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Edited by D. W. Harding, L. C. Knights and F. R. Leavis

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# SCRUTINY

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*Edited by*

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# THE AMERICAN CULTURAL SCENE

## (IV) THE NOVEL

I PROPOSE in this contribution to make a few observations about the contemporary American novel ; but I must disclaim at the outset any pretention of covering the subject. The production of fiction in America is a branch of big business which has developed to meet the demand of the largest reading public in the world ; and nobody but a professional reviewer could hope to achieve any adequate knowledge of the major trends and the more promising talents. The subject might be easier for the lay reader to handle if the main reviewing organs performed more adequately their function of guidance and discrimination ; but the process by which reputations are created is a very mysterious one, which appears to bear little relation to intrinsic merit. This article, therefore, will be concerned not with the most widely-read recent novels but only with those which, for one reason or another, this writer happens to have read.

In judging a novel there are two considerations which, at least for the present writer, are of primary importance. Literary value depends, in the first place, on the inherent quality of a writer's mind, as evidenced in the sincerity and freshness of his perceptions and his freedom from clichés. This quality reveals itself in the texture of a style, so that it is usually possible to recognize a writer of genuine talent by the reading of a single paragraph. Anybody whose style conveys this sense of original observation deserves to be read, no matter how many other deficiencies he may have. Writers, however, who have nothing but this inherent quality of perceptiveness finally disappoint their readers by their failure to develop. Continued growth requires a

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power to synthesize and evaluate experience—a power which is profoundly moral in the highest sense ; and as the faculty of perceptiveness reveals itself in style, so that of synthesis bears some relation to the novel's organic structure. To the extent that a novelist has mastered his experience, one might suggest, he will successfully perform his traditional function, that of exhibiting human character as it expresses itself in action and is itself modified by being acted upon. Failure to create complete and coherent characters and to present actions of human significance, on the other hand, would appear to indicate an incomplete moral understanding. Structural weaknesses in a novel, or the adoption of an artificial structure which is imposed upon the theme instead of developing out of it, are signs of fragmentary experience ; and writers whose experience remains fragmentary will, beyond a certain point, repeat themselves or disintegrate instead of continuing to develop.

Arrested development, as I have remarked on a previous occasion, is a striking characteristic of American literary careers ; among American novelists only Henry James grew into real maturity. Every half-dozen years produces a new crop of younger novelists, who disappear into obscurity before their work has fulfilled the hopes which it had originally encouraged. In 1920, for example, the accepted literary leaders were such writers as Winston Churchill and Joseph Hergesheimer, of whom the former is now totally, and the latter almost, forgotten. Within a few years the limelight was occupied by newcomers like Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson and by two older writers who were for the first time receiving full recognition, Theodore Dreiser and Willa Cather. In the later 'twenties appeared Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, whose best work was done before 1930, and John Dos Passos, who was to reach a zenith somewhat more slowly. In the 'thirties most of the major figures of the 'twenties were no longer discussed ; Dreiser published no novels after his *American Tragedy* ; Lewis, Anderson and Miss Cather continued to write, but their work deteriorated. Around 1933 there was a group of younger men who had written enough to be appraised and categorized—James T. Farrell, Robert Cantwell, Erskine Caldwell, and Edward Dahlberg, all of whom were politically of the Left ; there was also the isolated and meteoric figure of Thomas Wolfe. To-day Wolfe is dead, Dahlberg and Cantwell have published nothing for

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half a dozen years, Caldwell writes little, and only the work of Farrell has made any advance. Contrary to precedent, however, no promising younger generation has taken their places ; the past three or four years have been the emptiest period in the history of the American novel since before 1914. A few survivors from the past are still represented on publishers' lists, and a few figures have appeared who may prove to be important ; but there is no individual or group who can be regarded as exercising leadership.

