

# There Was Something About the Twenties

**What did the Paris expatriates do? They and others in the arts “were discovering a profound change in the human situation”—the morning of an age.**

By ARCHIBALD MacLEISH

SOMEbody once observed—Yeats for a guess—that the great thing is to survive. I’m not so sure. There may be advantages in outliving one’s contemporaries—some of them anyway—but there is little to be said for facing the next generation alone. For the next generation has its questions, too. What was it really like back there? What did all you expatriates *do* in Paris in the Twenties?

The worst of it is, if you reply, they don’t understand you. If you tell them you never met an expatriate in Paris in six years they smile: They’ve read the guide book. If you tell them most of the people you knew in Paris in the Twenties worked, they smile again: Did you know Fitzgerald? If you say yes, you knew Fitzgerald, and Hemingway better and longer, and Dos Passos, and Cummings, who was there from time to time, and Wilder on his way through to Rome (which he discovered, characteristically, a generation ahead of the world), and John Peale Bishop, who was, in some not unimportant ways, the most interesting of the lot, and that none of them were expatriates—if you say all that (which you learn not to) they don’t openly tap their heads but you see their fingers twitching. Well, they say at last, did you know Henry Miller? And you give up: No, you never knew Henry Miller. “Well, he’s an expatriate; he wrote *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*.”

True, you say, and you excuse yourself and wander off to the nearest elevation from which on a clear day . . . You know where *you* will end up in that thesis—a footnote in the bibliography.

No, an idea gets fixed in the collective mind like a loose tooth in a gear-box and you can’t get it free. The Twenties in Paris were Fitzgerald and soda. Or they were a Lost Generation as Mr. Hemingway said to Miss Stein or Miss Stein to Mr. Hemingway or maybe Miss Toklas to both of them. Or else, and in any event, they were a lot of Americans sitting around in the Dome detesting America—except for those who sat around detesting America in the Rotonde. And the fact that it isn’t true—or isn’t true, at least, of anyone who mattered—is irrelevant: The notion has deposited itself like stale air on a window—improvisations of beautiful frost through which no one can see.

IT’S a pity because what was actually happening in Paris in those years—and not only in Paris—was important. What was actually happening was that the arts—including the art of letters—were accomplishing what only rarely in human history they have accomplished as well: They were discovering a profound, and (until they performed their task) unnoticed change in the human situation—the change for which *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* and the Cantos created metaphors; the change which we all now recognize as real but which no one rec-

ognized as real until Stravinsky and Picasso and Eliot and Pound and Joyce and the rest.

I refer, of course, to the now evident—we would say, self-evident—fact that an age ended with the First World War; that the great voyage of Ulysses—“*Heureux qui, comme Ulysses, a fait un beau voyage*”—had become a Dublin jaunt from morning stool to noisy pub to wife’s dishonored bed.

“These fragments you have shelved  
(shored)”

“What are the roots that clutch, what  
branches grow

Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say or guess for you know  
only

A heap of broken images where the sun  
beats

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the  
cricket no relief

And the dry stone no sound of water  
. . .”

To a generation born fifty years after ours all this is established literature—part of the canon—its meanings obvious as the meanings of past literature always are. But in the Twenties none of this was obvious—even to the professional critics—even to the best of contemporary critics. There is something strangely (as of now) tentative about Edmund Wilson’s review of *The Waste Land* in the *Dial* (the curious review in which he refers to Pound as Eliot’s “imitator”):

And sometimes we feel that he (Eliot) is speaking not only for a personal distress but for the starvation of a whole civilization. . . .

The starvation of a whole civilization was a new idea in 1923. A generation born in the century of stability and order—of reliable events, foreseeable consequences—could still, like Alice through her looking glass, see the old safe world behind it, that *other* room in which chairs were actually chairs and tables tables and the sun on the floor sunlight on the floor. Indeed, to most of us who fought in that war—particularly to the Americans who, so to speak, *went* to the war across an ocean which they expected, with luck, to recross again—to most of us it was assumed as a matter of course that when the war was over we would return to the world we had left.

