

The Road to Modernism

BY ADDISON HIBBARD

PERHAPS no truer characterization of contemporary literature can be offered than to say that it is simply the literature of the past—in new combinations and with new emphases. So accustomed is the reader to think of the “modern” as the “new” that he forgets a fact he knows well—that new movements and tendencies are simply old conceptions revamped. Give a recent college graduate, nourished on formal courses in literature, a copy of “New Directions,” or give a man whose reading may have stopped with Kipling’s “Soldiers Three,” some of John Dos Passos’s “camera eye” passages to read, and the two will tell you in chorus that what you have given them is nonsense. And yet it is likely that their condemnation means only that they are ignorant of what happened in literature and the other arts during a decade or two at the close of the nineteenth century.

The conventional approach to literature has generally been through one of two gateways. We have classified chronologically—The Age of Chaucer, The Age of Shakespeare, The Age of Milton; or we have classified by types—the lyric, the drama, the novel. We have interpreted our writers in the light of political and social influences and we have broken up their spirit into bits easily classified for the purposes of the classroom. But we have seldom conceived of literature as the expression of great moods which have dominated the race at different periods in its development even as they have dominated the individual in changing periods of his life.

And yet a good case can be made for just this conception. Discard, if you can, your ingrained tendency to think of the stream of literature as dividing itself into chronological periods or into types of writing, and think of it as an expression of the great moods or tempers to which man is heir. The race, like the individual, is moody, variable in temper. As you and I have hours, perhaps even days and years, when our life flows along calmly and serenely, we also have periods of great exuberance, moments when we dream and idealize, periods when we are determined to face life sternly and seek

out actuality, brief epochs when we are poetical and fanciful, as well as hours of dejection and deep introspection. Sometimes these moods conflict, sometimes they overlap. Only rarely does one temper persist in an individual throughout life to the exclusion of the others—and when it does so dominate a single life it results in a genius or a maniac.

I believe that something like this sequence characterizes the stream of literature. For centuries literature was dominated by a mood of calm serenity; life and civilization were fairly firmly established, restraint and self-possession and a sense of decorum were in control. This gave us the literary expression or temper which we have long thought of as classical. Whenever society enters upon this calm, established way, we have a “classical” art—whether it be in ancient Athens, in Rome, or later on in Paris or London. Again, literature in different periods has been ebullient, enthusiastic, has given itself over to dreams and idealization in the manner of youth, a mood which characterized the Renaissance, and the early nineteenth century in Europe and America generally. This enthusiasm we call the romantic temper. When man and society have become factual-minded and scientific, we have a realistic or naturalistic temper; when man becomes fancifully poetic, subtle, delicate in his expression, our literature seeks voice through a rich mood of symbolism; and when man and society become psychologically introspective, analytical of emotions, literary expression, as in more recent years, has taken on either the impressionistic or the expressionistic temper. And, I might add, when mankind has become mad, we have dadaism or surrealism.

Do our contemporary writers use strange devices? Do they write sentences which are not sentences and deliberately flout all the rules of rhetoric and punctuation? And do they strew words carelessly over the page, coin new and shocking compounds, and assume that we have an interest in their mental states? And are they, perhaps, singularly unconcerned



Galerie Paul Rosenberg

“Do our contemporary writers use strange devices?” . . . (Picasso: “Woman Holding a Book,” courtesy London Studio.)

whether or not they communicate an idea to their reader? We may, as many readers do, dismiss them as simple exhibitionists. But it is more likely that they are saying things in a different way because of a new mood, because they are of a different temper from Milton, from Thackeray, from Emerson. At any rate, the old order is changing; the imagists and such contemporaries as Auden have done something to the lyric; Joyce has changed the novel, and the drama of Yevreinov’s “Theatre of the Soul” differs notably from Hamlet even though both are tragedies of the mind.

To understand contemporary literature, then, it is essential to know what literature has been in the past fifty years. The past is always the key to the present. But this paper offers little opportunity for such an historical study. The most I can hope to do is to indicate dogmatically what some of the new emphases are. The reader will be good enough to remember, however, that in writing of a fifty years’ sweep one can point out only general trends and cannot pause to indicate qualifications or exceptions to his statements.

