

## *Introduction: History and literary history*

“If it’s not art, it’s at least history.”<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Hart Benton

Bounded by the traumas of the Wall Street Crash and the attack on Pearl Harbor, the period that historians refer to as the long decade of the thirties is a narrative anchored in the economic and political emergency of those years. With the exception only of the Civil War, Americans faced in the Depression the most wrenching and divisive domestic crisis in their history. An economic structure that had seemed unshakable simply collapsed, and neither experts nor ordinary citizens were ever sure why.

Theories have multiplied, and the argument continues to this day. The Depression was caused by the economic imbalances and war debts imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, by an unusually sharp decline in the business cycle, by stock market speculation and irresponsible purchases on margin, by the market’s crash, by the unequal distribution of income, by high tariffs and other restrictions on international trade, by agricultural overproduction, by the counter-productive efforts of many governments to balance national budgets, by some or all of these in numberless combination.<sup>2</sup>

The tremors of what Edmund Wilson called “the great earthquake” shook every American city and village. Individual stock prices fell by as much as 90 percent; the market as a whole lost two-thirds of its value.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Emily Braun and Thomas Branchick, *Thomas Hart Benton: The America Today Murals* (Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art, 1985), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> For a survey of these debates, see the first two chapters of John Garraty, *The Great Depression: an Inquiry into the Causes, Course, and Consequences of the The Worldwide Depression of the Nineteen-Thirties, as Seen by Contemporaries and in the Light of History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986). Among the scores of books on the Depression, this volume is indispensable for its consistently international and comparative focus. For a useful and more recent comparative analysis, though limited to three countries, see Wolfgang Schivelbush, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt’s America, Mussolini’s Italy, and Hitler’s Germany, 1933–1939*, Jefferson Chase, trans. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

Between October 1929 and March 1933, more than 5,000 banks failed, and 600,000 homeowners saw their mortgages foreclosed. The worst drought in a century turned much of the Midwest to dust: 35 million acres of cropland had been completely destroyed, and another 100 million acres – an area the size of Pennsylvania – lost their topsoil.

By 1932, the third year of the Depression, more than 10 million persons were unemployed – almost 20 percent of the work force. In big-industry towns, such as Chicago and Detroit, the numbers out of work reached nearly 50 percent – 624,000 in Chicago alone. Many of those who kept their jobs were reduced to working part-time, or on split shifts. “Investors had ceased to invest and workers had ceased to work.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing like this level of unemployment had ever been seen in the USA before, not even in the long slump following the Panic of 1893, which had lingered through the last years of the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, for nearly a decade, the devastated economy responded only fitfully to New Deal reform programs. The severity and duration of the Depression seemed to define it as an essentially new phenomenon. Though the cyclical nature of the market economy had brought regular alternations of prosperity and contraction – boom and bust as they were universally called – the failure of the 1930s appeared to be more systemic, more fundamental, and more intractable than anything in previous American or indeed global experience. British economist John Maynard Keynes said the nearest parallel to the hard times of the thirties “was called the Dark Ages and it lasted 400 years.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, however, the situation was more complicated. Not everyone lost a job, and not all the indicators were doom-laden. The unemployed were a minority of the work force, even in the worst years of the Depression, and the majority of those who lost jobs found new ones. “It is important to keep in mind,” John Garraty reminds us, “that during the Great Depression, people who had full-time jobs were usually better off, at least economically, than they had been before 1929” (*The Great Depression*, p. 86) because the cost of living fell faster than wages. Even in the ravaged Dust Bowl, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children – two-thirds of the 1930 population – clung to their homesteads.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 133, 163, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), pp. 9–10. According to Egan, John Steinbeck told only “part of the story.”

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Despite the hard times, “[b]y 1937, fifty-two million people in fifteen million cars were spending an estimated five billion dollars on motor travel.” To be sure, migrants like Steinbeck’s Joads, seeking escape from misery, drove some of those cars, but recreational tourism increased notably during the decade.<sup>6</sup> Catering to those tourists, thousands of new motels sprouted next to roads and highways across America in the thirties.<sup>7</sup> Commercial air traffic increased twelve-fold in the 1930s, reaching one billion passenger miles by the end of the decade.<sup>8</sup> Book sales slumped, but millions of Americans spent tens of millions of dollars on movie tickets.

