

Contemporary Literature

A Mirror for Our Time

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In the '20's American writers devoted themselves to social satire, inveighing against the American middle class (e.g., Mencknen, Sinclair Lewis), or nursing a spirit of personal rebellion, or expressing a highly literary and sophisticated despair (e.g., Hemingway, Fitzgerald, O'Neill). That decade of prosperity, easy money, jazz, and moral laxity turned out to be a period rich in creative activity. The stock market crash in the autumn of '29 ushered in a soberer, angrier generation of writers. Marx displaced Freud as the prime influence and the proletarian novel replaced the novel of youthful rebellion or social satire. The chief writers of the '30's were chroniclers of social and economic failure and political unrest. John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* is an angry exposition of the human situation resulting from the whole economic system. Erskine Caldwell, the one novelist who touched on most of the significant issues of the time, pictures Southern sharecroppers so exaggeratedly sub-human that "Tobacco Road" ran Broadway for seven years primarily for its humor. Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, the last and the best of the proletarian novels, describes the bitter plight of homeless, migrant fruit-pickers of California. It was in the '30's that many writers were tempted by the promises of Communism. Since the '40's, Communism has been a negligible factor among major American writers. Indeed, it is difficult to discern a particular design in the literature of the '40's. There seems to be no evidence of a real movement. The older authors, who had been working quietly through the '20's and '30's, but who were never quite a part of the popular movement of the moment, continued writing steadily.

In general it may be said that twentieth century literature in America affords abundant evidence of the disintegration and degeneracy of man. This is the distinctive quality of the writing of our time, setting it apart from that of earlier periods. It is not that all our writers train their candid cameras exclusively on the evils and abnormalities of life. But a very large number of them, each in his own way, seem to be exploring the abyss which underlies the covering of life, and they are stunned by the senselessness, the malignancy, the horror of it all.

It is particularly true of the younger generation of writers ('50's-'60's) that they have come to regard all human life as essentially tragic. Believing that there are no collectively sanctioned spiritual values to which they can confidently refer, they experience only paralyzing frustration in facing the age-old questions: "Who am I?" "Where did I come from?" "Where am I going?" "What is the meaning of life, of death?" Not only is life drained of any ultimate meaning, but man cannot discover who he is. Weary of theological prescriptions, and finding the way to God closed, modern man faces a labyrinth of nothingness and despair. The purposelessness of life eats like a cancer at the heart of today's writers. It has been a devastating experience for them to discover that there are no short cuts to the millenium men hoped for, no magical formulas that will bring the kingdom of heaven among men, no scientific miracles that will bring peace, poise, and plenty to the human race.

The literature of our time seems to evidence a progressive deterioration of religious faith. In the past, men were able to adjust to the blows dealt to faith. New scientific discoveries may have administered harsh shocks, but at no time did they produce the black despair characteristic of our day. No doubt the introduction of technological warfare on a global scale, with the prospect of obliterating the whole of civilization, has played a significant role in making a mockery of humanistic ideals.

In spite of the fact that Americans generally regard themselves as the most optimistic people on earth it is such American writers as James T. Farrell, John Steinbeck, Dos Passos, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and above all, William Faulkner, who paint life in its blackest colors. Nothing as starkly realistic and as full of corruption as Faulkner's work has come from abroad. Nothing as full of despair has appeared in European drama as Arthur Miller's "The Death of a Salesman." Continental authors have produced no character as consummately evil as Faulkner's Popeye or Miller's Willie Loman.

"All our literature," writes D. D. McElroy, "is the work of desperate men whose anguish and despair have driven them to see further and to see more clearly than it is possible [for the rest of us] to see."¹ What they have seen, he says, has filled them with alarm and they seek to warn us before it is too late. Such warnings are to be found in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in nearly every page of

1. D. D. McElroy, *Existentialism and Modern Literature* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963), p. 17.

Faulkner, in Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, and above all is James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*—the great trilogy of futility and despair.

Farrell carries on in the naturalistic tradition of Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and other novelists who flourished between the two wars. His latest novel *What Time Collects* (1963) runs true to form. Farrell's career is dominated by the naturalistic writer's passion to prove that life is not art. In his frenzied attempt to get away as far as possible from any suggestion of romanticism, he sees to it that all his heroes end in despair. This for him is the lesson life teaches. And he *will* show how things are, with nothing added or subtracted. Since Farrell has been insisting now for forty years that most people are boring, it is not surprising to find him writing in a style in harmony with his characters. Its flatness grows oppressive. But his passionate attachment to Truth will not permit him to divert us from the reality of dullness. Like George Crabbe he will

. . . paint the cot

As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not.