Aesthetic disintegration, I have suggested, should probably be regarded as a symptom of moral confusion ; but the causes for it are usually to be found in society rather than in the individual. Experience remains fragmentary because there is no established social structure or accepted code of manners or generally-held body of moral beliefs which might serve as a standard for emotional integration and as a point of reference for the measurement of individual deviations. In Europe, as a result of a similar situation, the best twentieth-century writing has been concerned with moral exploration ; but this tendency has been relatively absent from American fiction. The only American novelists who can be regarded as having been engaged in a search for salvation are Sherwood Anderson and Waldo Frank ; and neither of them is comparable in importance to such figures as Gide and Mann and D. H. Lawrence. The main tendency in American fiction has been sociological ; it has been concerned with broad social forces, and with individuals only to the extent that they illustrate those forces. And although it has usually condemned modern society, it has either failed to define the values in terms of which the condemnation is made, as in the novels of Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, or has adopted as its only reference point the hope of a proletarian revolution. The inadequacy of the sociological approach, however, is that it necessarily excludes large areas of human experience. Marxism offers only an incomplete technique for moral integration because there are numerous experiences which it does not interpret or evaluate. And while the Marxist viewpoint achieves an appearance of integration only by omission, those writers who have not succumbed to Marxism and have presented a wider experience have been able to express it only as fragmentary and chaotic.

Of those novels written during the 'thirties which seem most likely to be remembered, the majority can be classified as socio-

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logical. One might mention, for example, the studies of the Jewish life of the New York slums in the novels of Daniel Fuchs, in Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, and in Edward Dahlberg's *From Flushing to Calvary*, in all of which the exceedingly sordid details of slum existence were brought into more vivid relief by the introduction of poetic overtones ; or Grace Lumpkin's description of southern mountaineers sucked into the factory system in *To Make My Bread* ; or Erskine Caldwell's fantasies on the sub-human lives of southern tenant farmers ; or two novels about Adirondack farmers by John Sanford, *The Old Man's Place* and *Seventy Times Seven*, both of which were written in a remarkably forceful, pungent and clear-cut prose, and the second of which was broadened, by an interesting use of symbols, into a commentary on American civilization as a whole. The only sociological novelists whose work has bulk as well as quality, however, are John Dos Passos and James T. Farrell ; and it is no accident that these were among the first Left-wing writers to repudiate the Communist Party. The paralysing effects of Communist tactics on literature are illustrated by the well-known case of one of the best of the younger novelists, who has been trying for six years to complete a book about the San Francisco general strike and who has been compelled to change his approach almost every year as a result of changes in the line of the party. Both Dos Passos and Farrell have been praised in the pages of *Scrutiny* : and both of them have virtues which are rare in the contemporary literature of Great Britain. On the American side of the Atlantic, however, their weaknesses become, perhaps, more conspicuous. Dos Passos's panoramic survey of American capitalist society is probably the biggest literary achievement of the 'thirties. It has, however, the deficiencies which are inherent in its method of approach. Its characters are two-dimensional, and few of them have experiences much above a physiological level ; instead of growing they merely repeat themselves ; and what happens to them is significant only by what it reveals of the society to which they belong. Since his trilogy Dos Passos has published only *The Adventures of a Young Man*, an attack on the Communist Party which is permeated with an extraordinary bitterness and which, though politically interesting, marks no literary advance. Farrell, a younger Dreiser, is a photographic realist whose chief gift is an accurate ear for American speech but

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who displays little sensitivity to subtleties of style and structure. After reading his Studs Lonigan trilogy one knew a certain segment of Chicago Irish society down to the minutest detail ; but though the trilogy was superb reportage, it was scarcely art. There was no conflict in it, since the protagonist was plainly doomed from the outset. Farrell's Danny O'Neill series, of which two volumes have appeared, *A World I Never Made* and *No Star is Lost*, is a more important work in that its scope is considerably broader and its characterization more varied ; but it displays the same defects.

