

Land of Literary Plenty

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This is the first of a series of interpretative articles on the development of contemporary American literature, with emphasis upon the literature of the thirties, which will appear in these pages from time to time.—EDITOR'S NOTE.

AMERICA has produced the most interesting and challenging, and certainly the most fertile literature in the world today. Nevertheless, it remains a literature of ephemeral and episodic intensity. Literary generations in America, as Van Wyck Brooks long ago pointed out, have no longevity. Lacking a school, which is necessary to a tradition, our attitudes and tastes in literature as in everything else have shifted from one pivot to another, each one more wobbly, more insecure than the one before. American interests have seldom been able to stay put, and have rarely been able to root themselves in any place or person for long. What one generation reveres, the next generation scorns.

A half a decade has often been enough to make the most prized and precious ideas and personalities look anachronistic. We have no Shaw or Wells or Maugham, or no J. M. Robertson, now unfortunately dead, who have dominated thought and literature for generations, and whose out-

put seldom deteriorated. The best we have is a Theodore Dreiser, who reached the literary climax of his career with "An American Tragedy," and hasn't written another significant book since; a Sinclair Lewis, who wrote three memorable novels but has written increasingly worse novels thereafter, with no climax, alas, in sight; an Ernest Hemingway, who has written in "Farewell to Arms" and in many of his short stories the best imaginative prose of our generation, but who has not been able to produce a first rate work in ten years; a Henry L. Mencken, whose eloquence thundered up and down the literary highways and byways in the twenties, but whose voice now has been turned into a senile squeak. American writers rise and fall, flash and sputter, give off brilliant light, but then fade, their glow degraded into glitter. English writers of the old school are less meteoric, less spectacular, but more lasting and steadily luminous. America, alas, as too much evidence proves, is a country of fads and faddists; we believe in everything for a time, but in nothing for a long time. We lack a sense of values—persistent, stable, enduring values.

In the main American writers have one thing to say and know only one way to say it. Variety is not one of their virtues. Almost always you can tell in advance the kind of book an American author will write—it will bear close resemblance to his previous ones. Seldom does an established American author experiment with a new form or attempt a new approach to his materials. Usually he is too afraid of losing his reading public. Like Charlie Chaplin, he dares not play Hamlet because the public will refuse to recognize him in that role. This is true of all the arts, and not only of literature and the cinema.

This has resulted in a strange paradox; namely, that many of the best works of American authors have been their earlier ones, viz., Farrell's "Studs Lonigan," F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Great Gatsby," Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio" and "A Story Teller's Story," Clifford Odets's "Waiting for



Drawing by A. D'Amato
Theodore Dreiser never finished any proletarian novels per prescription. . . .

Lefty" and "Awake and Sing." Their later works seldom achieve such distinction and significance. In other words, instead of growing, so many American writers stand still, or, worse, grow backwards. It is as if they grew up too fast and lack energy and staying power; they were old before they were young. In fact, many of them never were intellectually young. Like Ernest Boyd, one of the leading critics of the twenties, they were old men when they were thirty. They became sophisticated, omniscient, pontifical, grew spiritual if not physical beards, and strutted when they wrote.

Yet, as I said in the beginning of this article, American literature today is better than that of any other country. How explain the anomaly? The explanation is mainly quantitative. We have so much talent and genius revealing itself every year that our literature is constantly fresh and new. If our older writers do not regale us with more significant and greater books, we are always bound to have younger writers spring up who will—only in turn, alas, to be



Drawing by Schreiber
H. L. Mencken's voice has become a squeak.

succeeded shortly thereafter by still younger.

Now all this has been borne out most conspicuously by the development of American literature in the last two decades. The decade of the twenties was one of scepticism, cynicism, and literary nihilism, that of the thirties one of convictions with idealism riding high in the communist saddle, that of the forties—well, who knows? Perhaps it will be one of new orientations, new adjustments, new vision. To date it is a fulfillment of the thirties, although few reviewers and critics seem to be aware of it. It was the proletarian movement which dominated the thirties; everyone who could knot his tie was talking about it, to the dismay of Messrs. Mencken, Boyd, Cabell, and Lewisohn, who had been the literary mandarins of the twenties. During most of the thirties, however, the proletarian movement produced little that was interesting and less that was significant. It was only at the very end of the thirties and the beginning of the forties that the movement achieved the richness of realization in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" and Richard Wright's "Uncle Tom's Children" and "Native Son."

