

Eight American Novelists

AMERICAN FICTION, 1920-1940. By Joseph Warren Beach. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1941. 371 pp., with index. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

MR. BEACH'S latest volume is an amiable exercise in academic criticism. I use the words "amiable" and "academic" without patronage but as expressing both a certain strength and a certain limitation. I call his book amiable because it is a friendly explication of the purpose and artistic methods of eight American novelists, the explication being primarily directed at a reader of conventional tastes likely to be shocked or irritated by the subject-matter and the methods of Messrs. Dos Passos, Hemingway, Faulkner, Wolfe, Caldwell, Farrell, Marquand, and Steinbeck. That such readers exist by the legion is an obvious fact; these readers Mr. Beach seeks to convert to a greater apprehension of what the eight are driving at. And I call his book academic because the manner is often the classroom manner. Things are made clear after the fashion of a good college lecture. Labels are applied, tendencies indicated, and the reader of the volume puts it down with a considerable sense of satisfaction because he feels that the curve of contemporary fiction has been clearly plotted for him.

To be sure, both amiability and academicism have their weaknesses. For example, it is an unfortunate instance of the classroom manner to have Mr. Beach interpolate on page 5: "I go to the movies a good deal myself and have no apologies to make for that way of passing an evening. It is a form of relaxation as salutary for the tired scholar as for the tired businessman. Besides, the movies offer certain artistic features not present in the trashy novel." There is a whole paragraph in the style of Mr. William Lyon Phelps, and though it may endear Mr. Beach to a certain order of readers, it can only damn him among another order of readers, for whom the critical problem of the esthetics of fiction is paramount and Mr. Beach's affability about Hollywood is a mere annoyance. And Mr. Beach's amiability is such that, though he skillfully ranks the novels of his various authors into classes and kinds of perfection or imperfection, no writer is seriously condemned. Even Mr. Marquand's Mr. Moto books, which are potboilers, receive an approving nod.

This tone of condescension is fortunately not characteristic of Mr.

Beach's general critical style, but it appears often enough to vitiate his criticism at unexpected moments. For example, he writes, it seems to me, very well, when he says of these eight novelists that "in the long run they impress one as deeply and humanly concerned that men should attain to the spiritual dignity of which they are potentially capable, and that the social forms which embody and determine relations among men should better reflect the ideals of democratic justice to which in this country we all pay at least lip service."

I say Mr. Beach writes very well, but I must immediately modify this statement. He writes well when, seeing beneath the surface of Caldwell and Faulkner and the rest, he perceives that they are deeply and humanly concerned about the spiritual dignity of man. But he does not write well in the last part of the sentence—the part about the ideals of democratic justice—because at this point Mr. Beach turns away from his critical problems to humor the taste of his audience. And the weakness of academic criticism seem to me to lie just here; namely, that the academic critic, however acute his insight, cannot forget that he has an audience. He is not satisfied to point out good work. He does not see the work of art in itself as it truly is, he sees the work of art as something demanding pedagogical explication. But pedagogical explication implies that the explication is being conducted for the benefit of the less well informed. Under these circumstances literary criticism is not itself a work of art, it is a form of teaching.

Mr. Beach assuredly teaches. He teaches wisely and well, barring a few unfortunate lapses. Nobody who reads his book but must rise up from it edified, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. His criticism strengthens and improves. It profits us spiritually and mentally. It ought to increase the reading public for the eight authors Mr. Beach has chosen to talk about. He makes us aware of technical devices, of over-layers of meaning, of

special moral and social significances in fiction which most of us read, as we say, for the story. I admire the job. But I venture to add the blasphemy that he does not greatly advance the art of criticism or enrich the art of the novel.

What I am trying to do is not to find fault with Mr. Beach but to define him and to define a whole manner of writing about the art of literature. It is a manner which is often misunderstood and depreciated, especially by a certain type of writer, who describes it as "academic" in the sense of inept. But this is not true. Mr. Beach is not inept, academic criticism is not inept, the business of pedagogical explication, rightly done, is not inept, it is simply a necessary job of teaching. I do not say that without it the literary audience would not exist, but I do say that because of it the literary audience is widened. Its function is the function of college English departments and of adult education. But there is no use pretending, it seems to me, that literary explication of this sort is the same thing as literary criticism is rightly considered.

Mr. Beach has gone forth on a crusade. He wants eight novelists of disillusion better known. He understands that the violences which they commit offend many readers, and he therefore wishes to palliate or explain away their brutalities. But if Mr. Beach had included Ellen Glasgow in his list? If Mr. Beach had said something about Willa Cather? If Mr. Beach had remarked the strength and the weakness of Robert Nathan? Mr. Beach was under no obligation to do so—in fact, makes a charming apology for his choices, but my point is not that I wish to force Mr. Beach into a corner or to demand of him that he write not this book but some other one, my point is that his choices are those of a man who wants to explain something imperfectly understood, not the choices of a man whose primary concern is for the craft of fiction, the art of the novel, or the esthetic problem which confronts the literary workman.

