

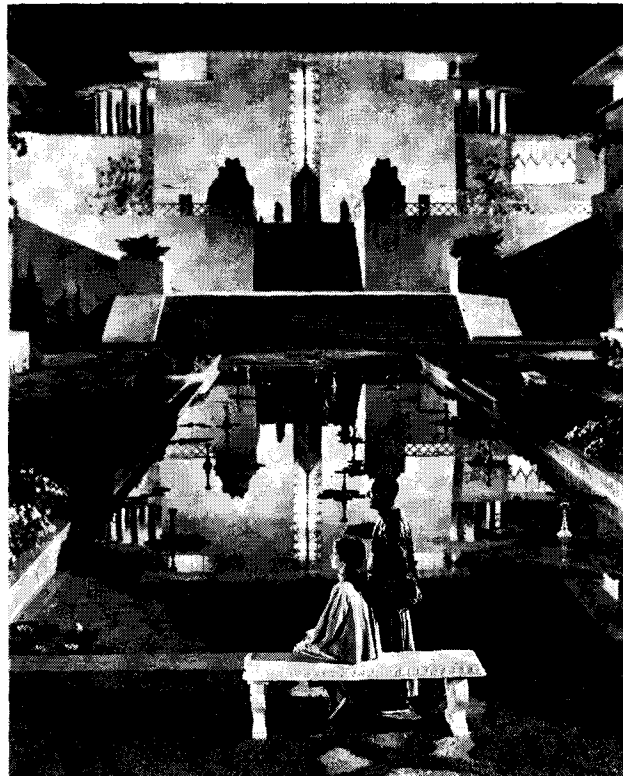
The Threatening Thirties

How Books Record the Dominant Emotion of the Current Decade

BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

THE heart of our thirties beats in literature, which as always is a sensitive machine for recording the emotions. This heart itself is infinitely complex, more so than the emotions, which after the human kind, can be simplified, oversimplified if you please, into a few passions. Does one passion in each literary era rule over the rest? It has been the custom of historians to assume that such is the case, and upon so simple a classification are their Augustan, their ages of silver, of gold, their Renaissance built. One German, recently dead, goes further in this analysis. Oswald Spengler in his "Decline of the West," written in war time, states categorically that all works of art in a given period manifest the definite quality, the ruling passion, of that period, no matter how different in other respects these crystallizations of the contemporary intellect may seem to be.

It is this thesis which I wish to examine with our nineteen thirties in mind, not as a propagandist for Spengler, but rather to make use, if use can be made, of this point of view, this method of analysis. It is obvious that Spengler's dictum needs qualification for a short-range survey. He is thinking in broad terms, such as the Renaissance, or Alexandrianism, where centuries are involved. When the perspective is narrowed to decades, allowance must be made for the well-known phenomenon of overlapping times. There are plenty of simon-pure Victorians alive and practising in our thirties; indeed in a given community it is always possible to find sets of ideas, prejudices, or imaginative concepts which range thirty, forty, or even a half century apart. The Southern mountaineer and the Jewish intellectual of New York belong in different time areas of civilization. Yet with all qualifications made, it should still be possible to get some results from Spengler's theory, especially if one takes so sensitive a product as literature. We must, of course, exclude from the discussion those types of popular books, written to a for-



NIRVANA WITH MODERN CONVENIENCES
From "Lost Horizon" (Columbia Pictures).

mula, which vary little in character from generation to generation, since their purpose is always to escape unpleasant reality. Yet even a test of best-sellers seems to show that there is a strong, if indefinite, ruling interest in any given year. When a best-seller is not a stereotyped romance, but such a book as "Anthony Adverse" or "The Story of Philosophy," the fact that it sweeps through the majority of literate minds in a country with little resistance seems to prove a residuum of identity in these minds which one ought to be able to define.

What, if anything, does literature show to be the prevailing time-current of the thirties? I believe it to be fear, although fear is too strong a word for its quiet margins, and panic would better describe some of its hurrying tides. This fear is sometimes conscious, sometimes subconscious. It ranges from a skeptical inquiry into the possible disintegration of culture as we have known it, to the deep pessimism of convinced alarm. Sometimes the writer is inspired by what he may call the

decline of capitalism. Sometimes the underlying fear is of war. Sometimes, and very commonly, the writer is concerned with the revival of the brutality of more desperate ages. Sometimes the unrest which spreads through a book is a reflection of the author's belief that democracy is bankrupt; sometimes jubilantly or fearfully he hails the rise of the proletariat, or the reappearance of the strong arm and submission to the state. More subtle is what has been recently called the flight from reason toward pure emotionalism, where men are encouraged to exchange their liberties for the joys of being the most powerful of animals. Again, this fear is only the weariness of a trading civilization, such a weariness as may have overcome the initiative of the Byzantines. Any of these fears, skepticisms, distrusts may be justified or unjustified. The fear remains.