Faulkner too strips life of its outer crust by exposing those traditions and rites which to him represent the destructive element in Southern society, those vestigial codes identified with social status, religious sanctions, and economic pursuits. He seeks to penetrate the magnolia curtain of Southern illusions to expose the hidden springs of motive. His preoccupation with violence and degeneracy expresses his reaction to the romantic tradition of the South. *As I Lay Dying* tells about the hauling of a corpse for nine days in midsummer heat; *Sanctuary* is a tale of rape, lynching and execution, prostitutes and imbeciles. *Light in August* deals with murder and lynching. *The Unvanquished* features nailing up the corpse of a murderer on a door, and placing his amputated hand on the victim's grave. To what end all this welter of carnage and brutality? This much, at least: Faulkner leaves you with a far better sense of the horrible depths that lurk beneath the surfaces of life than one could get from scholarly disquisitions on the perverseness of human nature.

Some find in Faulkner's violent protest against a false romanticism and superficial optimism a mood paralleled by that contemporary movement in theology which expresses a sense of the demonic forces which are at work in life.

In most modern fiction, poetry, and drama, man's struggle is no longer with God but with himself. This preoccupation with self is without theological reference of any kind. One gets the idea that only man is important in the universe. As Diana Trilling remarks in

her essay on Norman Mailer, "For the advanced writer of our time, the self is his supreme, even sole, referrent." The literature of no other period has shown such obsession with self.

Joyce's *Ulysses* is of course the most significant example of the twentieth century's voyage into self. It is mainly a journey into the solipsistic world of private citizen Leopold Bloom.

Having excluded both God and his fellowman from the universe, man struggles with himself to define himself. The result is chaos, the "waste land," the hell of isolation for modern man. Many of the characters in recent fiction and drama end up like Willie Lowman (Miller's *Death of a Salesman*). At the end of the play Biff says of Willie, "He never knew who he was." In this kind of a world without God, Hemingway, refusing to yield to despair, seeks satisfaction in the glorification of man. Using pain or violence for a catalyst he attempts this through the transmutation of the ordinary man into his highest concept of man—the hero. But Hemingway, who tried to outlive his disillusionment and despair by sheer bravado, proved that swagger was no cure for spiritual bankruptcy when he blew his brains out.

It is to be noted that man's concentration on self, in the absence of such absolutes as good and evil, has encouraged in much recent writing a sentimental tolerance of sin. When the idea of God is in eclipse, man can never be guilty of anything but trifling indiscretions. "We began by feeling sorry for the lovable bums of William Saroyan and John Steinbeck and ended by going soft on 'the genial rapist, the jolly slasher, the fun-loving dope pusher.'"²

A few writers have succeeded in making a path through the waste land to a place of spiritual affirmation. Of these the most renowned is T. S. Eliot, whose earlier poetry reflects vividly the disillusionment and desolation resulting from what Walter Lippmann calls "the acids of modernity." Eliot's *The Waste Land* reveals the banality and barrenness of the modern period. Unintelligible as most of the poem is, its title and some of its lines set forth the symbolism of complete desolation that follows the loss of faith. In "The Hollow Men," a different figure is used to describe the same kind of situation. The hollow men are the citizens of modern culture synthetically stuffed with opinions, ideas, and faiths they cannot feel. The Church itself is represented in the hippopotamus, with its mechanical organization and its formalism "wrapped in the

2. John Killinger, *The Failure of Theology in Modern Literature* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), p. 62.

old miasmal mist." But Eliot was to find his way out of the wilderness to a position of definite faith in the Anglican form of creed and worship. "Ash Wednesday," a poem of conversion, relates his transition from the Everlasting Nay to the Everlasting Yea.

In 1956 there emerged a curious literary group that struck so responsive a chord that it became the most widely discussed phenomenon of the late '50's. The Beat Generation has come to stand for a generation that reacted in certain ways to the kind of life it found in mid-century. It represents yet another highly belligerent form of expression of dissatisfaction with the values of contemporary society. Nowhere else in the literary scene does one find such complete rejection of social norms. The Beat finds society too hideous to contemplate; so he withdraws from it. Among the Beat writers are Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Carson McCullers, Nelson Algren, Herbert Gould, and George Mandel. England's Angry Young Men suggest its counterpart. Both groups are social phenomena which have found increasing expression in literature. Across the Atlantic the lower and middle classes are angry because they are made to feel inferior; the "new barbarians" in America are in a state of rebellion against the decadence of modern society and its institutions.

The Beat Generation is primarily important as the voice of non-conformity. Its platform calls for the repudiation of the past and the future, revolt against organized authority, and hatred for the Square (i.e., the man who takes no chances, who basks in his illusions, and who feels quite satisfied with his own scale of moral values). The Beats are for the most part against collectivism of any description, even to refusing to acknowledge that there is such a thing as a Beat Generation. It is impossible to list all the collective attitudes of the Beats, many of whom spend considerable time disagreeing among themselves.