Available data indicate that the health of Americans did not diminish during the 1930s, and the trend toward increased longevity continued: life expectancy rose from 57.1 years in 1929 to 63.7 years in 1939 (Garraty, *The Great Depression*, pp. 86, 104). In December 1933, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company placed a full-page ad in *Current History* and other publications, headlined: “The United States of America enjoyed better health and had a lower death rate during the year 1932 and in 1933 than ever before in its history.” To give a single local example, of added significance because it is taken from the South: statistics published in Georgia in 1939 showed that the death rate from malaria in that impoverished state had declined markedly in the preceding ten years.<sup>9</sup>

While these encouraging reference points do not subtract from the scale of anxiety and deprivation during the thirties, they usefully suggest that the decade encompassed a striking diversity of experience. Some Americans recoiled in disappointment and anger, and sought alternative structures and explanations. At the same time, others embraced all the more fervently the essential rightness and continued relevance of traditional national propositions. One study indicated that only a few citizens reacted with either apathy or protest: “Established values and desires persisted,” even among the unemployed.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd Morris, *Not So Long Ago* (New York: Random House, 1949), p. 386. For an informative history of the subject, see Marguerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Bill Stott, “Introduction” to Archie Hobson, ed., *Remembering America: A Sampler of the WPA American Guide Series* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 2. Hobson’s anthology includes upwards of 500 selections from the Guides.

<sup>8</sup> Sean D. Cashman, *America in the Twenties and Thirties: the Olympian Age of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), pp. 30–31.

<sup>9</sup> *Georgia: A Guide to Its Towns and Countryside* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1939), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Terry A. Cooney, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), p. 5.

Thus, while many of the victims of the Depression directed their anger toward the government or “conditions,” sometimes to the point of violence, others blamed themselves. As many contemporary observers pointed out, a commitment to self-reliance survived among countless men and women who continued to believe in the efficacy of initiative and hard work and considered poverty a proof of moral turpitude. Since up to a quarter of the work force was idled, such a belief could engender enormous emotional pain.

Many of those who lost jobs or homes expressed feelings of “guilt and self-recrimination” (Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 174). In doing the travel and research for *My America* (1938), Louis Adamic interviewed scores of people who felt personally responsible for their unemployment and impoverishment.<sup>11</sup> Journalist Lorena Hickok, reporting to Harry Hopkins on the conditions she was observing, quoted a young woman who refused either aid or encouragement: “Oh, don’t bother . . . If, with all the advantages I’ve had, I can’t make a living, I’m just no good, I guess.”<sup>12</sup> On his travels around the country in the mid-thirties, Sherwood Anderson met a man who told him: “I failed. I failed. It’s my own fault.”<sup>13</sup> From Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) to its host of imitators, Depression-era books and articles insisted that “failure is personal, not social, and success can be achieved by some adjustment, not in the social order but in the individual personality.”<sup>14</sup>

Blaming themselves or blaming the system, “Middletown Faces Both Ways.” The title of the final chapter of Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown in Transition* (1937) summarized the national mood. Every revolutionary manifesto can be matched by a call to re-affirmation. In 1932, Malcolm Cowley, Langston Hughes, Edmund Wilson, and the other intellectuals who published *Culture and the Crisis* demanded a revolution and supported William Z. Foster, the Communist candidate for President. A couple of years later, on the other hand, regionalist painter Grant Wood, in his *Revolt Against the City* (1935), argued, “during boom times conservatism is a thing to be ridiculed, but under unsettling conditions it becomes a virtue.”<sup>15</sup> Wood detected, in the opinion of one

<sup>11</sup> Louis Adamic, *My America, 1928–1938* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), pp. 283ff.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, eds., *One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> See Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> Grant Wood, *Revolt against the City* (Iowa City: Clio Press, 1935), p. 29.

scholar, a “powerful yearning for security” as the dominant mood of the time.<sup>16</sup> Looking back on the 1930s from a village called Grafton in upstate New York, ex-Communist Granville Hicks decided that the Depression had “changed no one’s views,” in part because the majority of his neighbors understood the slump to be a “natural catastrophe, in no wise different from a drought or a hurricane.”<sup>17</sup>

Those diverse understandings led to diverse imaginative expressions, in effect a debate over the meaning of America. The task of the pages that follow is to provide a through line for exploring that rich heterogeneity, by tracing one of the main subjects to which the decade’s writers turned again and again: the past. The writing of the 1930s comprises an extensive and complex engagement with the past, in myriad forms: the memoirs and biographies of influential individuals, and the factual and imaginary histories of the United States and other nations.

