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Introduction

Ichiro Takayoshi

Another Jazz Age? Probably never. I believe that the 1920s were the most dynamic period of all time, an anomaly in the whole history of American letters. You will surely think that such a decadal favoritism just exposes my ignorance of history and theory. By training, the interwar period is my home turf. I know its ins and outs. Admittedly I cannot say the same about other periods. If I do not know as much about, say, the 1850s, another apparently *sui generis* decade, how can I know that the 1920s were unique? Theory also tells you that such a comparison across time is an exercise in futility. Even if all the qualities I say were special to this decade did indeed apply, how can I ascertain that they were missing from other decades? How do I establish an objective ground for comparison? On top of all this, there is a popular resistance of a psychological nature. This sort of exceptionalism never fails to make people uneasy because it goes against the grains of their native assumption that literature innovates itself in a constant and continuous manner, decade in decade out, century after century. This assumption is probably rooted in their generational chauvinism, the psychological need to feel that some sorts of exciting changes are under way in contemporary literature. They actually live in a time no less interestingly dynamic than the 1850s or the 1920s, so they hope. A century or so from now, a misguided historian of the future might perhaps glamorize their own special era by editing a volume of essays like the present book. I am conscious of all these emotional, practical, and theoretical resistances to the idea that originally inspired me to undertake this project. And yet, it is not entirely certain to me that they may not founder before the cumulative energy of all the diverse essays collected here.

Don't expect these essays to glamorize. The decade is already encrusted with myriad layers of legends. More projections of the ideal images of the wounded and insecure ego of the current age will serve no one's purposes, and all of our contributors know that. What we offer here instead is an intelligent blend of survey, digest, and instigation, each chapter focusing

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on one aspect of a multipartite phenomenon that was American literary culture of the 1920s. Some chapters single out a cohort of writers, distinguished by shared traits with regard to race, gender, profession, generational position, political ideology, or aesthetic credo. Most of the chapters in Part I fall into this category. Part II consists of chapters documenting major off-stage influences, such as currents of thought, cataclysmic events, and social institutions that shaped the lives and works of the writers discussed in Part I. Some chapters explore relatively short-term impacts of major historical happenings. Chapters 11 and 15 are representative of this kind. Other chapters take up historical and cultural currents that flowed through this decade and explain how they got transfigured en route. Chapter 14 typifies this group. Meanwhile, a cluster of chapters in Part III zeroes in on the interactions and interferences between literature and its sister arts: music, cinema, and theater. While, throughout, the main spotlight will be trained on artists and writers and creators, you must remember that their self-expression was facilitated by supporting actors in the publishing industry. Publishers and editors, to a great extent, determined the form and content of the era's literary productions. These figures as well as the institutions they built deservedly receive limelight in Part IV.

As my mind's eye surveys the contents of this volume, I am again bewildered by the sheer variety of enticing entryways it presents. I am not merely struck that so many separate fields of creative activity coexisted. No less impressive is the variousness of the ways of looking and the variety of analytic frameworks that the rambunctious temper of the era's literary culture calls for. All at once, you must think about a fast-paced evolution of literary conventions, a slow but steady change in morals and mores, a shift in the meaning of culture and civilization, the advent of new media technologies, the rise of modern cities, the maturation of democratic capitalism, new social policies, foreign affairs, aesthetic trends in Europe, and many more. Your understanding of other eras, of course, may benefit from the holistic approach that this volume has adopted, but in dealing with the 1920s, it seems all but indispensable. The elastic syncretism of this volume, then, is not just a post facto conceit of a later historian but also a likeness, a simulacrum of that era's structure.