The alternative to the sociological approach has been, in most cases, a rendering of experience without making any attempt to integrate or interpret it ; and if the one method results, after a certain level of technical proficiency has been reached, only in repetitiveness, the other leads to disintegration. One might, perhaps, cite in corroboration the case of Ernest Hemingway, who achieved success in his earlier books by the device of deliberately restricting himself to the simplest and most physiological of emotions but whose last novel, *To Have And Have Not*, was incoherent. Since, however, Hemingway's most recent short stories are among his best, it would be premature to dismiss him. A better example would be William Faulkner, who has, by the quality of his perceptiveness, a profoundly original talent but who never had a point of view, and whose stylistic tricks and preoccupation with meaningless acts of violence have, in his more recent books, become exaggerated to the point of absurdity. One could refer also to Thomas Wolfe's long autobiography, a kind of *Portrait of the Artist* rewritten in terms of Whitman's America, which had an undeniable power but which was merely a string of episodes without a theme, having no development or interpretation. A younger writer of a comparable kind is Frederick Prokosch, whose last book, *Night of the Poor*, has attracted some critical attention. *Night of the Poor*, like the same author's *Asiatics*, describes a journey, in this case across the United States ; and the protagonist undergoes a series of queer, dreamlike and often macabre experiences, which are described with considerable sensitivity but which do not lead anywhere or point to anything.

From such books it is often a relief to turn to avowedly commercial writers whose work is wholly derivative but who do, at least, write novels which have a structure, a theme, and a point of view.

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Louis Bromfield—to cite one example—could scarcely be called a writer of importance. His treatment of his characters is sentimental; and his attitude could best be described as a vulgarized version of that of Henry James, his favourite theme being the contrast of European sophistication with American middle-class solidity. But the technical virtuosity displayed in the construction of his novels makes one acutely aware of the absence of this quality in the work of writers who have more serious æsthetic pretensions.

From this point of view I wish to recommend two recent first novels by Southerners, Allen Tate's *The Fathers* and Robert Penn Warren's *Night Rider*, which, though inferior in some respects to some of the books which I have already mentioned, exhibit a much greater degree of integration. Each of them expresses a coherent moral attitude, which can admit nuances of individual emotion as well as broad social forces; and each of them has, in consequence, coherence of structure and theme, of a kind which has been lacking in most other novels of the 'twenties and 'thirties.

Of the two books *The Fathers* is in some ways a finer work. The texture of the style is much denser; the perceptiveness displayed in it is more subtle and more complex. But it is the work of a man who is primarily a poet and who continues to write metaphysical poetry when he turns to prose fiction. The novel, placed in Virginia at the outbreak of the Civil War, describes the disintegration of a Southern family living in accordance with its traditional ways under the impact of a young man whose violent and undirected energies and refusal to conform to the accepted norms of human conduct typify the newer forces in American industrial society. The weakness of *The Fathers*, as a novel, is that its elaborate philosophical and political overtones are a heavier weight than its structure of action and character can successfully carry. The fusion of symbol and fact is incomplete; and the actions of the protagonist, intelligible as long as they are interpreted symbolically, are not equally comprehensible in terms of individual character.

*Night Rider*, on the other hand, seems to me to come closer to what a good novel ought to be than any other book written by an American for a long time. It deals with an episode known as the Tobacco War which occurred in Kentucky early in this century. The tobacco farmers, exploited by the buyers' monopoly,

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formed an association in order to demand better prices ; and this association was gradually compelled to employ intimidation, arson and murder against those farmers who refused to join it. The central figure in the novel is a young lawyer who is drawn into the association by personal weaknesses rather than by his convictions and whose character gradually disintegrates under the strain of the terroristic activities in which he participates. The novel is notable, among other virtues, because of its author's exuberant pleasure in simple sensuous experiences—which has reminded some reviewers, with good reason, of Tolstoi—and because of his power to convey a man's personality through the quality of his speech. Mr. Warren's performance is not everywhere equal to his intentions. The revelation of character through action, and the analysis of the process of moral decay, are not always successful. The protagonist has a love affair which is supposed to mark a stage in his disintegration, but this is told, rather than shown, to us ; and the final scene, in which he is killed after attempting murder in order to satisfy a private grudge, appears to have been included only in order to bring the novel to some kind of conclusion. Mr. Warren has, however, the gifts of a born novelist ; and *Night Rider* is the kind of book which novelists ought to write if they are to develop into major talents. It is, moreover, refreshing to find a book about rural and small-town Americans in which the characters are human beings and not sub-human half-wits and perverts. Mr. Warren, one might also point out, has accomplished what the Marxist critics have demanded that novelists should do but what no American Marxist novelist has done with comparable success ; he has written a novel about a politico-economic conflict in which sympathies are enlisted on the side of the under-privileged.