His criticism is therefore criticism of the second class, not criticism of the first class—criticism which, in a perfectly decent sense of the word, is derivative rather than primary. And because much of what is written about contemporary literature is of the same persuasion—hortatory, explicatory, edifying (even when it pretends not to edify)—American criticism, wonderfully as it has developed in the twentieth century, has a long way to go before it achieves a true independence.

Howard Mumford Jones is Professor of English at Harvard University.



The Astor Family And Their Era

THE ASTORS. By Harvey O'Connor.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1941.
488 pp., with index. \$3.75.

Reviewed by DENIS TILDEN LYNCH

THIS is a history of the Astor family from 1784, when John Jacob Astor, son of a German butcher, settled here, down to the contemporary doings of the so-called Cliveden Set. It is not a pleasant history. But that is the fault of the Astors.

How William Waldorf Astor bought a peerage after two unsuccessful attempts to buy a seat in our own House of Representatives is almost as notorious as the criminal neglect of the Astor slums. But few of this generation know of his studied affronts to the land which gave him birth and a fortune so large that he could humor his most extravagant fancies. He presented to the Royal United Service Museum the battle flag of the U. S. frigate *Chesapeake*. This standard waved over the dying Lawrence as he gave his last command: "Don't give up the ship!" In the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which Astor also acquired with gold from his noisome tenements and other New York City properties, he wrote: "I never wished to live at Brookdale where Hawthorne went to



Vincent Astor chats with his mother, Lady Ribblesdale.

learn that wealth is nothing, nor should I have been content at Walden with the contemplation of nature and a daily plate of Thoreau's bean soup." He also bought with American gold a family tree which transformed his humble German ancestor into a scion of a noble Spanish house, a transformation accomplished by inventing an imaginary person and juggling a date by thirty years. Anything they coveted, if for sale, was theirs. One of milord's sons outdid his father's journalistic ventures by buying *The Times*, the Thunderer itself. Little that is unworthy, bizarre, or scandalous in the careers of the Astors and their kin, is missed or muted.

The work represents considerable research; but a little more would have made impossible such passages as: "It was said that a triumvirate really ran the city: (William B.) Astor, Alexander T. Stewart, and Cornelius Vanderbilt . . . Astor and Stewart had one interest in common: the protection and advancement of Broadway. New York was preëminently the city of one street." These three never ruled the metropolis; and New York as a one-street city is as romantic as the fleeting references to the big day's loot of the Tweed Ring, the manner of the Ring's exposure, and the characterization of Fernando Wood, a proven swindler with an unclean tongue, as "brilliant and cultured." The filth of this groggery graduate, in affidavit form, is available at any large library. Someone gulled Mr. O'Connor into believing that "the only authentic voice of the slums was heard in the Socialist papers," and that "it was left to a young Danish reporter (Jacob Riis) . . . to see the slums as they are and mix compassion and indignation in his description." Nearly two decades before Riis saw an American slum, Horace Greeley started the fight against these breeders of crime and disease, and other journals—socialist papers were then unknown—followed the *Tribune's* lead. And far abler writers than Riis recorded the horrors of the slums before and after his arrival here. John Jay, a firm believer in the Republic, is set down as a leader of "the Federal aristocrats."

These lapses do not impair the indictment of the owners of the Astor slums for avariciousness and brutality. Vincent Astor, the "most prepossessing of all the American Astors" to Mr. O'Connor, is not named in any of the counts. But the presentment occasionally suffers for want of unity, notably in its treatment of William Waldorf Astor.

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

CHINESE IN LITERATURE

Chinese characters are not often portrayed in occidental literature, but when they are they are generally admirable and unforgettable. Briefly described here are ten outstanding Chinese whom you must have met before. Do you remember them? Allowing 5 points for each one whose name you recall, and another 5 for the story in which he appears, a score of 60 is par, 70 is good, and 75 or better is excellent. The answers are on page 18.

1. A member of the Honolulu police force, this brilliant Chinese detective was ever ready with an apt and scholarly quotation.
2. An accident led this lubberly boy to discover the art of roasting pig.
3. On a plot of ground measuring ten miles in area, this Chinese emperor had a stately palace built which had running water and natural refrigeration.
4. With a smile that was child-like and bland, this heathen Chinese proceeded to trim a couple of card sharps at their own game.
5. Gold extorted from a frightened refugee and precious stones stolen by his wife were the foundation of this land-hungry farmer's fortune.
6. By means of a magic lamp he built a palace with 24 windows, all but one being set in frames made of precious stones, and his father-in-law, a sultan, exhausted his treasury trying to finish the last window.
7. This Manchu princess, who played beautifully on the harpsichord, looked 18 although she was really 64 years old.
8. When a drunken and brutal prize-fighter had driven his 12-year-old daughter to live in a Limehouse bagnio, she was rescued and cherished by this friendless Chinese sailor.
9. When Gerrit Ammidon sailed home to Salem, he brought with him this high-born Chinese wife whom he had married to save her from death.
10. A young Venetian missionary converted this charming little daughter of Kubla Khan to Christianity and finally married her.