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If you think of literature as your equipment for living – that is, as an efficient machine to formalize, organize, and share a community's emotional reactions to the prevailing conditions of life – then you would agree that the faster and more drastically these conditions change, the faster and more

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drastically the makeup of this equipment changes.[1] Such a view is usually called "vulgar materialism" or "technological determinism." It is vulgar because it suggests that gross activities in the material world have the final say in the affairs of such refined things as morals and arts. Many would also say this view is "instrumentalist" or "cognitivist," in the sense that according to this view arts like literature are not concerned with what is true, beautiful, or morally edifying, but with what's cognitively convenient for men and women, both creators and audience. Works of art "work" well when they can offer some plausible, that is, soothing, explanation of the relationship between individuals and their social and natural surroundings, an explanation that these individuals use to minimize confusing and often painful contradictions in their heads as well as in their dealings with the outside world. I am not going to defend or attack this theory in this space. All I can do here is to say that we can find cases both for and against such a categorical way of looking at the relation between arts and history. And if you are interested in defending this sort of cognitivism, you would be hard-pressed to find a more favorable case than American literature in transition during the interwar decades.

As Ann Douglas tells us in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, this decade may well have been the first historical period that understood itself decadally. Before that time, Americans would divide their nation's history into centuries or into antebellum and postbellum, but they did not talk of, say, the 1790s or the 1890s the same way today we routinely "interrogate" the 1960s or the 1980s.[2] It was during the 1920s and in their writings on the nature of their special era that Americans accepted "decade" as the measure of time that most closely matched their sense of how things changed over time. The fact that they found such a small unit of time useful in making sense of their experience is a testament to the accelerated tempo of growth and fragmentation that bewildered proto-modernists (or late Victorians) such as Henry Adams. Adams's autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* was first privately circulated in 1907 among his closest friends, but when it was posthumously published in 1918, much younger generations of writers were morbidly fascinated by its ironic prose and its unrelieved pessimism that was foreign to them. Adams discerned two defining tendencies of modernity. One was the tendency of any existing trend to accelerate, be it coal output or electrification of rural areas. The other was the tendency of any existing entities to split into new multiple entities, which in turn promptly imploded to smithereens. All forces, physical or cultural, grew more and more powerful, and all of these forces simultaneously diversified. The most troubling implication of this discovery for this

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child of the eighteenth century who was born in the nineteenth century, only to dodder into the twentieth century with "his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new" was that in modern times there was no longer such a thing as the education that equipped young men and women for their entire lives.[3] In such a fast-moving, fast-diversifying world, yesterday's capacities turned into today's learned incapacities and yesterday's science turned into today's superstition. This realization, coming in his twilight years, forced the posture of sardonic ineffectuality on Adams, but the much younger writers of the 1920s were determined to turn what paralyzed their parents and grandparents into a motive for invention.

With some very important exceptions such as Adams (all discussed in Chapter 1), most major contributors to the literary culture of the 1920s were born between 1885 and 1900. Let me round these dates off and refer to these writers as "the generation of the 1890s." Two facts immediately emerge. First, in the 1920s, this generation was more or less in its biological twenties. Literature of the 1920s was literally young. Second, the time period when this generation spent their formative years coincided with the time of America's greatest economic growth. By "formative years" I mean some stretch of earlier years of one's life rather than later ones. I use them more or less interchangeably with childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. By calling these years "formative" I am embedding in the phrase a key, and hopefully not so controversial, assumption: life is path-dependent. Different stages of a life affect the evolving character of that life differently, and experiences in earlier stages count more in this regard than those in later stages. In his 1927 essay on the concept of generation, Karl Mannheim put this point baldly: the "inventory of experience which is absorbed by infiltration from the environment in early youth often becomes the historically oldest stratum of consciousness, which tends to stabilize itself as the natural view of the world."[4] For the generation of the 1890s, their first encounters, all those encounters that would go on to form the deepest stratum of their developing consciousness, were with instances of dynamic destabilization. Some of these instances are well known to us, and many illuminating efforts have been made to understand their infiltrations into modern American literature. The successive waves of immigration that began peaking around the turn of the century and the increasingly polyglot makeup of the population are one such instance (see Chapter 6). Another is the nation's entry into the Great War, which drafted tens of millions of young adult males out of the total population just shy of a hundred millions, subjected them to mental examination and physical training at bases far

