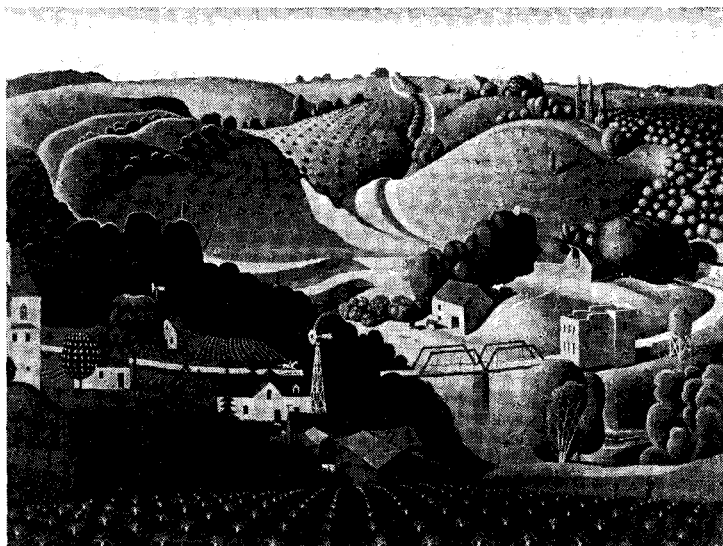


I Look at American Fiction

BY PHYLLIS BENTLEY



"'A novel of Iowa,' 'hardships of the Oregon trail,' 'a romantic tale of Minnesota home life,' 'the West in the great days'—I culled all these from a mere three columns of one of the Sunday book supplements" . . . (Stone City, by Grant Wood.)

THE cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, of Manhattan Island fade before my reluctant eyes as the Eastbound ship goes down the Bay, and America, from being a permeating element I breathed, becomes an external phenomenon I can see in perspective, a piece of geography on the map. Can I, before the terrible preoccupations of Europe rise and fill my mind, shape my perceptions of American fiction into a similarly coherent whole? I'm not sure that I can; but a few detached impressions clamor strongly to be recorded.

A lecture tour in the last three months has taken me into—or at least through—some thirty-five out of the forty-eight states, and wherever my schedule allowed me to pause long enough for conversation, I have inquired concerning the local writers. It is natural, therefore, that one of my strongest impressions of American fiction should be that of a robust regionalism. A glance at the publishers' advertisements of a Sunday confirms me in this view. "A novel of Iowa," "hardships of the Oregon trail," "dramatic tale of Minnesota home life," "the West in the great days"—I culled all these from a mere three columns of one of the Sunday book supplements a few days ago. Discussing this regionalism with my friend, Mrs. May Lamberton Becker, she reminded me of that fine passage in Rostand's "Chantecler," where the cock explains how he plants his feet firmly on his native soil, waits for the strength of the earth to rise up through his body to his throat, and then announces the coming of the dawn for his own valley. The passage describes with symbolic truth the art of the regional novelist in every country.

But unfortunately in England nowadays one is never the first on one's chosen dunghill—the literary sun has been summoned to rise on one's native

earth many times before. For indeed almost every square yard of English soil has already been sung in fiction. If one wishes to write of Wessex, for example, one feels some hesitation, remembering that one has been forestalled by Hardy; in my own county of Yorkshire, writers today are always compared, necessarily to their disfavor, with their great Brontë predecessors. In America it is not so; whole states yet lack expression; happy the novelist living in an era where so much material lies fresh, untouched, to his hand. It is only to be hoped that the pioneer novelist will use his material with a less wasteful exploitation than some of the actual pioneers on American soil; it would be a pity if the traditions, the folklore, the stories, of too many states were hurriedly shoveled into fiction to make contemporary best sellers, leaving only stale and impoverished fields, diminished forests, for the subsistence of future writers. But meanwhile a great opportunity lies open to the young American novelist, and he is not slow to take it. An instructive catalogue might be prepared by a librarian with time on his hands, of this regional literature; for my own part, on my way to and from the various states, in an attempt to prepare myself for what I am to see or to interpret what I have seen, I study eagerly the novels of such writers as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Phil Stong, Rachel Field, and so on, for the sun rises for me over their chosen regions as I read.