By mapping the contours of the thirties’ engagement with the past, I propose to document the decade’s extraordinary intellectual range. The search for what was frequently called “a usable past” reached into government programs, scholarship, and popular culture.<sup>18</sup> The 1930s, after all, were the years in which the National Archives opened, most of the volumes of the *Dictionary of American Biography* were published, the Historical Records Survey and the Historic American Buildings Survey were initiated, and the Index of American Design was established, tasked with recording the artifacts of the nation’s past.<sup>19</sup> The twelve-volume

<sup>16</sup> Steven Biel, *American Gothic: A Life of America’s Most Famous Painting* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 109. Numerous historians have concluded that “security” was the irreducible central theme of the New Deal, whatever the apparent incoherence and right and left turns of Franklin Roosevelt’s particular choices.

<sup>17</sup> Granville Hicks, *Small Town* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004 [1946]), pp. 117–118.

<sup>18</sup> Van Wyck Brooks first used the durable phrase “usable past,” in *America’s Coming of Age* (1915). As that date accurately indicates, the 1930s were not the first years in which Americans turned toward the past as a subject for study and imaginative exploration. Hawthorne’s novels have been described with the same term. My point about the rediscovery of the past in the thirties is two-fold: (1) the turbulent circumstances of the Depression stimulated an especially vigorous engagement with history, which is worth recovering because (2) since the end of the 1930s, decades of scholarly and critical absorption in the political literature of the decade has tended to obscure this large and informative body of retrospective texts.

<sup>19</sup> Two major works of historical restoration – or re-creation – were also completed in the 1930s. The first phase in the rebuilding of Colonial Williamsburg, announced by its patron, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in 1928, was accomplished in the 1930s. Another Rockefeller-funded project, the Cloisters, with its thousands of medieval artifacts housed in a reconstructed European monastery, opened in Manhattan in 1938.

*History of American Life*, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, appeared in installments from 1928 through 1944.

Americans, in Eric Foner's view, "have always looked to history for a sense of national cohesiveness," especially in times of crisis, when cohesiveness is under siege.<sup>20</sup> It is not surprising that many Americans turned to the past in response to the turbulence of the Depression decade. The historian David Lowenthal has argued that the recovered past – even if recovered only in the form of mythology – "legitimizes and fortifies the present order against subsequent mishap or corruption."<sup>21</sup>

These statements are helpful, though both claim too much and distinguish too little. While the retrospection of American writers in the 1930s was sometimes nostalgic, they frequently revived the past to criticize American values and institutions. In historical novels, poems and films, biographies and autobiographies, historical monographs and folklore studies, in painting, music, and photography, men and women of the thirties discovered a kaleidoscope of pasts shaped by a wide variety of political and cultural commitments. Some of these writers considered themselves radical, others conservative; still others were uninterested in politics at all. The conflicting pasts offered vehicles to defend competing views of the present and future.

Thus, to see the thirties exclusively as "the red decade" is to reduce a complex palette to a monotone. In this book, I want to argue against the current, widely shared scholarly assumption that the 1930s were largely characterized in cultural terms by Left aesthetics and politics. In fact, the United States in the 1930s was – as it has always been, and despite the pressures of the Depression – a place of enormous ideological and imaginative complexity, and the uses to which writers put the past can assist in recovering the heterogeneity of intellectual life in the decade. The French writer André Maurois, after several visits to the USA in the thirties, summarized his "total impression" of the country at the end of the decade:

This is an immense country made up of overpopulated islands sprinkled among the prairies, the forests, and the deserts. Among these islets of skyscrapers there is hardly any common life. The newspapers of Minneapolis are not read in Cincinnati. The great man of Tulsa is unknown in Dallas. The Negro of Georgia, the Swede of Minnesota, the Mexican of San Antonio, and the German

<sup>20</sup> Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), p. 150.

<sup>21</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 41.