It will be at least interesting to test with this hypothesis some of the successful books of the last half dozen years. The test provides only a point of view from which one aspect only of a book can be seen, but that aspect is important. If books show fear, whether Grade A, Grade B, or Grade C, it is a fair conclusion that some of this fear is related to a general mood of our society. But to be significant these books should not be chosen from those written by what Mary Colum calls the tradesmen of literature. Manufactured books, got out for sales, exploit the permanent proclivities of human nature, and will be a sure index of what the public wants, but by no means a sure indication of how it is feeling. The drug-

Next  Week

BEFORE I FORGET

By BURTON RASCOE

Reviewed by Bernard DeVoto

THE ROAD TO REUNION

By PAUL BUCK

Reviewed by Howard W. Odum

store-shelf writer is too insensitive himself to time his book accurately to the immediate present.

I shall choose, therefore, for analysis a group of recent books of some merit, avoiding books of propaganda for this and that, since usually they do not touch the imagination. And I will stick to American literature (with a few English examples widely read here) since if fear of the kind I describe is manifest in American books, the argument is stronger than if I should draw my evidence from Europe where men have been palpably afraid.

First the hard-boiled books, the school of cruelty, vulgarity, and terror, of which Hemingway is chief. His case is obvious. His books are all books of fear—the fear of physical violence which leads to an overemphasis upon danger, desperation, and hate; the fear of mental or spiritual disintegration which shows itself in descriptions of panic and chaos. The world he sees is a post-war world where sensitive disillusioned spirits strike before they are struck and drink in order to forget.

James Farrell's "Studs Lonigan" series reflects a different mood. Here is an emphatic break-away from the genteel tradition. This rough and grimy life is defiantly narrated as a true picture of what the American city is really like for youth of the masses. There are no confidences here, no graces, no expectations of cultural progress. The writer himself protests by implication against a training in toughness which is obviously preparing a society careless of civilization.

John O'Hara is more difficult to analyze. His books are so plained down into realism that it is difficult to tell how much satire is intended. But certainly he is as distrustful of the vulgarity of the life of the small-town bourgeoisie as Farrell of his Irish micks. Consciously or subconsciously he wishes you to see that there is no future for this kind of American civilization. It is cheap, stale, dead in imagination, although still economically powerful, and emotional enough to be unhappy. His books, so far as I have read them, have failures for heroes.

Or to strike into the higher altitudes where tragedy resides, consider Robinson Jeffers, a poet whose preoccupation is with a California which superficially is the realtor's paradise celebrated in the advertisements. But he ruthlessly strips off the surface, shows us blood-lusts and sex-rages, and makes the bare ranges, stark canyons, and roaring beaches a background for emotions so primitive that they threaten the continuity of folksy California life.

The break-away from the genteel tradition in American literature had to come, but did it have to go as far as this? Would it have gone so far, had there been no war, no depression, no weakening of the tradition by which at least we thought

we lived? These writers are not concerned with answering yes, or no, but their books answer for them. They have seen writing on the wall.

Another group of books far more widely read than these would seem to be entirely negative in their reaction. There is no obvious fear in "Anthony Adverse," in "Gone With the Wind," in the regional stories such as the recent crop of Maine novels, or the farm stories of the Midwest, or Robert Frost's poems of New England. But they are not negative when properly tested. Those two elephantine best-sellers, "Anthony Adverse" and "Gone With the Wind," are perfect examples of how the tradition of life in an era of uncertainty can be made to stir the imagination in our own age of uncertainty. Of course their success was due to many other causes, yet they date with us in spite of earlier romantic elements.

"Anthony Adverse" begins like a novel by Scott or Dumas, but rapidly turns into a picaresque story, the adventures of a youth in a difficult world. Its great success, in my opinion, was due to its spice of modernity in an ancient formula for romance. The hero grows up and succeeds in communities turbulent with war and reconstruction. He finds no settled society and seeks none, but makes his way and intensifies experience in a rough tide that often flows against him. He does not pursue security like the heroes of the Victorian novels, but rather thrives upon chance and adversity. And at the end he undergoes a spiritual reconstruction symbolic of the need of faith, and willingness for renunciation, characteristic of turbulent periods, and utterly unlike the last chapters of the novels of the nineties.

