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

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THE AMERICAN CULTURAL SCENE

(II) CRITICISM

THAT the history of literature in the United States has been largely a study in different types of frustration has become a critical commonplace. During the past quarter of a century it has had a vitality probably superior to that of the literature of any European nation ; and since its beginnings about a hundred years ago it has been capable of producing seminal ideas which, when transplanted into European soil, have often had an extraordinary influence. But what has never occurred in America is the normal and harmonious growth into maturity of a major talent. American literature has produced minor writers capable of perfection within a very limited range (Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson), writers of potential greatness thwarted and thrown off their balance by a lack of critical understanding and appreciation (Melville), mediocre writers swollen into the appearance of greatness by their mystical identification with Americanism (Emerson, Whitman), writers notable only for a perverse originality (Poe), writers with vitality but no cultural discipline (Mark Twain), and (the case with the majority of those now living) writers of limited scope who cultivate a single theme or a single stylistic technique and who then repeat themselves as often as their public will tolerate it. But with the exception of (perhaps) two expatriates, it has never had a literary master of the first rank.

The impediments to the intellectual life in America have been diagnosed so frequently during the past quarter of a century that an attitude of hostility to all that America represents became, for a period, more or less *de rigueur* among persons who liked to consider themselves as intellectuals ; and it is only within the last three or four years, since the growth of Fascism in Europe, that a patriotic reaction has set in. What is sometimes called the American Renaissance, whose beginnings can be dated about the year 1912,

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was mainly a movement of self-criticism. Its most influential spokesman in its early days was Van Wyck Brooks, who published a number of essays deploring the lack of sound intellectual standards and whose attacks on the complacent provincialism which then characterized American cultural life were seconded by such writers as Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, and the late Randolph Bourne. During the cynical 'twenties, while half a dozen literary movements came and went, there was a prolonged assault on every front against the traditional ideals and institutions. The deficiencies of American culture were ascribed in turn to too much democracy and to too little democracy, to too much emotional repression and to too little emotional repression, to contempt for European standards and to subservience to Europe. Literary radicals devoted themselves to undermining every form of national complacency and to dissecting in long and dreary sociological novels every aspect of national life ; while academic conservatives, anxious to rationalize their fear of emotional freedom and their inability to understand the newer literary forms, rallied behind that eccentric Puritan revival known as Humanism. Finally, with the onset of the depression, most of these forms of protest became canalized into the left-wing political movement, and it was decided that the fundamental reason for all the intellectual maladies of America was the capitalist system.

The accomplishments of the Renaissance were by no means despicable. Though it produced no great writer, it created a very luxuriant literary undergrowth. Its improvements of literary technique were considerable. It stimulated a popular interest in literature which is probably more widely diffused than in most European countries, and it elevated the general level of popular taste—as can be seen by contrasting any list of recent best-sellers with their prototypes of thirty years ago. It remains true, nevertheless, that frustration is the usual fate of the American writer, although it may take different forms than in the past. The democratization of the literary life is not an unmixed advantage, since writers who might have flourished in a relative obscurity are now exposed to the temptation of seeking enormous sales and to the need for winning and retaining the applause of metropolitan reviewers—a situation which accounts for the disappointing development of a number of promising careers. And while the New York

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press finds masterpieces among the mediocre and the immature, the more vigorous talents are under constant pressure both from their own consciences and from the Marxist critics to become Marxist propagandists. But whatever may be the political merits of a revolutionary programme, there is no doubt that the attempt to arouse the class consciousness of the proletariat and to follow all the deviations of the party line has had a paralysing effect on writers, who have continued to be productive only when (like James T. Farrell) they have escaped into Trotskyism or (like Dos Passos) they have abandoned their allegiance to any specific political programme. In spite of these instances the pressure to adhere to the orthodox party ideology is very considerable, particularly in the case of writers who cannot count on a large middle-class public; and those who (like Waldo Frank) have identified themselves with the Communist movement and have afterwards left it are apt to find themselves without any audience at all.