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of Chicago, Marquand's patricians, and Steinbeck's tramps are all citizens of the United States, but there is slight resemblance among them.<sup>22</sup>

A number of the texts discussed in this book, apart from their contribution to American diversity, are worth recovering and reading on their own terms. Questions of literary value and valuation have become a rich and vexed subject in the past several decades. Are literary reputations constructed by the collaboration of critics, publishers, academics, and editors, or do they rise above fashion and conspiracy by asserting their own eminence? I am less interested in that argument than in the opportunity to describe a more populous artistic 1930s, more inclusive and hence more interesting.

Consequently, *The American 1930s* includes prize-winning books and bestsellers, novels as well as poetry, and quite a few volumes of non-fiction as well. The relevance of so much of the decade's writing to my argument can be taken as a simple but serviceable measure of the vital currency of the past in the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> Beyond that, as William St. Clair has recently reminded us, literary history should take at least some account of "books that were actually read, and were admired in their generation."<sup>24</sup> Especially for works not likely to be familiar to most readers, I have tried to provide enough detail to make their diverse purposes and achievements clear. The pages that follow offer a set of what might be called case studies in the literary thirties.

Some years ago, Peter Novick offered an important admonition about the writing of history:

As cultural historians multiply, cultural epochs get cut finer and finer: where once we had the Age of the Baroque and the *Siècle des Lumières*, we now have characterizations of the culture of decades: "iconoclasm" for the 1920s; "radicalism" for the 1930s. But there was no shortage of superstition in the Age of Reason; plenty of traditionalism and complacency in the decades of iconoclasm and radicalism.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> André Maurois, *Etats-Unis 39: Journal d'un voyage en Amérique*. The passage cited is printed in Oscar Handlin, ed., *This Was America: True Accounts of People and Places, Manners and Customs, as Recorded by European Travels to the Western Shore in the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 566. No translator is credited. Maurois's catalogue sounds a bit like Mark Twain's demand, in his *Essays on Paul Bourget*, that "the native novelist" must attend to the villages of each region and state, along with the lives of Indians, miners, Irish, Germans, Italians, Swedes, Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, and Jews, not excluding the moonshiners, the train robbers, the "Idiots and Congressmen." The serious point that both writers were emphasizing is the irreducible diversity of the nation's people, and the need for novelists – and their critics – to attend to as much of that diversity as possible.

<sup>23</sup> I have included a list of bestselling and prize-winning work in the appendix.

<sup>24</sup> See William St. Clair, "But What Did We Actually Read?," *TLS* (May 12, 2006), pp. 13–15.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 133.



Or, in the more vernacular formulation of journalist Robert Bendiner, whose family lived a hand-to-mouth existence through the American thirties: “It has always seemed to me fatuous to fix a single label on a whole decade – as though the Nineties were gay for immigrant ladies in the garment sweatshops of Manhattan or the Twenties stood for hot jazz in the mind of Calvin Coolidge.”<sup>26</sup>

These comments usefully warn against the reduction of entire decades to two or three hackneyed adjectives. At the same time, the advantages of working within the confines of a relatively brief period such as the 1930s are substantial: among them precisely the opportunity to enrich our understanding by documenting the breadth and even the internal contradictions of the decade. Part of that cultural breadth consists in the patterns of continuity that link the 1930s to the history that had come before. As Oscar Cargill shrewdly observed, many years ago, “nothing precisely ceased or began on October 29, 1929.”<sup>27</sup> By connecting the 1930s to earlier American pasts, this book provides a fuller description of the cultural life of the Depression decade. That in turn offers at least the beginnings of an alternative literary history of the 1930s.

The focus is on fiction and non-fiction writing, but I also include some comment on the decade’s history painting, as a way of further widening the scope of the analysis. The 1930s was among the busiest of all American decades for the production of historical pictures: highbrow and lowbrow, populist and elitist, serious and comic. Such works demonstrate that painters, like writers, found in the past a means of responding to the dislocations of the present moment.

Let me conclude these preliminary comments with a final distinction. Some of the texts I shall be discussing, for example the novels of John Dos Passos and the plays of Clifford Odets, deployed history in direct response to the political and economic events of the 1930s. Other historically engaged work, for instance the novels of William Faulkner and the plays of Eugene O’Neill, would probably have been produced whether the Depression had occurred or not. The point is that all the novels, plays, and paintings here contributed to the thick texture of “pastness” that helped to define the decade, and they participated thereby in the debate over the meaning of America.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Bendiner, *Just Around the Corner: A Highly Selective History of the Thirties* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), p. xi.