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from their homes, and sent millions of them to the fronts in Europe (see Chapter 11). The most destabilizing change, however, has attracted much less attention from literary historians because it is invisible in its overt ubiquity and also because its shaping influence on the sphere of cultural invention seems hard to isolate. This is the change that modernization brought to the nation destined to be the most modernized in the world around the time that the members of the generation of the 1890s were studying their way through their elementary schools, the change that did not result from some decisive battles or radical legislative acts, but was occurring inside homes, in schools, at factories, on farms, and in the streets – everywhere and every day. This is where you find the hard core of the "formative" experience of the generation of the 1890s.

John P. Marquand is typical. Born in 1893, like Dorothy Parker, he attended Harvard, which counts among its alumni other prominent members of Marquand's generation, such as T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Conrad Aiken, Alain Locke, Robert Sherwood, Sydney Heyward, Thomas Wolfe, E. E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, Countee Cullen, Itzok Isaac Granich (enrolled as a special student for a short period of time), and many more. Marquand cut his teeth on the editorial board of a student magazine, in his case *Lampoon* (Robert Benchley was a few years ahead). He went to war while still in college and saw some of the bloodiest battles in France, as did Sherwood, John Dos Passos, Archibald McLeish, Harry Crosby, Laurence Stallings, William March, and many others. After discharge he went to New York, as did almost everyone else. He worked for a while as a reporter (like Stevens, Hemingway, Charles Reznikoff, Ben Hecht, and Benchley) and as a copy writer in the burgeoning advertising industry (like Fitzgerald, Hart Crane, Dashiell Hammett, Malcolm Cowley, S. N. Behrman), until his popular short stories and serials in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, and other slicks brought to him a measure of financial security and professional renown in the early years of the Jazz Age.[5] Unlike his peers, though, his best work came relatively late in his career. *The Late George Apley* (1937) is a book about the parents of his generation. To them, this younger generation is an enigma. They have hopes and plans and ample advice for their sons and daughters, but these children never turn out the way they have anticipated. The title character, George Apley, is just one such perennially disappointed parent. In a letter he writes to his son John in 1928, on the occasion of his grandson's birth, Apley, a Boston Brahmin, speculates about what has created a gulf so wide and deep between his and his son's generations:

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> Have you ever stopped to think how great this material revolution has been? You have probably not done so any more than I, because we accept the obvious so easily. When I was a boy I went to bed by candlelight. The old candlesticks are still on the shelf by the cellar stairs, and later there were jokes about country bumpkins blowing out the gas. I washed out of a pitcher and a basin. Later there was a single zinc tub for the entire family. I remember how it surprised me even five years ago when a salesman demonstrated to me that it was quite possible to arrange modern plumbing facilities in a place like Pequod Island [the Maine camp site where the family vacations every summer]. The human voice can now reach around the world. It is a simple afternoon's diversion to drive eighty or ninety miles. Our two heroes, Byrd and Lindbergh, – by far the most hopeful, indeed to my mind the only hopeful, human products arising from this chaotic change, – have spanned the Atlantic Ocean . . . . There is no use reciting any more of the obvious. I have given reason enough why you should all be changed. This material change has made you all materialists, and yet it has rendered your grasp on reality uncertain. It has made you rely on the material gratification of the senses. It has made you worship Mammon and in this new material world everything comes too easily. Heat comes too easily and cold. Money comes too easily. Don't forget that it will go as easily too. Romance comes too easily, and success. We have all grown soft from this ease. Position changes too easily. Values shift elusively. When everything is totaled up we have evolved a fine variety of flushing toilets but not a very good world, if you will excuse the coarseness of the simile.[6]