The main cause for the frustration of the literary career in America is to be sought, no doubt, in the prevalent tastes and standards of criticism. Of talent and the desire to cultivate it there has been no lack; but its healthy and harmonious development requires the appropriate critical environment. And by criticism in this sense is meant not merely the analysis of what writers have actually done or set out to do—the task of the historian rather than the critic of literature—but the statement of what appropriately could or should be attempted in literature, of its general scope and function, and of its proper role in relation to the problems of social and individual morality. Criticism of this kind is prior to creation and serves to guide it; and the practice of it necessarily involves a philosophical or religious view of the nature of man and of civilized living, and—if its literary fruits are to be healthy—is incompatible with any doctrines of mechanism or determinism. The importance of this kind of criticism, and the lack of it in twentieth-century America, has been emphasized in a recent book by Mrs. Colum, *From These Roots*, which traces the prevalent tendencies of modern European and American literature back through the French and English critics, Taine and Saint-Beuve, Wordsworth and Coleridge, to their origins in Lessing and Herder. As a simple and lucid introduction to the Romantic and

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post-Romantic movements—Mrs. Colum does not aspire to do more than this—the book can be strongly recommended. It is of particular interest in illustrating the fact that a new kind of literary creation is accompanied and preceded by a new kind of criticism, and because of Mrs. Colum's European background, which enables her to see American characteristics in perspective and to show how the ideas which appear as novelties in the New York of the nineteen-thirties were commonplaces in the Paris of two or three generations ago.

If American culture is viewed in the broad perspectives which Mrs. Colum's study suggests, it may be doubted whether American critics have ever given writers the kind of guidance which they need or whether the literary reformers have ever been sufficiently fundamental in their diagnoses. Roughly speaking, critical programmes have followed two main tendencies: American writers have been urged to create an American literature, something which would be different from any European literature and which would express the democratic greatness and destiny of the New World; or they have been expected to set themselves up as religious or political reformers, calling attention to the evils of the national life and proclaiming a way of salvation. The great exemplar of the former of these tendencies was Emerson, whose faith in America was imbued with a vague mystical belief in divine guidance derived from a fusion of his ancestral Puritanism with German Romantic philosophy. What Americanism means remains, however, obscure; it is a mysticism almost devoid of content, and definable only by negatives. In practice, it is apt to mean that literature should be formless, gargantuan and all-inclusive because America is like that (as in the poetry of Whitman, or the novels of Thomas Wolfe), or that some indefinable mystical emotion should attach itself to the American soil and the achievements of American technology (as in the poetry of Hart Crane). The latter tendency—the belief that the artist should be a reformer—has been the dominant motif in criticism for the last quarter of a century. It was the favourite idea of Van Wyck Brooks, whose destructive analyses of the American cultural scene showed a remarkable insight but who apparently believed that what was needed to regenerate America was the appearance of a number of American H. G. Wellses. Literature, in other words, was to be an instrument of the will—

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a conception which the more influential writers of the last generation have faithfully endeavoured to realize. To what concrete ends the will was to be directed has, however, remained obscure. The school of Van Wyck Brooks has been admirable in pointing out to what extent American life fell short of civilized standards ; but of what civilization itself consists has remained undefined.

These critical tendencies should perhaps be regarded as an expression of those same forces whose cruder manifestations they have opposed ; American critics, in other words, have not been sufficiently radical. The three factors which have had the greatest influence in creating the American psychology are the Puritan view of life, the conquest of the American continent, and the industrial system. Their combined effect has been to create a hypertrophy of the will, which results in the domination rather than the qualitative appreciation of an environment. The American is concerned not with the sympathetic understanding of objects, as qualitative wholes, but with the abstraction from the real world of those aspects of it which can be used. Reality loses its sensuous fullness, and becomes a complex of abstract and bloodless lines of force. From this tendency can be traced all the more conspicuous traits of the American, or—more accurately, perhaps—of the Anglo-Saxon American of the Northern states: his peculiarly rootless and, as it were, disembodied intellectuality and idealism, which is combined with a lack of sensuous richness and of strong emotional attachments, his pragmatic and utilitarian philosophy, his restless energy, and his inability to convey in his physical environment any sense of harmony, of mutual adjustment, between man and nature. These characteristics, which are almost the negation of the æsthetic attitude, reappear in American literature. America, as the mystic entity postulated by Emerson and Whitman, becomes a bloodless abstraction consisting not of concrete specific places and people but of names on a map and undifferentiated specimens of the genus Man. The literature of social exposure and reform is concerned not with things in themselves but with usable aspects of them. Its trend is always towards satire, and instead of drawing human beings in their totality, it depicts them as grotesque or sub-human and as the mechanistic victims of social forces—tendencies from which very few of the American novelists of the last quarter of a century have been immune. What American