It was not easy for us—not easy even for a man as perceptive as Mr. Wilson—to accept the fact that that world was no longer there. But Eliot as poet realized it—and created (his duty as poet) the form in which it could be realized by others. Pound realized it—in his poem. Dos Passos found fictions which would realize it. And the realization was the age. It was not the Lost Generation which was lost: It was the world out of which that generation came. And it was not a generation of expatriates who found themselves in Paris in those years but a generation whose *patria*, wherever it may once have been, was now no longer waiting for them anywhere.

That realization produced two consequences: *The Waste Land* and the forms in which the waste land was discovered. The Twenties were not only the years of the images of the collapse of Christendom and the drowning of Cleopatra's barge and the end of an age. They were also high-hearted—even high-handed—years of innovation, arguably the greatest period of literary and artistic innovation since the Renaissance. The burden of the song may have been tragic, but the song itself was new and then new again and then even newer, as though, precisely because the bottom had fallen out of the historical tradition, a new ship had to be built for every voyage to sea. Indeed—and this is perhaps the most significant fact about the period—the avant-garde was composed in those years not, as ordinarily, of the frustrated and defeated but precisely of the principal figures of the time. Joyce was avant-garde (though he would have rejected the designation). Stravinsky (who still rejects it) was avant-garde. Picasso has been avant-garde for generations. With the result that the Surrealists, who had announced, by manifesto, their right to head the procession never

got far enough forward to hear the drum.

It is these two characteristics, miraculously combined, which make the peculiar quality of the time; the shimmer and sheen of the inventiveness and the tragic depth of the theme. Art, with the great figures of the decade, was accomplishing what art exists to accomplish—and accomplishing it with freshness and vividness and courage: It was recreating with new means—almost with a new vocabulary—the metaphor for our experience of our lives, the tragedy of our experiences. Not philosophy, not the church, but the painters and poets and composers of those years showed us what and where we were.

**P**ERHAPS the simplest way to make the point is to compare the work of the years which followed the First War with the work which followed the Second. The principal orientation of this later work, as it appears to those who know it best and admire it most, is briefly and, I think, brilliantly described by Susan Sontag writing in *The Great Ideas Today*, a volume published by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: "One of the primary features of literature (as of much activity in all the other arts) in our times is a chronic attachment to materials belonging to the realm of 'extreme situations'—madness, crime, taboo sexual longings, drug addiction, emotional degradation, violent death. The motive or justification for this loyalty to extreme situations is obscure. It is felt that such situations are somehow 'more true' than others; that an art immersed in such situations is 'more serious' than other art; and finally, that only art that embraces the irrational and repellent, the violent and the outrageous, can make a valuable impact on the sluggish consciousness of the audience."

This, of course, is something more than a description of the writing of some of our best-known contemporaries: It is also, in its assumptions and implications—and in some of its explicit statements—an account of the beliefs, particularly the beliefs about mankind, on which their writing is founded and which, as serious work of art, it exists to express. To say that the literature of "extreme situations"—of "madness, crime, taboo sexual longings, drug addiction, emotional degradation, violent death"—is felt by its authors to be "more true" means, of course, more true to *man*, more true to that human truth which is the measure of all literary truth. To say that an art immersed in "extreme situations" is felt by its creators to be "more serious" means more humanly serious—more worthy of serious human attention. And to say that "only art which embraces the irrational and repellent, the violent and the outrageous," is felt to be capable of making a "valuable impact on the sluggish consciousness of the audience," is to comment, in the most explicit terms, on the opinions about mankind of the creators of this art.

