

Eight Novelists Between Wars

JOSEPH WARREN BEACH

Last week the SRL published "Fashions in Defeatism," by Van Wyck Brooks, which criticized the role of the cynic in contemporary fiction. The following article, which is a preview of "American Literature: 1920-1940," to be published by The Macmillan Co., views the "cynics" in another light.

THE vast mass of popular fiction makes, and has ever made, its appeal to uncritical sentiment. The plots are so contrived as to gratify the cravings of the heart. The characters are so conceived as to rouse disgust, where they are villains, and, where they are sympathetic, to feed the reader's appetite for nobility, for wit, refinement, altruism, intelligence, and resourcefulness. All romantic stories are success stories; and the reader who identifies himself with the hero or heroine has the gratification of vicariously realizing his ideals and attaining the object of his ambitions. Such fiction serves, no doubt, its useful function in the human economy. It is one of the most innocuous forms of entertainment and diversion; and the provision of such forms of entertainment is one of the most crying needs of urban life. They lend their glamour to drab and commonplace lives, and give heart to readers depressed by what they have seen of the world. I would not think of discouraging the production or consumption of this trashy fiction any more than I would the production and consumption of moving pictures.

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. It is even conceivable that the sentimental trashiness of our popular drama works unconsciously to determine the direction of serious fiction—by which I mean the work of our clever men who are aiming at something more than sales. It may be partly by reaction from the taste of the vulgar as shown in our most popular art

form that our best novelists lean over backwards in their avoidance of sentimentalism and the pseudo-refinements of bourgeois taste. Now, let me say at once that the authors whom I am featuring as representative of present-day fiction are not necessarily such as I would have summoned out of the void had I been the Proteus of American fiction. Nourished as I was on Dickens and Trollope and Hawthorne, on James and Hardy and Tolstoy—fond as I am, among present-day writers, of Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann and André Malraux—it is unlikely that I should have had the hardihood, not to say the imagination, to have conceived of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, of Thomas Wolfe and John Steinbeck, or John Dos Passos or Erskine Caldwell, or J. P. Marquand or James T. Farrell, as standard-bearers of our cultural effort.

Now they are very much with us; they are the voices of our day, and we cannot deny them. Each one of them I have chosen to discuss has a marked and individual accent, giving esthetic definition to all his offering, and that



—Candidisraeli
John Steinbeck, says Mr. Beach, is "too fond of men to be a cynic."

precious air of being selective. Let it be the corrosive irony of Dos Passos, the weighted understatement of Hemingway, the conscious naïveté of Caldwell; let it be the nervous intensity, the rush and incandescence of Faulkner or the lyrical Gargantuan extravagance of Wolfe—even where these qualities are present in excess, even where they lead the author at times along the perilous edge of absurdity—in every case there is something to give the individual stamp of art to the neutral stuff of common observation. It is the mind that is working, but never the mind in its purely scientific and colorless apprehension of truth. It is the mind humanized by emotion and implemented with the rhetoric of feeling. Irony and naïveté are forms of wit; they give point and savor to what might be unimpressive in direct statement.

Even the stark objectivity of Farrell—his bleak, unvarnished recording of things said and done, of brutality, stupidity, obscenity, and silliness—even this seemingly photographic method involves the art of self-restraint, self-suppression, so hard for any conscious creator to observe—and from it all, from a narrative in which the author never once appears, there emanates a strong savor of his personal attitude, a sense of the cold fury of loathing with which he contemplates the cultural purgatory from which he made himself so narrow an escape. The very force of the mind, where we are specially conscious of that, as in Jonathan Swift or Michelangelo—to leave for a moment the field of fiction—this is not properly force of mind but force within the mind, power manifesting itself in the operations of the mind. The drive itself comes from the personality, from above or below the mind; the drive is furnished by the sense of values and importance in concepts of the mind, but it is not from the mind that we have our sense of values.