On sundry issues the father, born in 1866, and the son, born in 1891, fail to see eye to eye. The son moves to New York City, as Marquand and his coevals all did, while the father stays in his mansion on Beacon Hill. The son does not bemoan but simply adapts to the decline of Boston and the rise of New York, while this change only sours and paralyzes the father. Their aesthetic tastes are at odds. The son enjoys new literary sensibilities; the father, while intrigued, cannot stomach them. He reads *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and reports to his son: "I am not a prude but I do not like it." The father sees the most fundamental generational gap yawn over the problem of how one responds to change *qua* change, as opposed to individual instances of change. The generation of the 1860s and the generation of the 1890s both encounter a host of modern inventions, mundane, "obvious," and yet transformative, that changed American life in their lifetimes. But they experience differently the new phase of modernization where inventions are soon followed by their better and more diversified versions, the age where change and rapid growth become the norm, the obvious. The father is born into the previous era when change and rapid growth were the exception, that is, something shocking and hence not so "obvious." George Apley

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sincerely believes that his generation is, in essence, no different from the first Apleys who arrived in New England in the early seventeenth century. For the last few generations, the social environment has remained more or less identical, decade in decade out, one tranquil century after another. Skeptics would point out that George Apley is projecting such unbroken continuity on the past, but there are plenty of reasons to be sympathetic to Apley. A man who was born a year after the Civil War's conclusion was able to recognize the life of a man who was born in 1800 as his own, but the generation of the 1890s who grew up with indoor plumbing, gas light (to be replaced by incandescent light in the 1920s), telephone, and automobile would find the world of their grandfathers dark, dirty, and dangerous beyond recognition. George Apley, a figure in whom the main protagonists of the following chapters should find some resemblance to their own parents, belongs to the generation, the only generation, that made the transition from the previous age of stability to the new age of perpetual revolution. And his children formed the first generation born into the era of which "chaotic change" is the defining characteristic.

A "chaotic change" or "incalculable change" of the magnitude that Apley reflects on does not come around so often. In fact, economic historians think that this particular age of change that came as American civilization took off in the late nineteenth century ended around the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, some of them even predict that a wholesale social transformation of that scale and disruptiveness will not be replicated for the foreseeable future.[7] When such an exceptional era of change does come, though, that inculcates in the *first* generation to be born into it a unique propensity. Its uniqueness is a product of the uniqueness of the condition under which the transmission of cultural heritage occurs from the previous generation to the first generation of the new era.

The ideal case of transmission is the one that involves no loss of heritage. A good example is George Apley's relationship with his ancestors. He fancies that an unbroken chain of precedents and their confirmations connects him to the first Apleys who immigrated to the New World. Meanwhile, the worst that can happen in transmission is a total loss of heritage. Although this kind of cultural death rarely occurs (except when a cultural tribe perishes without a trace or comes under rule of a foreign tribe), some approximation of it happened when the generation of the 1890s entered, year after year, into the existing population. Their fathers first encountered and then lived through the new age of change. Their lives were thoroughly modernized as their sons', and since they retained a memory of what the world was like before, their lives were in fact more disorienting than their offspring's.

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All the same, however, a whole body of norms, symbols, and customs that belonged to the preceding generations never abandoned George Apley and his generation. Already well into adulthood, they began to be bothered by evidence of the increasing disjunction between their belief system and the new world that was displacing the old during their lifetimes, but at that point, well past their formative years, it was too late for them to rebel and invent a new code of conduct, a new language of self-expression. And furthermore, it was this traditional belief system, whose obsolescence they were in denial about, that they attempted to pass down to their offspring, through formal education as well as much more effectively through informal means of habituation. The sons and daughters – that is, the generation of the 1890s – absorbed this residual mentality, to some extent. To some extent, because much of the transgenerational cultural transmission occurs unconsciously. Even in the 1920s, the era known for its iconoclasm, the generation of the 1890s kept around itself many taboos it did not know why it respected, many idols it did not know why it worshiped. However, by virtue of the fact that the younger generation was born into the new era and tended to take it to be a natural way of things, it perceived the whole set of established ways of doing and saying things to be unnatural. Thus began their fresh quest for a fresh system of values and expressions.