First, the author has retreated from his narrative. The intimacy which once prevailed between reader and writer has largely disappeared. The chatty pages in

Next  Week

DAYS OF OUR YEARS

By PIERRE VAN PAASSEN

Reviewed by Eugene Lyons

HERE COMES A CANDLE

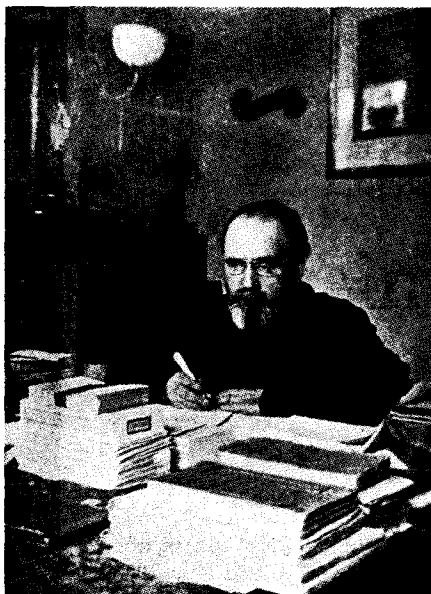
By STORM JAMESON

Reviewed by Herbert J. Muller

which Dickens or Thackeray stopped and talked with his reader about a particular action of David Copperfield or the background of Becky Sharp are seldom found in the work of a Dorothy Richardson, a D. H. Lawrence, or a Morley Callaghan. Contemporary authors have stepped out of their books and into the minds of their characters, and to step back to talk with their readers would be to destroy the illusion of actuality which they are at such pains to create. Even those writers most intimately personal, most concerned with their emotions, carefully preserve this impersonality.

Action and plot have lost their importance. Whereas classic and neo-classic tragedy were intensely unified and built up the ritual of the unities, and the romantic novel ran riot in an effort to complicate and speed up action, later tendencies have served to weaken the importance of plot and, finally, almost completely to eliminate it. Realism slowed up the action in its desire to emphasize background and character; naturalism in its purpose to serve up a "slice of life" all but discarded plot which, as an artificial arrangement of events, was inimicable to the first principles it advocated. Indeed, of plot it might almost be said that it was sired by Aristotle, nursed into full growth by Dumas, and buried by Zola. "The incidents themselves are nothing, it is the details alone that are important," Zola wrote to Cézanne. Yet, in the same decade that the authors of "Les Soirées de Médan" and the Goncourts were celebrating the obsequies of the imaginative and artificial novel, Mallarmé and the symbolists were glorifying the imaginative and fanciful. The symbolists were anxious to rearrange life, to idealize it even, and thus, although they had no sympathy for the point of view of the naturalists, they heaped the dirt higher on the grave of plot. The exigencies of plot were too rigid for them; they dealt in the ethereal while their contemporaries, the naturalists, wrote of war and drink and sex. But plot held no more interest for one school than for the other.

Some few years later, with the new interest in psychology, emotions and mental states became of central importance. Stephen Crane in "The Red Badge of Courage" sent his Henry Fleming through an almost plotless story of fear and emotions; Joseph Conrad permitted Lord Jim to desert his ship but left us convinced that his hero's reactions were more significant—and more fascinating I must believe—than action could possibly be. Dorothy Richardson in her "Pointed Roofs" and the novels written around Miriam Henderson sought to charm us into being more interested in the quality of a scene than in the scene itself. And so it goes; call the roll of contemporary writers—Joyce, Lawrence, Hemingway,



Emile Zola: "Indeed, of plot it might almost be said that it was sired by Aristotle, nursed into full growth by Dumas, and buried by Zola." . . .

Faulkner, Farrell, and the rest—and where is plot?

The subject matter and interests of literature have moved away from the universal and general toward the individual and the specific. Classical writers presented great truths and put in poetry and drama the common feelings of audience and writer alike. And the civilization of classical periods, whether in Greece or France or England, was characteristically that of settled periods when society was more or less unified, convictions were more or less common to all members of a social stratum. Classicism was a literature of "great thoughts" and noble subjects expressed in decorous and restrained language, charged with reason. It attempted to look upon man as complete. It viewed life, in one sense at least, comprehensively. It wrote of an ordered world in an orderly manner.