**A**LL of which is to say something of the greatest importance about the current state of that belief in man on which our civilization, in its classical beginnings, and in its Renaissance renewal, and in the Enlightenment, which produced our own society, was based. Man, to the generation of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, was a creature capable of leading a whole life in the fullness of his mind and senses: a creature so capable, indeed, of living a whole life that he could be trusted to think for himself, to reach decisions for himself—in brief to govern himself. Man to William Shakespeare—or at least to a character of William Shakespeare's who went as far into the



"I have an idea. Why rob the rich? Why don't we just tax them?"

dark as any character in English drama has ever gone—was a marvel: “What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of the animals!” And as for the Greeks, it is the Chorus of old men in *Antigone* which says, “Wonders are many on the earth and of these man is the greatest.”

But if Miss Sontag is right, and the evidence would seem to support her, then the principal burden of the literature she describes is a very different conception of man indeed. What these writers are doing—like the writers of the Twenties—is finding metaphors for a new and altered human experience. But where the new experience of the Twenties was a new experience of time, the new experience of Miss Sontag’s writers is a new experience of man—a new vision of man—if “vision” is the word I want: a vision of man in which madness and emotional degradation and illicit “love” and drug addiction are more true than sanity and emotional harmony and health and love itself. But if this is so—if, as I say, Miss Sontag is right—then a comparison of the effectiveness of the work she is describing with the effectiveness of the work of the Twenties may

serve to throw light on both. For the ultimate test of the work of any group of writers, like the ultimate test of any work of art, is whether or not it works—whether or not a reader, or a generation of readers—or, with the greatest, many generations of readers—can use the metaphor—recognize their lives in those imagined lives—recognize themselves in those other selves.

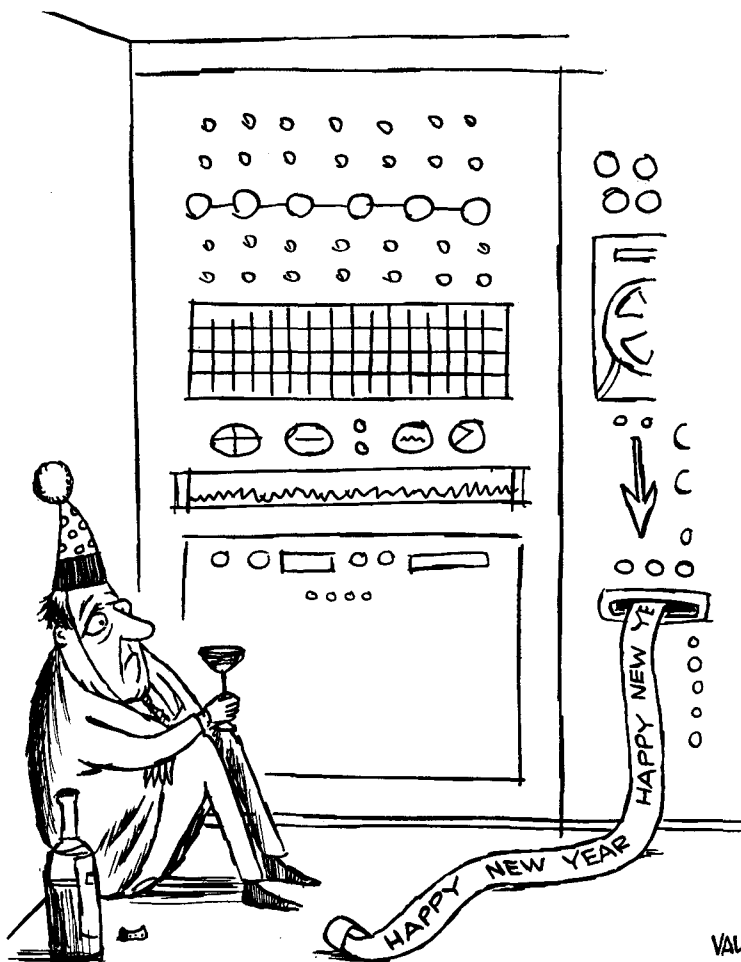
WITH the Twenties—with the great work of the Twenties—there can be, I think, no question. Its images were recognized at once—and with the famous shock of recognition which can change the consciousness of a time. *The Waste Land* provided the vocabulary of our understanding; *Ulysses* formed the sense of history in which we lived. But is the same thing true of Miss Sontag’s writers? Do we recognize our age among their metaphors?—recognize ourselves?—master with their help the difficult figure of ourselves? There are some of us, perhaps, to whom these reflections of mankind are “true.” Judged by their works the producers of television programs may well believe that “only art that embraces the irrational and repellent, the violent and outrageous, can make a valuable impact on the sluggish consciousness of the audience.” Indeed, the sentence sounds as though it had been