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literature requires from its critics, therefore, is not so much any re-orientation of the will, any re-definition of American ideals, as simply the assertion of the æsthetic attitude as an independent mode of apprehension, having as its function the defining of the real world in its sensuous concreteness. And those contemporary writers who have set out to record the American scene rather than to change it—for example, William Carlos Williams—have probably contributed more to the growth of an indigenous culture than all the prophets of the mystical America and the proletarian revolution.

The past two decades have, nevertheless, been a time of increasing critical maturity ; and in spite of the efforts of the Humanists and the Marxists to use literature in behalf of specific programmes of moral and political improvement, there are a growing number of writers capable of judging literature by the insight which it gives rather than by the kind of activity which it is likely to promote. As proof of this can be cited the large body and range of criticism contained in a recent anthology edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel, *Literary Opinion in America*. This gives a very adequate representation of recent critical trends, and contains a number of those scrupulous and detailed studies of individual authors which were stimulated by such magazines as *The Hound and Horn* and *The Symposium* and which have been undertaken by such writers as R. P. Blackmur, Philip Blair Rice, William Troy, and Mr. Zabel himself.

What emerges both from this anthology and from other recent books is the inability of those who approach literature in social and political terms to provide any genuinely æsthetic guidance. Marxist reviewers in such organs as *The New Masses* proclaim, of course, that the writer must arouse the revolutionary consciousness of the masses ; but Marxist critics who are sensitive to literary values usually confine themselves to elucidating what actually has been done by writers in the past. The Marxist approach may account for the content of a work of art, but it cannot say what gives that content artistic value. The two ablest left-wing critics are, no doubt, Mr. Edmund Wilson and Mr. Kenneth Burke, of whom the former is not a Communist but would probably call himself a Marxist, while the latter is not an orthodox Marxist but supports the Communist Party. Mr. Wilson writes a better prose than any other American critic, and his study of the symbolist

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movement, *Axel's Castle*, is probably the finest piece of literary history which has been written in America. His most recent volume, *The Triple Thinkers*, a collection of scattered essays on such subjects as Pushkin, Housman, Shaw, James, and Marxism and Literature, exhibits the same virtues and the same deficiencies; it contains admirable examinations of authors of the past but offers little critical guidance to authors of the future. The implication is always that writers should be politically conscious, but how their political intelligence ought to express itself in their work remains somewhat obscure. Mr. Burke once wrote a book called *Counter-Statement*, in which he proclaimed a necessary opposition between the writer and whatever forces were socially dominant, and made a valuable study of literary form in terms of the psychology of the audience. Since adopting Communism, he has published *Attitudes Towards History*, which may be described as an anatomy of the non-rational factors in social change. By studying the social development of western civilization in terms of its effects in the emotional development of individuals, he is able to co-ordinate social and literary criticism, and to provide a general framework within which different authors can be placed. Reversing the usual Marxist procedure, he argues not that literature should express political forces but that coming political changes express themselves first in literature; art is a social barometer which indicates the rise and fall of social systems. Mr. Burke has an unusually wide range of information, and a very rich, though a very perverse, mind. He can be trusted to propound ideas which would not have occurred to anyone else, but their value is often dubious. Like other left-wing writers, however, he has become a historian rather than a critic of literature.¹

For a criticism which deals with the future of literature and not merely with its past, one must turn to writers who are concerned with æsthetic experience itself. Of these the most important are Mr. Yvor Winters and Mr. Allen Tate.