How far from that we have gone! The romantics taught us a concern for the individual. Realistic writers set up for themselves the ideal of faithfulness to a particular character. Naturalism turned the individual into a subject for a scientific case study. The impressionists came along and insisted that writers portray not the haystack but the impression the haystack made on a particular day at a particular moment. And then our more recent expressionists have taught us not to try to represent the haystack at all, at any moment, but rather to ascribe to it the emotions and sensations which arise within us as we behold the stack! Unless we include the dadaists and the surrealists, the first of whom would deny the very existence of the stack and the second of whom would tell us to write of a dream of a haystack which didn't exist—

can literature go farther from the universal? We have not only gone so far as to forget the universal but as to imply the absence of the particular!

From great truths we have marched ahead to small truths and even to aberrations, from the "common feelings" of mankind to the uncommon feelings of characters under great stress and, perhaps, even diseased, and from "large appearances" we have gone to the minuscule. Homer did not tell us, some critic has pointed out, whether the face that launched a thousand ships was a blonde's or a brunette's. Yet that is a detail we moderns insist on knowing.

I may be allowed to suggest, before the reader sheds too great a tear for the sedate days of classical literature, that what has happened to writing may be what has happened to life itself since the golden age of Pericles. Life has become more complex; science has broadened our knowledge and taught us a scattered interest; unity has departed from a civilization wracked with the warring attitudes of fascism, communism, and democracy; psychology has diverted our attention from externals to internals and made us all conscious extroverts or introverts. The glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome have given way to the hypocrisy that is Hitler and the bombast that is Mussolini. Queen Anne has moved over to make room for Mrs. Windsor, and Emerson's Oversoul has settled in California and become theosophy. Like it or not, this is a world of particulars and the universal is buried under the specific. Writing, then, in reflecting these changes, has only once again given evidence of its relationship to life.

As writing has advanced, the principle upon which authors have selected their material has constantly expanded and become more catholic. Perhaps this change more than any other has made enemies among the conservatives for contemporary literature. "Nothing is sacred any more," such readers cry, too readily assuming that, because contemporary literature sometimes finds its material in the psychopathic ward and seems to allow itself few inhibitions, these writers have simply become careless or licentious. Every artist has always chosen situations, problems, people, details with an eye to his immediate purpose—otherwise he is no artist. It is not necessarily a desire to shock, to be gauche, which takes the writer into the psychopathic ward; it may be, rather, that the twentieth-century writer has a real desire to learn of the working of the mind.

I have written of the varying moods which have characterized literature. Each of these moods has its own principle of selection. The classical author admitted to his work those aspects of life which

(Continued on page 16)

Faulkner's Double Novel

THE WILD PALMS. By William Faulkner. New York: Random House. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

THE spreading title of Mr. Faulkner's latest "novel" shelters not one story but two. We may owe this to the author's generosity or to his sense of economy, or the combination may represent an artist's sincere experiment in narrative form; but one reviewer, at least, finds it impossible to agree with the publishers' statement that "In this novel Faulkner orchestrates, in two parallel stories, the major themes of flight and refuge." The stories are related only by the physical device of printing them in alternating sections between the same covers, and there is no evidence of orchestration. The theme in each case is that of flight. Charlotte and Harry seek to escape from the world into a warm and private hay-mow of physical love; the nameless convict, who has been carried to freedom by a Mississippi flood, escapes from the responsibilities of life by a voluntary return to his prison haven.

The bare bones of Charlotte's and Harry's story are familiar enough, as the skeleton of any love story must be. A married woman falls in love with a bachelor, and for him deserts her husband and two children; the lovers pit the strength of their passion against the world, and, at the last, pay in full for what once would have been called their sin. Similar plots—under such titles as "All For Love; or The Price They Paid," and "The Errant Wife; or Why Did She Do It?"—flourished among the paperbacks that littered our attics in the nineties. But now they flourish with what a difference! The "modern" novelist has put the asterisks of his grandfathers on a paying basis; with his candid camera and his scalpel and his psychoanalytic science, he spares neither his characters, nor himself, nor his readers anything. The body's once sacred precincts, the mind's darkest recesses, are his happy hunting ground. As a result of his newly acquired license, he can bombard his public with a series of galvanizing charges that were, only yesterday, morally and legally taboo. He can do this for the sake of literature, or for the sake of rank sensationalism. In the past, at times, William Faulkner has skidded from the higher to the lower level. But in his telling of the story of Henry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer—despite the shock-tactics that he employs, the chances that he takes, and the slippery path he treads—he does not skid. It is a love story that kindles our imagination, persuades our reason, and leaves us emotionally shaken.