H. B. PARKES.



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## ‘AS YOU LIKE IT’<sup>1</sup>

IT is a commonplace that Jaques and Hamlet are akin. But it is also a commonplace that Jaques is an intruder into *As You Like It*, so that in spite of the kinship the plays are not usually held to have much connection. I have begun to doubt whether not only *As You Like It* and *Hamlet*, but almost all the comedies and the tragedies as a whole are not closely connected, and in a way which may be quite important.

Recent criticism of Shakespeare has directed itself with profit upon the tragedies, the ‘problem plays’ and certain of the histories. The early comedies, on the other hand, have either been disparaged or entirely overlooked. Yet the same criticism owes part of its success to a notion of what it calls Shakespeare’s ‘integrity ;’ his manifold interests, it has maintained, being co-ordinated so as rarely to thwart, regularly to strengthen one another. Hence he was alert and active as few have been, while his writing commanded not part but the whole of his resources.

Such a notion seems sound and proves useful. Belief in an author’s integrity, however, ought to forbid the dismissal of any part of his work, at least its hasty dismissal. The comedies, to which he gave a number of years of his life, are no insignificant part of Shakespeare’s. If it is true that they shed no light on the tragedies nor the tragedies on them, it would seem he deserves credit for a unique dissipation rather than concentration of his powers.

It is of course comprehensible that the comedies should be shunned. To some readers they are less inviting than the tragedies, to all they are more wearisome when their study is begun. Not only are the texts in a state of comparative impurity, the form itself is impure. Being less serious than tragedy—this I am aware is disputed, but would suggest that the word has a number of meanings—being less serious than tragedy, comedy admits of interludes and sideshows ; further, the material for the sideshows is not infrequently such that it might be material for the comedy

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<sup>1</sup>The substance of a paper read to the Cambridge English Club.

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itself. Decision is important but not always easy whether or not it should be disregarded.

The desultory nature of the following notes may, I hope, be forgiven, partly because of complications such as these, partly because of contemporary distractions which leave no time for elaboration. I start with Jaques's melancholy, in respect of which alone he has been likened to Hamlet.

It is, I think, most accessible to study in his encounter with Rosalind at the beginning of Act IV. Having abundant leisure he needs a companion to while it away. 'I prethee, pretty youth,' he says, 'let me be better acquainted with thee.' But Rosalind, who has heard unfavourable reports, is by no means eager to comply: 'They say you are a melancholy fellow.' As for that, replies Jaques, his melancholy is at least sincere, for it is as pleasing to him as jollity to other men: 'I doe love it better then laughing.' But sincerity is irrelevant unless to deepen his offence. As there is an excess of laughter so there is of sadness which should not be pleasing to anybody:

'Those that are in extremity of either, are abominable fellows, and betray themselves to every moderne censure, worse then drunkards.'

The rebuke is no more than a rebuke of common sense. Your melancholy, objects Rosalind, is not justifiable merely because it is your melancholy, for it may be one of the things which, though they exist, ought not to do so. But the rebuke is none the less pertinent, common sense implying a minimum of alertness and Jaques being afflicted with languor. Either as cause or as consequence of his state he is blind and fails to see, or is stupid and fails to ponder obvious truths.

The force of the rebuke is to be noticed. From Shakespeare, mediæval rather than modern in this as other matters, drunkards receive no more than temporary tolerance: Falstaff is in the end cast off, Sir Toby beat about the coxcomb. And the respect which they receive is not even temporary. Wine and wassail make

. . . Memorie, the Warder of the Braine  
 . . . a Fume, and the Receipt of Reason  
 A Lymbeck only ;