But let us at this point turn to the decade of the twenties without which it is impossible to understand that of the thirties. The twenties was unique in literary history. It was like no other decade. It was born of the aftermath of the First World War and it carried the seeds of the war in it. From a literary point of view it was a period of wild extremes, incoherent experimentations, violent hostilities and confusions. Europe as well as America was caught in its chaos. Those were the days when Dadaism flourished and Tristan Tzara's belief in *nothingness* captured the romantic-minded intellectuals, who were disgusted with a civilization which caused so much destruction and death. In America this spirit found expression in such magazines as the *Little Review*, *The Dial*, and most typically in *transition*, published in France, but mainly by American expatriates. In art there were the faces of sad, forlorn horses, beneath which there would be a title such as *The Wailing Violin*; in poetry and prose there were the abracadabra lines of E. E. Cummings, whose description of a goldfish still defies translation:

a: crimplitteringish is arefloatsis
ingfallall! mill, shy milbrightlions
my (hurl flicker handful
in) dodging are shybrighteyes is
crumbs (all) if, ey Es.

It was *transition*, however, which gave the final touch to it all when it issued its famous proclamation: "The

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writer expresses; he does not communicate." All responsibility to the reader was cancelled. Nothing but the individual writer mattered. Their aim was to get away from the exterior world, which was so lethal, and explore the interior world of the brain, where man could be alone with himself in a private universe. Margaret Anderson, editor of *The Little Review*, expressed that feeling aptly when she wrote at the beginning of her book, "My Thirty Years War": "My greatest enemy is reality. I have fought it successfully for thirty years."

This literary nihilism was succeeded here by the rise of the free-beer, free-state, free-for-all school of criticism, which had Mencken as its joker, George Jean Nathan as its right bower, and Ernest Boyd as its left. They were the hell-fire men of the decade. They despised the Nihilist crowd because they thought the latter were literary sissies, half-men, she-men. The controversy between them reached its acme of absurdity when, according to Burton Rascoe's account, Malcolm Cowley threatened to knife, disembowel, and quarter Ernest Boyd for what the Irish critic said about him in his essay, *Esthete, Model 1924*. They were the greenback days when the dashing boys and girls in college and out proclaimed their wisdom and sophistication by carrying copies of the *American Mercury*.

Of such stuff was this group made. Moral and social values were scorned, and a kind of joyous cynicism developed. Beliefs of all kinds were sneered at—in fact, it was a period of the exaltation of the sneer. Negativism was extolled and positivism decried.

ALL this changed, almost overnight, with the turn of the thirties. The beneficent influence, spiritually speaking, of the Wall Street crash and the ensuing depression encouraged Americans to adopt a more serious outlook. The Menckenians lost their power, the *American Mercury* lost the larger part of its circulation, Mencken retreated to Baltimore, got married in violation of his anti-marital credo, and retired into an enforced oblivion. Few of the Menckenians survived. Everything they stood for developed into the opposite in the new decade. Moral and social values became imperative and were exalted by both the right and the left. T. S. Eliot declared that "the greatest poets have been concerned with moral values," and many other humanist critics repeated the same formula. Cynicism lost its pagan enchantment. A large percentage of the *American Mercury* contributors and readers joined the moral crusade led by the humanists or the

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THE PULITZER AWARDS

FICTION: JOHN STEINBECK'S "GRAPES OF WRATH"

POETRY: MARK VAN DOREN'S "COLLECTED POEMS"

DRAMA: WILLIAM SAROYAN'S "THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE"

BIOGRAPHY: CARL SANDBURG'S "ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THE WAR YEARS"