What this quest consisted in is hard to generalize. It varied from writer to writer. For many "modernistic" and "bohemian" writers tightly bound up with the idea of the 1920s in our collective memory, this quest entailed formal experiments (the focus of Chapters 3 and 4). As Chapter 2 relates, on the other hand, the best-selling middlebrow authors such as Edna Ferber (born in 1885) found a rich depository of topical materials in the bewildering contradictions, between character and personality, between commercialism and spirituality, which necessitated this quest in the first place. Chapter 23 reminds us that for many risk-taking publishers, editors, and authors, the quest led to legal battles over what was printable. Did some abstract, deep, and sparse structure underlie all these variegated responses? Here is Jean Toomer's answer, formulated in 1929:

> From whatever angle one views modern society and the various forms of contemporary life, the records of flux and swift changes are everywhere evident. Even the attitude which holds that man's fundamental nature has not altered during the past ten thousand years must admit the changes of forms and of modes which have occurred perhaps without precedent and certainly with an ever increasing rapidity during the life period of the now living generations. If the world is viewed through one or more of the various formulated interpretations of this period, or if one's estimate rests upon the

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> comparatively inarticulate records of day to day experience, the results have the common factor of change . . . . [T]he principles of cohesion and crystallization are being rapidly withdrawn from the materials of old forms, with a consequent break up of these forms, a setting free of these materials, with the possibility that the principles of cohesion and crystallization will recombine the stuff of life and make new forms.[8]

We actually do not know much about what "change" is. Philosophers, from Lucretius to Hegel to Bergson to Gilles Deleuze, thought their most important task was to conceptualize this vexing phenomenon. One moment, one thing happens to be something. Sometime later, that thing has become something else. What happens when something becomes something else? Toomer here wants to understand change in the terms drawn from chemistry: cohesion, crystallization, and recombination. Toomer thinks that the world is made up of atomic entities. They combine, disintegrate, and recombine. In times of slow change, they assume various forms or they sediment in various modes. What you see and handle are these atomic entities as they are fixed in these "forms" and "modes." Think of water. In everyday life, you do not manipulate hydrogen and oxygen. You do not even handle water as an amalgam of so many molecules. You utilize water in its three recognizable and manageable forms: gaseous, liquid, and solid. In abnormal times, however, atomic entities, "materials," are set free from their accustomed forms and modes. These forms and modes that have functioned as vessels to contain sloshy and formless masses of atoms break down, while new vessels are not at hand yet. The age whose "common factor" is change is the age when men and women confront without the mediation of forms and modes raw materials. It is a time when you are dying of thirst in the desert and the world hands you vials of hydrogen and oxygen.

Because this chemical analogy is still an abstract way to think about change, and because life is not, after all, a chemistry experiment, we might do well to find more concrete examples. Take the human body, for instance. The body, unlike actual atoms, comes with recognizable outlines and features. You think you know how to see the body. You think you know what to do with it. Until you encounter a nude body. That is when you realize that, in complex modern society, the naked body is as useless, unmanageable, and even unrecognizable as vials of hydrogen and oxygen are to the traveler in the desert. The body must be formalized one way or another. Its organs, limbs, attires, gestures, postures, and voices must cohere, combine, and crystalize into some functional, recognizable, meaning-bearing shape. The two photographs in Figures I.1 and I.2 visualize two ways of formalizing the body. The first picture shows Edith Wharton, born in 1862, the

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Figure I.1 Edith Wharton

most iconic female author of George Apley's generation. The second picture shows a Jazz Age idol, Edna St. Vincent Millay, born in 1892. This pairing visualizes the point I have made about the unprecedented speed of change in the new era into which the generation of the 1890s was born. Women today still dress like Millay, but no woman today dresses like Wharton. Things dramatically changed between Wharton and Millay, but things barely changed between Millay and us. The drastic contrast between the two pictures also usefully illuminates Toomer's point about how in the

Figure I.2 Edna St. Vincent Millay

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