¹One might also cite the case of Van Wyck Brooks, who emerged from a long retirement to produce, in *The Flowering of New England*, an elaborate reconstruction of New England culture between 1820 and 1860 which contained no critical judgments whatever.

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Mr. Winter's two volumes, *Primitivism and Decadence* and *Maule's Curse*, are examinations of contemporary poetry and of certain leading American writers of the nineteenth century, and are the beginnings of an ambitious project for a reevaluation of all American literature. For Mr. Winters' æsthetic creation is in itself a moral act in that it means the apprehension and ordering of emotional experience; a complete mastery of the experience will be accompanied by a corresponding mastery of the technique of communication, so that literary form and metric acquire a kind of moral significance. For Mr. Winters' most modern poetry is decadent, its obscurity and the weaknesses of its formal organization indicating an inability to achieve a full grasp of the experience which is being communicated. In *Maule's Curse* he traces a similar deficiency in the New England group of writers and finds its ultimate cause in the moral obscurantism of Puritanism. As a statement of critical principles Mr. Winters' work deserves wide attention. That it has not received that attention, and that reviewers have consistently misunderstood it, is chiefly because of the eccentricities of Mr. Winters' critical practice. His judgments of particular authors, which are always boldly defiant of conventional opinions, are often convincing, but have one outstanding weakness: an inability to distinguish between writers who achieve formal mastery through a genuine mastery of experience and those who use the traditional forms but never grapple with experience at all. Thus Mr. Winters admires Robert Bridges, Sturge Moore, and a lady called Mrs. Daryush (a daughter of Robert Bridges) and sets them above writers whose technical failures are caused by a genuine attempt to extend the boundaries of poetic experience. Mr. Allen Tate, on the other hand, is probably the most reliable critic of poetry now writing in the United States, and some of the studies of particular poets in his *Reactionary Essays* (a book which was handicapped by its unnecessarily provocative title) can be regarded as definitive. The most important essay in that volume is, however, *Three Types of Poetry*, in which he distinguishes between poetry which aims simply at an imaginative grasp of the totality of experience, poetry which makes itself an instrument of the practical will (and which must therefore allegorize, and abstract from, experience), and poetry which, identifying the abstractions made by the practical

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will with reality and finding them unsatisfying, reacts into romantic individualism, irony or despair. During the past two centuries, according to Mr. Tate, poetry has belonged predominantly to the second and third types, but when imaginative writers attempt to provide incentives to action they are missing their true function.

Mr. Winters and Mr. Tate approach literature from different angles, but their fundamental beliefs are similar; and those beliefs are shared by a considerable group of writers, most of whom live either in the South or in California. One might, for example, cite Mr. John Crowe Ransom (who once wrote an admirable book about religion called *God Without Thunder*), the author of *The World's Body*. Long immersion in an academic environment appears, however, to have had the most unfortunate effects on Mr. Ransom's style, and his critical ideas, which are similar to Mr. Tate's, are so encrusted in a belle-lettristic archness and coyness that it is a laborious task to disentangle them.

The critical approach represented by these men is peculiarly valuable because it means that, for almost the first time in America, literature is being studied as an æsthetic creation and not merely as an incentive to some particular kind of activity, moralistic or political, or as an expression of some nationalistic ideal. This assertion of æsthetic autonomy would appear, nevertheless, to have moral and political implications; a belief in æsthetic autonomy involves a belief in moral autonomy, and such a belief is incompatible with any mechanistic or deterministic view of human nature, and perhaps with any collectivist political programme. It raises the problem, moreover, of the relationship, and possible inter-dependence, between the imaginative apprehension of experience in poetry and the analogous apprehension achieved through religious doctrine. Mr. Tate has been especially concerned with these questions, and would define himself as a distributivist and a traditionalist and, probably, as sympathetic to organized religion. But though a thorough-going revaluation of the whole of the American way of life is implicit in the attitudes of that group of Southerners to which he belongs, it has not yet achieved any clear or definitive formulation.

H. B. PARKES.