The international crisis, which is reshaping not only the map but the literature of Europe, is having its effect on American literature too. A sudden strong consciousness of the American idea is very apparent to the outside observer today, both in American life and in American literature. This articulate expression of concern for the American faith perhaps began with Sinclair Lewis's "It

Can't Happen Here"; it continues, and gains constantly in volume, in both major and minor works. The number and popularity of books dealing with American history, both in fiction and non-fiction, seems another facet of this contemporary characteristic, for a nation becomes most conscious of its great past, when it feels that past in danger. It is not without significance, I think, that though I began to visit America in 1934, it was not till March 1939 that I heard "The Star-Spangled Banner" played in public. Perhaps I am mistaking for a contemporary movement what is really a permanent characteristic of the national temper, but it seems to me there is a very real difference in this respect of articulate patriotism between the fiction of say, 1929, and that of 1939.

A frequent (and very natural) question asked me by reporters seeks to elicit the names of my favorite contemporary American novelists. I am obliged to reply, with very genuine sorrow, that my favorite contemporary American novelist is no longer alive; this (naturally) irritates the reporters, but I cannot help it. For I cannot yet regard Thomas Wolfe as anything but contemporary, and to me he seems as far above the other American writers of the day in mental as he actually was, I am told, in physical stature. I have not yet seen his last work, "The Web and the Rock." But the poetry of the man's work, its fire, its power, its perception of universal truth, its living quality, so that the book almost seemed to pulsate in your hand

Next  Week

AMERICA IN MIDPASSAGE

By CHARLES A. and MARY R. BEARD
Reviewed by Elmer Davis

WORDS AND MUSIC

By STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

as you held it—always as I read I thought of hot lava rolling in inexorable fiery tumult down the slopes of a volcano, while the noise of the eruption thundered overhead. Yes, Wolfe's genius really seemed to me vast enough and powerful enough to express America. His death is a most deplorable loss to world literature.

A writer whose work I always hasten to read, though in a state of mingled joy and exasperation, is William Faulkner. His prose is mingled fire and smoke; sometimes the fire seems worth the smoke and sometimes it just doesn't, as coughing, choking, with one hand outstretched groping despairingly for some solid meaning to which one might cling, one gasps one's way through a row of obscure pall-laden pages. Sometimes, too, one feels that the whole novel consists of a single sentence—one hardly dare pause to take breath lest one should lose grip of its solitary verb. To a practical north-country Englishwoman, Faulkner's world seems strangely lurid, fury-haunted; one emerges from a Faulkner novel staggering, disheveled, very conscious that one's emotions have received the Aristotelian purge. After an hour or two, when one has grown calmer, one grows a little incredulous too. To me Faulkner's work seems just to fail of greatness by its lack of universality. Reading Ellen Glasgow's "Barren Ground" last night I came across this sentence in the preface: "I had resolved that I would write of the South not sentimentally, as a conquered province, but dispassionately, as a part of the larger world." I speak, of course, as an Englishwoman, a stranger, one whose ancestors had no part in the great quarrel and who has therefore no right to judge the quality of those who maintain its persistence; but it does seem to me that until Faulkner changes from the first to the second of these attitudes, steps back a little, as it were, from his material, he is too close to it to see its real truth.

Ernest Hemingway, whose earlier work seemed to mark the dawn of modern American fiction, has disappointed me of late. He seems to have fallen a victim to his own technique. We must, however, remain deeply grateful to him for having introduced that technique to American literature, for I believe it is a technique very specially suitable for the presentation of American life. To explain what I mean by this statement, I shall have to enlarge a little on my views both of Hemingway's technique and American life, and I ask my readers' indulgence if what I have to say on these points seems mistaken or redundant; I am offering merely a personal view.

