several questions press on the reader as he notes the cumulative evidence that so much of our literature is shot through with pessimism. Why is it that, as Chekhov said of himself, so many contemporary writers have neither immediate nor remote aims but only a great empty space in their souls? Is it not true that an even vaster body of writing in this country is blatantly and offensively optimistic? Is there no trend in American letters (outside of Frost and Mumford!) which includes in its realism a perception of a hopeful direction in human affairs? And, finally, why has Van Wyck Brooks, whose own work was once to some extent a complaint against capitalist society, decided to call for a more endearing portrait of civilization as we know it? And what basis in reality does he offer the writer whom he exhorts to faith, joy, and courage?

MR. BROOKS very properly says that the public has a right to expect from its poets and thinkers "some light on the causes of our problems and the way to a better future." He does not himself live up to this expectation. In attempting to explain the causes of the pessimism which he deplores, he does not take us very far. "Thirty years ago, when I began to write," he tells us, "the future was an exciting and hopeful vista." That vista was destroyed by the first world war, which gave writers a sense of disillusionment and betrayal. More recently we have been getting reports of the "excluded," children of immigrants who have lived in slums and known only slights and indignities. There has been a loss of attachment to the family and the soil. The solution projected is purely rhetorical. It is not opposition to a new imperialist war, not struggle against the conditions which have embittered "the children of immigrants," but a return to the region. The basis for hope rests in the writers who are settling down in remotest regions. "They are cultivating their roots where the seeds were sown, and where they are sure to yield their flowers and fruit."

But this pathetically empty rhetoric could be advanced as a program only by a writer who has failed profoundly to explore the roots of modern pessimism. For the truth is that the pessimistic mood, far from being limited to the period since 1917, has more and more deeply defined an important section of bourgeois literature for a century. "We fight rather to keep something alive than in the expectation that anything will triumph," declares T. S. Eliot, and in that statement he has summed up a process of decadence which did not begin yesterday. Proust and Joyce are not postwar phenomena. They reflect, from the differing approaches of the aristocrat and the petit bourgeois, a disappointment which goes back to Flaubert and Gautier, to Hardy and Huysmans, to Dostoevsky and James, to de Vigny and Housman. Their absorption in pessimism and incredulity was not necessarily reprehensible. The past, Gorky once said, is not irreproachable, but there is no sense in reproaching it. Rather, we should understand that it was because they were sensitive and in large measure honest to their experience that they wrote as they did. For the days of youthful vigor were drawing to a close, and capitalism was expropriating not only wealth but human dignity. What source of hope or faith existed for the writer who could not break through the framework of social relations which at every point restricted creative effort? And given the illusion that these relations were eternal, what answer can one make to Dostoevsky's morally brutalized hero of *Notes from the Underground?*

"The ideas of the ruling class," observes Plekhanov in his *Art and Society,* "lose their intrinsic value at the rate at which that class approaches extinction, and the art created in the spirit of that class decays at the same rate." One deep source of modern literary pessimism is the alienation of bourgeois writers from the ideas of the ruling class at the same time that they are hostile to anyone who seriously challenges existing class relations. Flaubert, for example, heaped scorn on the bourgeoisie of France, but he resisted with fury the only movement which could overthrow the greed, hypocrisy, and banality which he detested, the movement of the working class. The same is true in large measure of Dostoevsky, James, Proust, and Joyce. Dozens of distinguished writers in this epoch, particularly in moments of crisis, assiduously defend institutions and values in which they cannot deeply believe. Indeed, their best work, their most realistic work, has necessarily exposed the carcass which they try to shield from the gravediggers of a new class. They lack belief in one social order which has

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