written after protracted exposure, not to novels published by the Grove Press, but to the assorted offerings of the television guide. And the same thing may be true of the advertising business as a whole. If one may judge not only by the television commercials but by the full-page multi-color ads in the picture magazines, man to Madison Avenue also is a diminished creature, a totally passive, sluggishly suggestible being whose only conscious purpose in life is to smell sweeter or weigh less or sleep longer or keep his dentures from slipping or go on smoking cigarettes in spite of what his intelligence tells him about smoking cigarettes—in brief, a sort of unthinking, indiscriminating, indecisive consuming apparatus like a sea sponge whose only significant human function is to want and want and want . . . until eventually he wants a Lincoln Continental . . . or a Lincoln Continental hearse.

But if, in the Olduvai Gorge of the human spirit, Madison Avenue man is an ignoble creature whom Sophocles’s Theban elders would not have recognized, does it follow that we as a generation accept a fictionalized or poetized Madison Avenue man as truer to ourselves than Sophocles’s truth? Or, more precisely, do we accept the preconceptions of this literature Miss Sontag so honestly defines? Do we accept its message?—for these preconceptions are indeed a message. Do we agree, with these metaphors before us, that the time has come to accept the revelation that the Greek idea of man is dead; that Hamlet’s soaring sentences are rhetoric; that Jefferson’s trust was misplaced and sentimental; that man is indeed what he shows himself to be in his “extreme situations”?

In other words, does this literature work? Does it work as the literature of the Twenties worked? Does it show us our time—our situation—the true tragedy of our situation?

That it works for some is a matter of public record. We have the testimony of that mutiny among the young which is also characteristic of the time; for what this mutiny rejects is precisely a concept of humanity and of human behavior which has become a stereotype no longer corresponding, as many of the young insist, to the honest realities of our lives. We have also, I suppose, the testimony of that part of the academic community which makes of such terms as “anti-hero” an explanation of the age. But even so the question remains—remains for the obvious reason that *this* question is the last and most fundamental question of all, no longer, as it was forty years ago, a question of the end of a chapter, but a question now of the end of the book. For any civilization rests on a single cornerstone: its belief about man. And if the new literature





challenges, as it clearly does, the classic confidence in man on which Europe rested, and on which this republic was founded, then it raises a question which not even the most brilliant of literary critics can dispose of with a literary judgment.

FOR the real issue then is the issue of truth: Is it true—is it *humanly* true—that the old belief in man is gone, and that nothing is left but this shadowy figure flickering in the half-light of madness, degradation, and death? There are, I suppose, reasons for thinking so. There is Hitler and—worse than Hitler—the thousands upon thousands of “decent Germans” who were only too ready to do his unspeakable work. If this is “mankind” then who can believe in mankind again? And there is the bomb. If man’s intelligence is so irresponsible that it will produce mechanisms which can abolish mankind—to say nothing of the lovely earth on which mankind was conceived—then who can admire human intelligence? There is also—arguably—science. It is arguable, that is to say (for it has been argued), that “the nagging fear” which has produced the “crisis of confidence” in which we live is the consequence of our discovery that man is “no more than a machinery of atoms” and therefore not a “person.” Indeed, Professor Bronowski, from whom I quote, put it even more explicitly: “The explosive charge which, in this century, has split open the self-assurance of Western man” is indeed contained in the “bland proposition” that man is “part of nature.”