<sup>27</sup> Oscar Cargill, *Ideas on the March* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. xi. Cargill’s remark has particular relevance to the subject of this study. The widespread interest in the past that writers of the Depression decade displayed intensified and expanded the surge of interest in American history – one result of postwar nationalism – that had also marked the writing of the 1920s.



## CHAPTER I

*Farewell to the twenties*

For the 1930s, the twenties were the years of the near past, and they were instantly codified and mythologized. An unsigned editorial in the January 1930 issue of *The Bookman* announced that “it is apparent that the ’twenties had a flavor and a spirit of their own, a composite personality that will figure in history as a distinct entity, a ‘period.’” The prevailing images captured the decade’s alleged glamour, ill-distributed but undeniable affluence, and assorted revolts – chiefly against the village and sexual repression. But onlookers of all persuasions also welcomed the end of what they considered an era of triviality and excess.

Speaking from the left, Edmund Wilson wrote that he found the economic perturbations “not depressing but stimulating. One couldn’t help being exhilarated at the sudden unexpected collapse of that stupid gigantic fraud.”<sup>1</sup> Albert Jay Nock, a libertarian gadfly and incorrigible snob who had written influentially on subjects from education to religion, made much the same point from a different direction. In a diary entry in 1932, Nock noted: “The Dark Ages must have been a grand gorgeousness of gaiety and sparkle compared with the intellectual life of the last fifteen years.”<sup>2</sup>

The Depression’s reconstruction of the 1920s began with the First World War, which had shaped many of the characteristic gestures and moods of that earlier decade. In four years of stalemated carnage, the war had killed 10 million men, women, and children, soldiers and civilians, participants and bystanders, and truncated an entire European generation. Although America entered the war relatively late, and fought for only eighteen months, the political and imaginative consequences were profound. John Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers* (1921), E. E. Cummings’s *The*

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952), p. 498.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Jay Nock, *A Journal of These Days, June 1932 – December 1933* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1934), p. 80.

*Enormous Room* (1922), Willa Cather's Pulitzer Prize winning *One of Ours* (1922), Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), William Faulkner's *Soldier's Pay* (1926), were only the more prominent texts that engaged the war and its aftermath.

The war continued to loom behind the thirties as the preeminent catastrophe of the twentieth century. By the thirties, it had been transformed from current events into history, and as such it continued to provide an important subject for imaginative writing. By one count, upwards of forty novels with World War I as their subject were published in the USA in the 1930s – far fewer than those published in the 1920s, and fewer than those published in the thirties in Great Britain, but a significant number.<sup>3</sup> The first section of this chapter will survey several of those novels, which collectively made a singular contribution to the literature of remembrance in the 1930s.

Perhaps more successfully than any other writer of the 1930s, John Dos Passos found a prose that combined modernist technique with political statement. After graduating from Harvard in 1916 he went to Europe, intending to study architecture in Spain but shortly thereafter volunteering to serve as a medic and driver in the legendary Norton–Harjes Volunteer Ambulance Service on the Western Front. The war catalyzed his opposition to the institutional straitjackets of modern life. Dos Passos had waged his private campaign against the war in several previous novels and stories, including *One Man's Initiation – 1917* (1920) and *Three Soldiers*.

Dos Passos's *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932) was the preeminent war novel of the 1930s. Revisiting the carnage he had seen firsthand, Dos Passos captures the nastiness, the tedium, the intermittent horror, and above all the sheer stupidity that propelled men repeatedly into meaningless death. In the novel's final pages, an embittered set piece called "The Body of an American" indicts the misguided and ultimately murderous patriotism that made World War I possible. Dos Passos recreates the ceremony that took place in Arlington National Cemetery on November 11, 1921, when President Warren G. Harding presided over the burial of the Unknown Soldier. Presidential rhetoric and newspaper headlines are juxtaposed against the grisly anatomical realities of "John Doe's" mutilated body:

The blood ran into the ground, the brains oozed out of the cracked skull and were licked up by the trenchrats, the belly swelled and raised a generation of bluebottle flies . . .

<sup>3</sup> Philip E. Hager and Desmond Taylor, eds., *The Novels of World War I: an Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1981).