There are two kinds of narrative in fiction. One kind consists in describing an action exactly as it has occurred (in the novelist's imagination), the moment



Jerry Robinson

"A sudden strong consciousness of the American idea is very apparent to the outside observer" . . . (Audience at "The American Way," by Kaufman and Hart, rises in the last scene to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner.")

it has occurred; we call this kind of narrative a "scene." The other kind consists in summarizing a series of actions for the reader's benefit; to this kind of narrative we haven't yet allotted an agreed name, it is sometimes called a summary, sometimes a panorama. Some critics indeed call it merely "narrative," but this nomenclature, implying as it does that scenic fiction is not narrative, is a mistake. And a very important mistake, too, for I believe it has encouraged our more experimental novelists in their disuse of the summary; it has led them to believe that scene and summary are quite different species of writing, and not, as they really are, merely varieties of the same genus. Be that as it may, several novelists have recently made the experiment of rejecting the summary; they have decided to tell their tales in terms only of scene. The theory behind this decision has been well expressed by Mrs. Virginia Woolf, an early practitioner of the technique. "Examine for a moment," she writes (in a volume of essays collected in 1925):

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions . . . from all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. . . . Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall . . .

"Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind, in the order in which they fall"—let the novelist, that is, record the actual present now, the direct experience,

the single perception, the specific action, exactly as they happen, because life is composed of these single perceptions, these specific actions; life is not lived in summaries, therefore let us not summarize.

Now that, achieved quite independently of Mrs. Woolf, is the technique of Ernest Hemingway—or, at least, in his earlier novels it was the tendency of his technique; in his later novels it has become his technique in its entirety. A maximum use of scene, in his earlier novels, gave his work a vividness, a vigor, an intensity; for scene, the description of single specific actions just as they occur, always gives the reader a greater intensity of participation than a summary of events, which necessarily throws the events summarized into the past. But Hemingway has now brought his use of scene to a pitch which could only be justified by an extraordinarily sensitive perception of the feelings caused by the fall of the atoms; and this sensitive perception he does not give us, he seems content to record merely the external fact of their fall. Too much of Hemingway's later fiction consists of: I had a drink; she had a drink; he had a drink. Those actions are not worth recording one by one in monotonous repetition; surely it would be better to summarize, say simply that they all three got drunk, and go on promptly to something more interesting.

Now many other contemporary American writers use this "maximum of scene" technique. John Dos Passos has,

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Hope for Czechoslovakia

WE SHALL LIVE AGAIN. By Maurice Hindus. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1939. \$3.

Reviewed by HENRY C. WOLFE

WHEN Maurice Hindus entered Czechoslovakia last June, the German diplomatic-propaganda offensive against Central Europe's island of democracy was in full swing. By mobilizing on the week-end of May 21st, it is true, the Czechoslovaks had slowed down the German drive. But only for a few days. When the Nazis recovered from their May rebuff, they redoubled their political and military pressure against the land of Masaryk and Benes.

Mr. Hindus went to Czechoslovakia to study the people, their customs, their government, and their way of life. His knowledge of Russian enabled him to pick up the Czech language quickly. And his ability to talk directly with the people made it possible for him to go into remote parts of the country and converse with the simple folk as well as with the officials of the central government in Prague. This ability to get into intimate contact with the average man gives "We Shall Live Again" an advantage over nearly all the other books about Czechoslovakia written by Englishmen and Americans.

In this respect Mr. Hindus's book reminds the reviewer of Louis Adamic's "The Native's Return." Both writers take their readers into the homes, the churches, the wine festivals, and the weddings of peasants whom strictly political writers know little about. Here we have a close-up of life far removed from Prague.

The man of the house, a thin-faced, thin-bodied, bright-eyed Slovak with a gleaming brownish mustache, showed us around his farm. His buildings were old, in need of repairs, and he had none of the modernized equipment which the other farmer had installed in his barns. But here too was evidence of a love of cleanliness. There were scarcely any cobwebs in his cow stables, his pigsty though small was clean and dry and so was his rabbit cage. He had no henhouse, and his chickens roosted on boards in the cow stable. These were scraped clean of droppings. Here too swallows flew about with gay abandon. They all believed in good luck, these humble and good-humored Slovaks.