All this, I suppose, is true—though one would have to recall, as to the last, that Professor Bronowski’s “bland proposition” was advanced in so many words by one of the greatest of scientific philosophers 300 years ago, and that Descartes’s mechanistic theory produced no crisis of confidence in man: Jean-Jacques Rousseau was still able to be born. But even if all this is true something else is also true: that there is more in this age than Hitler and his mass assassins—more in this age even than the bomb. There is also the most extraordinary demonstration of man’s intelligence—man’s ability to master his environment—history has ever seen. Beastly though humankind may be in its Fascist masks and its dictator masks and the nasty political masks it has sometimes assumed even in our own country (its Hitlers and Stalins and McCarthys) the human mask of the generation is not beastly. Nor is the generation itself.

Prophesy is a fatuous business but it hardly requires prophesy to foresee that men in other centuries will look back on this as among the most splendid and terrible in the annals of the race. For ours is truly a great and tragic time; a time heroic as few ages have been heroic;



*“So you see, Father, it all started because I was afraid to bring home such a bad report card.”*

an epoch of vast wars, horrible cruelties, unimaginable discoveries, conquests over time and space and circumstance which earlier human beings never dreamed of gaining; a time which has produced here and elsewhere some of the most remarkable figures—remarkable both for good and evil—the world has ever known; an era, in brief, in which man has gone farther outward into the unknown—farther inward into the unknowable—than in all the centuries and millennia before.

IT is here, of course, that the “literature of extreme situations” meets its test. For the literature of any generation must work *for its generation* as the literature of the Twenties demonstrably did—not for the margins of experience or the backwaters of experience but for the total experience. Its metaphor of man must be true for man as a whole creature, not a partial creature. But is the metaphor of man in his extremities such a metaphor?

No one, I think, could say it was. Within its presuppositions, and for those who are willing to confine their minds to those presuppositions, the discoveries of this literature are true discoveries. Man is doubtless far more evil, far more debased, than our immediate predecessors—particularly our immediate predecessors in this country—were willing to admit, and these revelations are, to that extent, truthful revelations. But are they, for that reason, more “true for man” than that earlier image which survived so long? Go back for a moment to that

Chorus from *Antigone*. Consider what is being said. Why is man the wonder of the world? Because the Greeks were ignorant of all the dark lessons we have learned? Because they refused to face, as we have learned to face, the fact of human mortality? Not at all. Man is the wonder of the world because he is master of the ageless earth, bending that mother of the gods to his will; because he is the master also of living things; because he overcomes all chances, all the dangers, finds the remedy for every ill . . . every ill but one: Death he cannot overcome. Why, then, is he the wonder of the world? *Because* he dies: because, in spite of death, in spite of his foreknowledge of death, he masters nevertheless the ageless earth, tames beasts, builds cities.

Heroism to the Greeks of the great age was never triumph: It was Prometheus with the eagle at his liver, Herakles among the sons he himself had killed. . . . And man to those same Greeks was wonderful, not because the Greeks were ignorant of the abyss our contemporaries, or some of them, have now discovered, but precisely because they looked into that abyss: because they knew what we, or some of us, have forgotten—that death is not the defeat of life but the cause that life is sometimes more than life; the cause that man can be more than man; infinite in faculty . . . in apprehension how like a god.

This article is based on a Bergen Lecture delivered by Mr. MacLeish at Yale.

# Saturday Review

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## The Perils of Hasty History

MOST of the books on the late President Kennedy have created something approaching a furor. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s masterful *A Thousand Days*, for example, raised an interesting question: To what extent should a historian take advantage of his position as a Presidential assistant to write about events-in-process so promptly that this affects the ability of men still in office to deal with these events? But the Schlesinger controversy has none of the poignant and tragic aspects of the clash between the Kennedy family and the author and publishers of *Death of a President*, a book originally commissioned but then rejected by Mrs. John F. Kennedy.