In all these writers we are impressed by their freedom and boldness in dealing with life and character. This boldness is again an esthetic, an emo-

tional quality. There is a kind of ruthlessness or cruelty in their treatment of human nature. Many readers will think this is overdone. They will think it unkind or immoral to tell the truth too nakedly; or they will think that these men give a partial and one-sided view of the truth. And very likely they are right in this last judgment, though they may not be right in condemning this school of writers for being one-sided and partial. It may simply mean that with true artistic instinct they have selected from the social scene, or from certain parts of it, what seems to them most characteristic or what lends itself most naturally to esthetic representation. The rest they leave out of the picture in order not to confuse the effect. And that may be one reason why these men interest us more steadily than certain others who, in the interest of fairness and comprehensiveness, have crowded their canvas with figures that will not come to life and only serve to give a messy effect to the whole.

And that is not all. These writers, like powerful artists in all times, are concerned to render what we may call the very essence of human experience. And for this purpose they have need of characters and incidents that are perhaps more sensational than the average. The peculiarities of human nature are best exhibited in extreme cases. It is about vice and crime that moral problems cluster most thickly. Pedestrian virtue was always notoriously hard to make interesting in literature. Great fiction, great drama, was always too strong meat for squeamish readers. They were as much distressed with the grossness of Ben Jonson, Fielding, and Sterne, as they are with that of Hemingway or Steinbeck. American literature has definitely passed out of its Victorian phase, and we need not be surprised to find our writers making liberal use of their new freedom. It would have been so, no doubt, if there had never been a World War, a feminist movement, a Freud, a Marx, or a Darwin. But all these things have been. It is not the world of Scott and Thackeray into which these men are born, above all not the same world of the mind. And before considering them individually, it will pay us to take account of certain attitudes common to them all which are directly referable to the times in which they write. These are our own times, and these men are the product of the world we have made.

THE most important common feature of American fiction today is that it has all been produced in the interval between two world wars, each one of them greater in scope than the wars following the French Revolution of 1789, and far more disastrous in their

THIS WEEK

Articles

	PAGE
EIGHT NOVELISTS BETWEEN WARS By Joseph Warren Beach.....	3
BIOGRAPHY-BIBLIOGRAPHY By Carl Purington Rollins.....	14

Reviews

IN THIS OUR LIFE By Ellen Glasgow Reviewed by Howard Mumford Jones....	5
JOHNSON WITHOUT BOSWELL Edited by Hugh Kingsmill Reviewed by Leonard Bacon.....	6
HOLMES-POLLOCK LETTERS: THE CORRESPONDENCE OF MR. JUSTICE HOLMES AND SIR FREDERIC POLLOCK Edited by Mark DeWolfe Howe Reviewed by James Reid Parker.....	7
INDIAN ART OF THE UNITED STATES By Frederic H. Douglas and Rene d'Harnoncourt Reviewed by Oliver La Farge.....	10
CANTINA By Kim Schee	
MEXICO: A NEW SPAIN WITH OLD FRIENDS By J. B. Trend Reviewed by Herbert J. Muller.....	10
LETTERS FROM OCCUPIED FRANCE With a foreword by Elizabeth Morrow Reviewed by Douglas Schneider.....	11
BIG OLD SUN By Robert Faherty Reviewed by Marjorie K. Rawlings.....	12
COTTONMOUTH By Julian Lee Rayford Reviewed by Eugene Armfield.....	12
NOT TO THE STRONG By J. P. Thorndike Reviewed by Stuart Cloete.....	12
LIGHTER THAN DAY By Desmond Hawkins Reviewed by Bess Jones.....	13
MY UNCLE BENJAMIN By Claude Tillier Reviewed by Justin O'Brien.....	13
PAGEANT OF ENGLAND, 1840-1940 By Arthur Bryant Reviewed by Crane Brinton.....	15
THE UNITED STATES By John D. Hicks Reviewed by James Truslow Adams.....	16
THE ARMED HORDE By Hoffman Nickerson Reviewed by R. Ernest Dupuy.....	19