The author spent only part of his time in the rural sections of the "citadel of humanitarianism." He was interested in the socio-economic forces at work for democracy in this Central European laboratory. His studies of social, political, and human Czechoslovakia were soon interrupted by the onslaught of Nazi *Machtpolitik*. The screaming crescendo of Hitler's propaganda warned everyone that the Reich's campaign against Czechoslovakia was reaching a stage of crisis.

The Runciman mission had come to Prague. "There was martial law in parts of the Sudetenland; the German army was holding maneuvers within easy reach of the Czechoslovak border, and the Czechoslovak government was quietly calling up reserves." The Czechs and Slovaks were ready to fight. "Alone?" asked the author. Invariably came the answer: "We won't be alone. France and Russia will be with us, anyway."

The part of the book entitled "Doom" recounts the series of dramatic events that rushed one upon another through the turbulent days of September. Henlein fled to Germany; Czech refugees poured out of the Sudeten area; Lord Runciman went back to London. Mr. Hindus visited the frontier area along the German bor-

der. Everywhere he saw chaos—all the symptoms of a mad world. The Czechs were standing behind their guns ready to fight for their independence. But the little democracy's fate was being decided in London and Paris. Munich and the "peace with honor" followed. Later came the end of even the mutilated post-Munich Republic.

But Mr. Hindus does not lose hope. "Yet more firmly than ever do I believe that the present ordeal is only a phase of the checkered history of the Czechs. . . . They will live again!" Americans hope that time will vindicate the author's faith in historic justice and the strength of a sturdy people.

This book is one of those rare volumes which combine political insight and social appraisal. It seems to me even more enthralling than "Humanity Uprooted"—which is something of a record even for Mr. Hindus.

Roots of the Tarheels

PURSLANE. By Bernice Kelly Harris. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

IN an agrarian South so much written about in the pretentious terms of the great plantation and in the pitiful terms of tenant farmers, Bernice Kelly Harris has found a truer, more typical people who, on her land, as on the pages of her "Purslane," live vigorous, vivid, and satisfying lives. They are as Southern as cotton-chopping and sweet potatoes, but their roots in the region make them also convincing and welcome Americans growing out of American land.

Mrs. Harris not only knows the tobacco-growing land east of Raleigh in North Carolina of which she writes; she has eye and ear and nose for every aspect of a country she loves. Color and smell and feel of the country and its kitchens, its churches and graveyards and plant beds mark every page. Understanding of the faults and virtues of all the Fullers and the Fuller kinfolks and the Fuller neighbors make a world of human characters as clear in their diversity as the inanimate world around them. Add together her big crowd of characters (from John Fuller, the steady father and farmer, to Cousin Sell, who lived by visiting, from day-dreaming Nanny Lou to ball-playing Calvin) and slowly, cumulatively, lives touching and matching lives, a whole and true community comes into existence and understanding. And it grows in a book which emphasizes beauty as well as backache and finds plenty for all in an energetic poverty even in the South.

There will undoubtedly be some who will feel that there is too little story about so many characters. The probability



Bernice Kelly Harris

is, however, that there is too much story. Of course a storyteller might have made a direct and compelling drama around the yearning of young Calvin for Millie. Such yearning is an old story and Mrs. Harris only injures her portraiture when she tries to pull drama and tragedy into her book, as in the amazingly bad last three or four pages. Fortunately the conclusion happens to be trivial in this book, and so an unimportant though glaring fault. Mrs. Harris makes pictures which of themselves are richly dramatic in their implications. It is a pity that she felt a need for more obvious dramatics. They mar a beautiful book but fortunately do not seriously interfere with appreciation of its high and unusual quality.

"Purslane" is both Mrs. Harris's first novel and the first novel to be published by the University of North Carolina Press.