Mrs. Kennedy's legal attempt to stop publication of William Manchester's book has had the paradoxical effect of bringing out in force the sensation-mongers and curiosity-prone whom the book was supposed to silence. What is most unfortunate about the entire episode is that it brought about a confrontation between responsible and good people on both sides. It would be difficult to find a more distinguished group of citizens than magazine publisher Gardner Cowles, book publisher Cass Canfield, and Mr. Manchester on the one hand, and on the other hand the Kennedys and the prominent lawyers who represent them.

What divides these compatible people, of course, is the ancient, unrelenting brush-fire war between author and patron. If the Kennedys had been a business firm interested in having its

corporate history written up, or had been a doting family out to commission a "campaign biography" of Uncle Hector, there would have been no problem. They would simply have summoned one of the cold-eyed writing technicians with whom our age abounds, they would have set his dials, and he would have typed out a bland, perhaps slightly soporific, but certainly unexceptionable account of that day in Dallas and its aftermath.

But the purpose of the Kennedys was quite different. What they wanted, naturally, was to retain a responsible author and turn the pertinent materials over to him in full confidence that there would be no conflict between the private interest and the public interest. The private interest, of course, was Mrs. Kennedy's desire to give the facts without hurting her children or precipitating political storms, and without allowing her story to fall into the hands of commercializers and exploiters. The public interest called for an authoritative and responsible account of the event.

WHAT the family did not bargain for was the fact that authors—good authors—inhabit a world of their own. No matter how sharply defined or contractually limited the serious author's original conception of a book may be, he usually finds as his work proceeds that his conceptual template has constantly to be adjusted and reshaped. He discovers that what artistic truth demands be included, tact and punctilio suggest should be excluded. Though this compulsion to include all the relevant material is meta-

physical, the author feels it as keenly as he might a hunger pang. This, to the Kennedy family's great distress, is what appears to have happened to Mr. Manchester.

It may be said that both the President's widow and the notable author should have foreseen the unfortunate contretemps. But a common symptom of the author-sponsor relationship is that everything is rosy and trusting right up to the big blowup. At the very least, however, Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. Manchester, when they drew up their agreement, should have had in mind the Rockefeller family's jolting experience during the early Thirties, when it commissioned the Mexican painter Diego Rivera to do a fresco for Rockefeller Center. The fresco that Rivera produced was indeed brilliant, but it reflected the painter's political sympathies, which were distinctly radical—Rivera worked in a depiction of Lenin. The subsequent dustup, which ended with the mural's removal, prompted E. B. White to write his wry, priceless poem, "I Paint What I See," which is recommended reading for all creative types and their patrons. The poem runs, in part:

"It's not good taste in a man like me,"  
Said John D.'s grandson Nelson,  
"To question an artist's integrity  
"Or mention a practical thing like  
a fee . . . .

"And though your art I dislike to  
hamper  
"I owe a *little* to God and Gramper,  
"And after all,  
"It's *my* wall . . . ."

"We'll see if it is," said Rivera

If and when the Manchester book appears, it may well turn out to be a mild entry indeed in the what-should-an-author-include controversy. As a temperature-raiser, it will probably be nothing like William Henry Herndon's iconoclastic three-volume study of Lincoln, or the slashing evisceration of Woodrow Wilson by Sigmund Freud and William Bullitt, which was withheld from publication for many years and has only recently been brought out.

The tragedy of the Kennedy-Manchester story is that people have been hurt even though the story has no malice-mongers. So far as the outsider can tell, what happened is simply that a group of highly civilized, well-disposed people, by an almost Dostoyevskian circumstance, were forced into bitter contention with each other. Whatever the ultimate outcome of that contention, everyone involved—Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy above all—will feel for many years to come the wounds inflicted by this public tragedy.

—HALLOWELL BOWSER.

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