"Gone With the Wind" under analysis shows a like correspondence with the time currents of the thirties. The characters in this novel, with the exception of Scarlett, are not impressive, the story often loses itself in details, but one theme is never lost in its many pages. This is tradition, oral as well as written. It is specifically the tradition of an American period the bitterness and devastation of which had been half forgotten in the romantic sentimentalizing of the old South. It is the traditional memory of the breakdown of an age of confidence into an age of defeat, disillusion, and disintegration. It is a vivid reminder of the aftermath of war as it happened once in a country which was only scratched by the last great conflict. It is too much to call Miss Mitchell's book a warning; yet certainly its narrative responds to the fear in every sensitive heart for the future of another culture also threatened by reconstruction.

I do not wish to extend this survey to wearisome lengths, therefore I shall merely note that the sudden popularity of regional stories and regional poems is also not without significance. From Maine

to California these poems and narratives of the soil, some pessimistic and satiric in tone, others nostalgic or challenging, seem to spring from a wide and deep desire to remind us of the good earth from which we sprang, which we have cruelly abused, yet which is more permanent than cities, and more calculable in its effects upon character than the rootless mechanisms of industrialized urban life. If the traditionalists warn us of what is or may be happening, these regionalists remind us of the land that still is a home under the sun and the rain, when everything else seems on the move, speeding toward an uncalculated destination.

A still more curious manifestation of the fear which leads to spiritual unrest is to be found in the books of the seekers. Many books belong to this class, and especially much drama and poetry. I shall speak, however, only of one genre of writing which has lately been so successful as to supply a career for journalists who long to strike deeper than journalism. There is always a type book in such a genre. The one I should choose here would be Vincent Sheean's "Personal History," although since its date a dozen other ex-correspondents have followed his lead. "Personal History" is much more than a foreign correspondent's autobiography. Sheean's job was to get the news, but in getting it, he learned to think what it meant, and so by natural gradations to seek the meaning of events for a civilization which, like most of us, he had taken for granted. One finds him, therefore, in Morocco, in China, in Russia, not merely recording what happened, but questioning, weighing East against West, Red against White, Russian against Arab, Chinese against the American. He wants to know, because unless we grasp what this new turbulent world means for the individual raised in the West and conditioned by a stable culture, we are in constant danger of a false security and an ignorant confidence. Gunther, Negley Farson, the Dutchman Matisse, and many others both in fiction and autobiography, are trying, like Sheean, to break through the crust of the news to see what lies underneath. Nor is this seeking confined to international affairs. There are dozens of books dealing with local themes that belong in the same category.

I shall pass over such obvious reflections of malaise as the proletarian novels so-called, which are usually accounts of what a bourgeois intellectual thinks a laborer's mind is like. And also the new crop of exotics expressing (like "Lost Horizon") the desire of civilized man to escape from the results of his own zeal for progress into some palmy island or Nirvana decorated (like Hilton's) with the spoils of civilization and dedicated to thinking about the simple life.

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Headed for the Stone Age

PROGRESS AND CATASTROPHE. By Stanley Casson. New York: Harper & Bros. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

MR. CASSON, the Oxford archaeologist, is disturbed by the fact that "we seem in 1937 to be back once more struggling to solve primitive problems that in the Neolithic and the Bronze Ages men thought they had solved once and for all." Not merely our antediluvian ancestors but even some of the dumb animals had an understanding of collective security, coöperation for the common safety, which large groups of civilized mankind have lately discarded; Darwin pointed out that in many animal societies there was coöperation, not competition, for survival, though his more individualistic expounders forgot about it. So long as men were worried every day about the next day's food they seem to have coöperated too, but once they had attained the rudiments of stability and security they sought out many inventions and turned them to pernicious uses. "Man's task was to cultivate the social and moral qualities at the same time as his practical inventions. When the former developed too fast his whole social fabric would be in danger of destruction, if he did not also take practical measures to defend what he had created against external attack; when his practical inventiveness ran ahead of his moral consciousness and social organization, then man has equally faced destruction. Perhaps today we are in this stage." Perhaps is a mild word for it.

So, with the recognition that history never repeats itself, the author looks back over history and pre-history in search of

tendencies that make for survival and those that lead to destruction. Special attention is paid to the two great collapses of Western civilization, the first about 1200 B.C. and the other which has become known as the fall of the Roman Empire; but so conscientious a historian unfortunately cannot get much out of them for the edification of his contemporaries. The "fall" of Rome was the epilogue to a long slow decay whose causes cannot be assessed with any accuracy; the fall of the Hittites and Minoans appears to have been due merely to the invasion of barbarians who could fight better (our Aryan ancestors, if that is any consolation). But in the case of the Minoans at least—whose civilization, so far as can be judged from its surviving art, was possibly the most seemly, the most truly civilized, that man has yet evolved—there had been a lowering of standards before the fall. For centuries the Minoans trusted to isolation, with a big navy and a tiny army; then they seem to have expanded on the mainland, taught their barbarian subjects how to build and maneuver warships, and were presently upset by them. The Romans, too, were overthrown by barbarians in their own armies. "Protective warfare," observes Mr. Casson in connection with the Sumerians, who seem to have invented military organization, "has preserved civilization in its most critical moments, as aggressive warfare has destroyed it." But since the technique is open to almost everybody the critical point is obviously the purpose for which ability to wage war is employed.