HISTORY: RAY STANNARD BAKER'S "WOODROW WILSON: LIFE AND LETTERS"

THE unexpected occurred only once in the literary selections of this year's Pulitzer Prize jury. Carl Sandburg figured as a winner somewhere along the line since his "Abraham Lincoln: The War Years" was not eligible for consideration in the biography classification; John Steinbeck's failure to win the fiction award would have precipitated a revolution; and Mark Van Doren's "Collected Poems" seemed a logical choice. But everyone had apparently overlooked Ray Stannard Baker's "Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters" for the biography award. Not that the work was undeserving—it is a first-rate accomplishment in our historical literature—but it had been in execution for so many years that it had become a quiet institution.

Announcement of the new prize winners, made as this issue goes to press (Monday evening, May 6), is expected to receive wide commendation. The big question was whether the Pulitzer Committee could break away from its tradition sufficiently to honor a novel which was full of raw meat—a novel which was so far ahead of the rest of the field of American fiction last year that henceforth 1939 shall be a landmark in our literary history.

Three of the four titles selected by the Pulitzer Prize committee were heavy favorites in the poll of the nation's literary editors and book reviewers conducted several weeks ago by *The Saturday Review*. In fiction,

John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" dominated the field, receiving thirty-nine out of forty-eight votes. The only novel polling more than a single vote was Thomas Wolfe's "The Web and the Rock," which was favored on three ballots.

Thirty-four critics, it will be recalled, selected Carl Sandburg as the winner in biography, but eight critics, apparently anticipating the ineligibility of "Abraham Lincoln: The War Years" for the biography award, selected Mr. Sandburg for the prize in history.

In poetry, Mark Van Doren's "Collected Poems" was at the top of the balloting in this classification with ten votes—one ahead of Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Huntsman, What Quarry?" and five ahead of Robert Frost's "Collected Poems."

Not a single critic submitting his nominations selected Ray Stannard Baker's "Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters" to receive the biography award. Behind the favorite, "Abraham Lincoln: The War Years," in *The Saturday Review* poll, was Henry Seidel Canby's "Thoreau," which received eight votes, and Henry F. Pringle's "The Life and Times of William Howard Taft."

The awards in journalism went to the Waterbury (Conn.) *Republican and American* for its campaign exposing municipal graft, in the "public service" classification; to Otto To-

lischus, of the *New York Times*, for his foreign correspondence from Berlin, with honorable mention to Lloyd Lebras, of the United Press; to Bart Howard, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, for distinguished editorial writing; to Burton Heath, of the *New York World-Telegram*, for his reporting disclosures of municipal graft; and to Edmund Duffy, of the *Baltimore Sun*, for cartoons.

The Fiction Award

JOHNN ERNST STEINBECK was born in Salinas, Calif., on February 27, 1902. From childhood, spent in the heart of California's lettuce growing region among ranchers and farmers, he knew the ways of working men, was aware of their problems, awake to their difficulties, their sorrows, and their pleasures. As a young boy he ran cultivators, worked with the cattle, did rough labor of all sorts and then, having made up his mind that he wanted to go to college, chose Stanford and thereafter attended that institution intermittently, taking time off again and again to work and then going back to his studies. In the middle 1920's he came to New York, got a job for a short time on a newspaper and losing that, he put in some time as a hod carrier for the new Madison Square Garden. Unsuccessful in his quest for work in New York, he went

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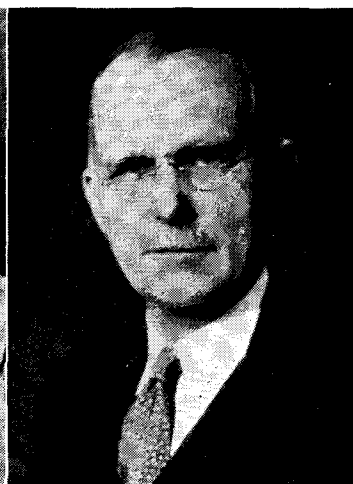
Mark Van Doren



William Saroyan



John Steinbeck



Ray Stannard Baker