Jack Kerouac, former Columbia University football star, is credited with coining the phrase, "Beat Generation." He used it in reference to himself and his circle of friends who, in his opinion, represent a complex of attitudes to be found among American youth everywhere. The phrase came into national prominence with the publication of Kerouac's *On the Road* (1950), a novel spotlighting a New York underworld bent on pursuing life to its furthest reaches. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Kerouac himself does not enter directly into this quarrel with the values inherent in the American way of life. Instead, he creates a whole sub-culture in opposition to it. His *Big Sur* (1962) sets forth the reality of the Beats over against the unreality of traditional American life.

Colin Wilson, one of England's Angry Young Men, in *The Outsider* examines the psychology of the hero, who is an outsider because he stands for truth. Uncertain, self-divided, realizing his nothingness in a world that means nothing, the Outsider keeps asking, What? His case against society is plain. Man possesses dangerous, unnameable impulses but he uses his respectability, his religion, his philosophy, to gloss over that which is savage and irrational. In the general rat-race, men assume unnatural roles. But the Angry Young Man throws aside the mask and accepts his own sullied state of being. He will come to terms with life as it is. To do otherwise is to deceive oneself. His concern is to perceive the self as it relates to the immediate experience. Incapable of exercising faith in tomorrow the Beat and the Angry Young Man prize relationships only as they unfold the truth of their own individual existence. Persons and places are of value only as they help the Beat understand himself.

Poet Allen Ginsberg and novelist Jack Kerouac are considered the chief promoters of the Beat Generation. Ginsberg was a leader in the "Bohemianism" of the '50's, which showed its hatred of civilization by its worship of primitivism, instinct, and "blood." No Beat writing has so shocked the public or so influenced the Beat mind as has Ginsberg's long poem, *Howl*, a fierce diatribe against the world in general. It remains to be seen whether or not fifty years from now Beat writers will have proven to be an ephemeral oddity. Notwithstanding the storm of public indignation they have aroused, it may be safely asserted that the reading public has grown singularly tolerant towards them. Indeed, some of them are now being accepted as part of the mainstream of American literature.

It was mentioned earlier that in contemporary writing man's struggle is no longer with God but with himself. Perhaps, as one critic suggests, the key to the attitude of most modern writers toward God is struck in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, in the scene where the Savage and the World Controller are looking at copies of the Bible and other Christian classics. The Savage asks whether the World Controller believes there is no God. "No," he answers, "I think there quite probably is one. . . . In pre-modern times he manifested himself as the being that's described in these books."

"How does he manifest himself now?" asks the Savage. "Well," says the Controller, "he manifests himself as an absence; as though he weren't there at all."³

3. Quoted in John Killinger, *ibid.*, p. 40.

It is not so much that God is dead as that He does not seem to matter any more. "The paradox of the Manifest Absence!"

A small body of religious fiction is favorable toward the Church. But this attitude is more or less mixed with sentimentality—as in Agnes Sligh Turnbull's *The Bishop's Mantle* and *The Crown of Glory*, and James Street's *The Gauntlet* and *The High Calling*.

Faulkner's description of the Negro church service in *The Sound and the Fury*, in its severely austere setting, with its rapt congregation, swaying a little in their seats to the rhythmic intonations of a Spirit-filled message coming from the heart of the homely little preacher, is at once winsome and compelling. It is because of the elemental simplicity and the passionate earnestness of the worship that Faulkner is moved to remark, "They endure." But in describing white churches, as he does in *Light and August* and in *Sanctuary*, Faulkner presents them as social organizations whose members have no real apprehension of the power and the glory that could redeem them. The reader catches the irony in the scene in *Light in August* where the men return to town during the search for Joe Christmas, the half-breed killer: "When they crossed the square the church bells were ringing, slow and peaceful, and along the street the decorous people moved sedately beneath parasols, carrying Bibles and prayer-books."⁴

Seldom has criticism of the visible Church and its officers been more caustic than in contemporary writing. In their reproach, Trollope and Henry James are mild compared with Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* with its vigorous indictment of the sensational evangelist, hypocritical and unintelligent, and the lady evangelist with whom he lives; or James Joyce's, *Ulysses* with its withering passage about a worship service in a Catholic church, or Gregory Wilson's *Stained Glass Jungles* with its fierce invectives against ecclesiastical politics.

Contemporary literature opens up the cavernous depth which underlies the covering of life. And in this Pandora's box one finds only violence and degeneracy, hollowness and unreality, purposelessness and despair. Disillusioned in the traditional values of life and in his fellows, modern man journeys into self in an attempt to define himself. The end is chaos.

In contemporary writing we have a powerful criticism of our age. No truer word may be spoken than Amos Wilder's when he says, "One has only to recall the growing library of modern classics

4. William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 260.

from Kafka and Joyce to Auden and Faulkner, to realize that we would never have reached so penetrating a criticism of the modern crisis if we had had to depend on the preacher or the theologian or the social scientist.”⁵

5. Amos N. Wilder, *Theology and Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 52.