That purpose, says the author, must be collective security; and of the menaces to collective security the worst is fascism (since communist theory aims toward unity even if it would impose that unity

by force). "The deliberate segregation of men into groups between which communication is deliberately denied is a fantastic move back to the most primitive conditions." True enough; a world of fascist states would certainly go out in a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. But beyond the obvious point that non-fascist states had better hang together Mr. Casson suggests no remedies; and his suggestion of a "new Byzantium" that might preserve a remnant of the old civilization (which, he feels, is not on the brink of collapse but has already collapsed) goes either too far or not far enough. It might include, he thinks, England, France, Holland, Belgium, Scandinavia, and America; but Scandinavia could hardly be defended against fascist powers which had absorbed the rest of Europe, even if England, France, and the Low Countries could survive fascist air raids. Collective security had better be more collective than that, unless Europe is ready to sign off and leave to America alone the function which Constantinople performed during the last Dark Age.

All this necessarily omits many of Mr. Casson's stimulating observations. He covers a great deal of ground, indeed about all the ground there is, and doubtless is often wrong; but he is worth reading even if you may not agree with him more than about sixty per cent.

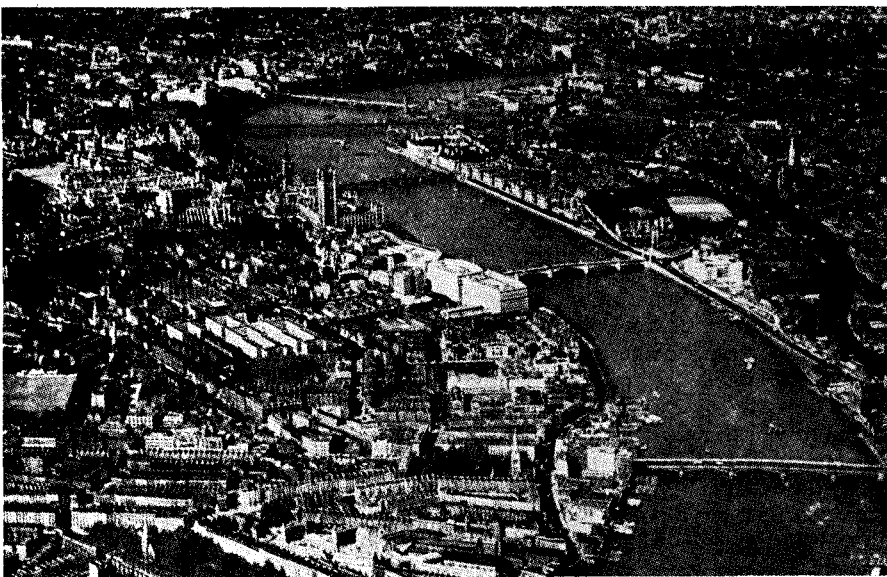
Harlem Prophet

THE INCREDIBLE MESSIAH. By Robert Allerton Parker. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by A. J. LIEBLING

THE Incredible Messiah" is not as good a title as "God in a Rolls-Royce," the study of Father Divine which John Hoshor published last Fall, but Robert Allerton Parker has written a much sounder book. Instead of treating the little brown prophet of Harlem as a unique phenomenon, Parker, like a religious entomologist, preserves him with a spray of antiseptic words and pins him in his proper place among the other messiahs. He lists dozens of them, from one Kondrati Selivanov, who "announced himself to be the incarnation of the Diety" in Russia in 1770, to Hung Hsui Ch'uan, who identified himself with Jesus Christ and led the T'ai P'ing Rebellion. Identifying Father Divine, né George Baker, as a slightly ludicrous example of a recurrent type, Parker makes him appear so credible that he is almost uninteresting. Coinciding with the recent schisms among the Little Brown Father's followers, the book has something of the quality of an epitaph for a cult.

The "mystery" of Father Divine, which advertised him among Negroes and engaged the curiosity of newspapermen and social workers, was the source of his money. He ostentatiously refused to take



LONDON FROM THE AIR (From "Progress and Catastrophe")
"An example of a city built on the assumption that it would not be attacked."