It is all, of course, a little larger than life, and in a way simpler; more intense than normal experience, and at times

tangential to common reality. Faulkner's characters are always more or less out of the ordinary focus—sometimes, for the ordinary eye, they are fatally so—and their creator has been known to set the frontiers of a private world, emotional and intellectual, between himself and the generality of his readers, leaving them to the sad reflection that without understanding there can be no belief. But here he indulges in no such flight.

Charlotte is the kind of heroine who is dear to novelists who live by their brains: a woman of sex all compact, irresistible in her sexual drive, ruthless in her urgency. She is perhaps an exaggeration, an ideal, a symbol; but she is understandable, as is Harry, who is caught up in the whirlpool of her compulsions and with her swept to destruction. We come to believe in this man and this woman; at each stage of their journey, our participation in their emotional and



Decoration by Rudolph Schwartz

psychic life is more nearly complete and more deeply felt, until, finally, we are ready to experience the full impact of their journey's ending—a tragedy not quite concluded, and, so long as memory endures in one of them, not wholly tragic. We believe, too, in Charlotte's husband, whose own compulsions are far from stereotyped but entirely comprehensible. He is an original creation, finely realized.

Compared to the lovers' drama, the story of the nameless convict and the Mississippi flood (despite the violence of the raging waters and the convict's physical exploits: exploits that would make Paul Bunyan recognize in him at least a baby brother) is strangely monochordic, calm, and undisturbing. The descriptions of things seen and actions performed are vividly successful; the author makes us see what he would have us see. But the communication of emotion is comparatively meager, and the flouting of physical probability sometimes suggests that we should read the tale as an allegory rather than as a factual narrative designed to convince and move us.

The two tales are separate and self-

sufficient, distinct and individual in matter, in manner, in spirit, and in time. A decade lies between the action of one and that of the other. It may be claimed that a certain vague irony is achieved by their juxtaposition, but a similar effect could be produced by printing together in similar fashion—to take only one possible pair—Benjamin Constant's "Adolphe" and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat." Some readers may find it an exhilarating game to straddle the backs of two stories simultaneously; others may feel that the exercise is merely annoying and unnecessary. For my part, I am convinced that neither story gains anything from the enforced union, and I am fairly sure that both are losers. The emotional sweep of the one is interrupted by the almost purely physical action of the other; and the final phase of the convict's history is less compelling than it would have been had it not been made to follow one of the most powerful and affecting scenes, or series of scenes, that William Faulkner has ever written. However, neither tale by itself would have sufficed for a "full-length" book; and Mr. Faulkner has a weakness for novelty for its own sake. So, as matters stand, the publishers have their book and the author has his novelty.

William Faulkner's style has seldom served him better than it has in many passages of this novel. It often serves him badly, and he would do well to note the fact. Too often he displays a perverse liking for syntactical complexity; for a needless, unorganized, and unrewarding complexity. The thirty-five-line-long sentence that begins on page 23, and the second paragraph on page 130, are only two examples of what I mean. The disjointed clauses and outrageous parentheses, the suspended and fractured meanings, are an affront to both eye and ear. Complexity is excusable only when complex ideas require expression, and even then an author's refusal to organize his thought is inexcusable. Logan Pearsall Smith has recently deplored the piece-of-string sentences with which so many writers now content themselves. Mr. Faulkner, contemptuous of mere string-lengths, flies to the opposite extreme and produces what may be called the duffel-bag sentence: into it he chucks anything and everything, helter-skelter, pulls the cord, and leaves to the reader the job of sorting out the contents. It is a deliberate act, not a careless one, of course. It is done for effect, but the effect does not come off and the mess remains. He fails just as conspicuously when he indulges in what must be called "fancy writing." There are numerous examples of this style in "The Wild Palms," and one need only contrast them with those other passages, in which the author has permitted simplicity to triumph, to measure the extent and cost of his wilful folly. William Faulkner has a great talent and a great deal to say. He should say it in the best way of which he is capable.