Departments

EDITORIAL.....	8
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.....	9
YOUR LITERARY I.Q.....	11
THE CRIMINAL RECORD.....	18
THE NEW BOOKS.....	20
TRADE WINDS.....	21
DOUBLE-CROSTICS: No. 366.....	23

THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, published weekly by the Saturday Review Company, Inc., 420 Madison Avenue, New York, N. Y. Harrison Smith, President; James Nelson, Vice-President and Treasurer; Amy Loveman, Secretary; George Dilkes, Business Manager. Subscription, \$4 a year; \$4.50 in Canada; \$5 in other countries. At least 3 weeks' notice required for changes of address; both old and new addresses must be given. Printed in U. S. A. Vol. XXIII, No. 23, March 29, 1941. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. THE SATURDAY REVIEW is indexed in the "Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature."

effects than those Napoleonic wars. One of these men took part in the fighting as officer of field artillery in France (Marquand), one as member of the Canadian Flying Corps and the British Air Force in France (Faulkner), one as a member of the Italian Arditi (Hemingway), one as a private in the Medical Corps (Dos Passos); two of them also saw service in the ambulance and Red Cross service (Dos Passos and Hemingway). Of the younger men, one viewed the war from the point of view of a college student (Wolfe), and the others from those of schoolboys, farm hands, mill hands, football players (Steinbeck, Caldwell, Farrell). I think we may say that all of them have viewed the first World War with the same horror and dismay; that they all have shared the same doubts as to the ideology that inspired it and that led to our participation in it, the same disgust with that worldwide commercial spirit which was so largely responsible for it, and the same loathing for those traits of human nature which have allowed the dominance of this commercial spirit throughout the civilized world. The disillusionment with human nature, which was already so common among intellectuals before the war, became, we might almost say, universal with them as a result of it.

Few of these men have written extensively about the war; but the first World War was the greatest single cause (among many) of an attitude toward human nature in general which is the most obvious feature of serious contemporary American fiction. Various as are the talents and methods of these men, and various as are the fields in which human nature is shown by them in action, they are at one in their disposition to show it in a distinctly unflattering light. In their general view of it they are uncompromising realists in the historical sense of that term. They are determined not to be taken in by the claims of the heart and the imagination, by man's pretensions to be heroic.

It would be a mistake to bracket these eight writers as plain cynics. One or two of them, when you look close, would seem to be too fond of men in their natural state for that—would seem indeed to be convinced of the essential goodness of human beings—or if goodness is too special a word, then of their essential likableness, or, as we might say, their innocence of evil. Such is the case with Steinbeck, and sometimes with Hemingway. On the whole, however, these writers show men behaving rather disappointingly—rather meanly—and the impression conveyed is that they must inevitably behave rather meanly in the conditions

(Continued on page 17)

Product of the Tragic Muse

IN THIS OUR LIFE. By Ellen Glasgow. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1941. 467 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

YOU can, if you like, remark familiar patterns in the warp and woof of "In This Our Life," which brings Miss Glasgow's social history of Virginia down to the present. You can say that you have met some of these persons before. Asa Timberlake, the unheroic, shabby-genteel father, compounded of suffering and steel—was he not in "Vein of Iron?" His daughter Stanley, feminine, futile, and disastrous, is sister under the skin to Jennie Birdsong of "The Sheltered Life." Her mother, Lavinia, is the sentimental petted invalid of other novels. Uncle William is the hoary masculine sinner for whom Miss Glasgow has a fictional partiality; Aunt Charlotte is his placid but not unsubtle wife for whom he has a strong personal respect. They have been displayed before—in "The Romantic Comedians," for example. You may learnedly comment that Queenborough is Richmond, a town where God fails to fulfill himself in many ways. You may even complain, if you are a close reader, that some of the events are too palpably prepared for.

But these are irrelevant observations, the sort of thing English departments welcome in graduate students as proof they are not ignorant of literary history. What is essential and important about "In This Our Life" is that the themes of the twenty books which Miss Glasgow has devoted to Queenborough and to Virginia are here swept into a final symphony, a tragic orchestral poem which is yet lambent with unearthly wisdom, an iridescent inward light. Miss Glasgow's pages are still vibrant with humor and scorn, they still march and move at the command of an expert stylist. They do so, I think, because, although she has not lost curiosity, she long ago won serenity. She knows that man is the captive of this earth. But she knows also that he is not.

In 1941 the foremost woman in the South exhibits the unflagging curiosity about the sources of human frailty she first showed when, a learned girl, she wrote those early crudities, "The Descendant" and "Phases of an Inferior Planet." Fresh from the reading of evolutionary science, she thought in the

nineteenth century that character was the product of heredity and environment. But she refused even then to admit that it was merely the product of heredity and environment. Morals, she held then and held since, are not synonymous with *mores*. Now in the twentieth century this distinguished moralist knows that character ought to be something more than the product of heredity and environment, but that frequently it is not.

IN the days of Mencken Miss Glasgow once announced that what the South needed was more blood and irony. Bewitched by a formula so simple, shoals of Southern novelists set to work to misinterpret this golden phrase. Most of them have been unable to distinguish blood from bloodiness. Most of them have showed a singular aptitude for confusing what is tragic with what is terrible. They have confounded irony with iconoclasm. For them, culture below the Potomac meant the exploitation of the uncultivated. They not merely announced the demise of romanticism, they held a literary lynching bee and strung up the corpse. Somewhere in Masfield's "Dauber" there is a line: "Spit brown, my boy, and get a hairy chest." This is what many writers in the Sahara of the Bozarts understood by irony and blood in their efforts to make that desert blossom with their blows.

Miss Glasgow, alone among the barbarians, has been a moralist of the classic order. She never confounded Masfield with Thoreau. "I wished," wrote the Concord sage, "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life." "I wanted," he said, "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life . . . to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world." It is nowhere recorded that Thoreau set fire to his cabin or bashed in the head of Farmer Hosmer with

an axe. Driving life into a corner in order to inspect its meanness is not the same thing as driving life into a trap. Tragedy is not a problem of violence, it is a problem of values.

It ought not be necessary to enunciate these simple and oracular truths. But there is a vague feeling abroad that Miss Glasgow is outmoded because she did not stroll down "Tobacco Road." It is not, however, Miss Glasgow who is out of date. The difficulty is not going back to her, the difficulty is to catch up with her. What shall we say of a spirit so rare that, as it nears its seventh decade, it is still seeking to live deep and suck all the marrow of life? When shall we have a criticism civilized enough to accept the truth that the ironist and the social comedian are simply other aspects of one who has been haunted by the tragic sense? Social revolutions sweep across the face of the planet, but the old enigma remains—what price men and women?

"In This Our Life" is a product of the tragic muse. Its motto might be that simple and startling sentence with which Thackeray concluded "Vanity Fair": "Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" The book is as subtle as that. In the Timberlake family two marriages go wrong because, by the law of her being, Stanley Timberlake cannot be other than the eternal feminine. The repercussions of her sexuality shake a whole family for the simple and sufficient reason that sexuality is beyond good and evil. But are men and women beyond good and evil? Civilization is compounded of good and evil, but the paradox is: whose good? whose evil? While reformatory novelists have assumed that Southern society must be revolutionized if a single soul is to be saved, Miss Glasgow has quietly announced that the most revolutionary thing in any society would be for some one to save his own soul. Pending that salvation, the only anodyne is a half tender, half mocking stoicism.

"In This Our Life" is distinguished writing. I think the middle portion not as good as the other parts, I think the novel not quite of the calibre of either "Vein of Iron" or "Barren Ground." But "In This Our Life" is not so much a work of fiction as it is a testament, a summary, a philosophy, a belief. The wisest woman in



Drawing from "Ellen Glasgow," by Dorothea L. Mann.