

A Mirror For Our Times

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To appreciate the temper of our generation we must examine the literature of our time; for literature is a sensitive machine which reveals the moods and feelings, the aspiration and despairs of a people. We do not address ourselves to philosophy, which offers a *theory* of life; nor to religion, which provides a *way* of life. For our purpose we turn to literature, which presents an *interpretation* of life. Without Sir Walter Scott, Anglo-Saxon England cannot be well understood. The spirit of nineteenth-century England is only imperfectly realized until one has read Charles Dickens. Marjorie Rawlings' "Fodderwing" and even John Steinbeck's Joad family give us the very feel of life as it is being lived in certain sections of America.

Better than any other art, literature succeeds in reducing that huge, shapeless will-o-the-wisp called civilization to a palpable working entity. The infinitely complex it resolves into a simple, understandable pattern. This is what Oswald Spengler means when he says that the works of art of any given period manifest the ruling passion of that period. The literature of the Elizabethans, for instance, reflects versatility and enthusiasm; that of the Augustans, urbanity and tolerance; of the Victorians, smugness and shallow optimism. What is the prevailing mood or pattern for our day as disclosed by contemporary letters? Of this we are certain, none of the epithets just mentioned satisfies the description of our time. But before discussing the problem at length it needs to be emphasized that literature

can be an indispensable ally in the service of religion.

One of the best Greek scholars is quoted as saying that the verb which Paul uses when he tells Timothy to be instant in season and out of season should be translated "be contemporaneous: be up-to-date." The Christian minister can hardly comply with this injunction if he ignores the writings of his contemporaries. Unless he sees the human scene as mirrored by current literature, his understanding of the needs of his time must inevitably be distorted and inadequate. It is to present-day fiction, poetry, and drama that he must look if he would be "contemporaneous," if he would keep up with the intellectual currents of modern thought. Of all the literary forms, it is the modern novel that bears the closest resemblance to American life. Ever a guide to social change and a prophecy of things to come, it is the most important literary medium today. Poetry, too, has been quick to register the fundamental changes taking place in our society. It is time for grave concern when our poets are full of sound and fury. Because the most significant literary work is at present being done in the fields of fiction and poetry, these will be our chief interest for the present discussion.

I.

On all sides it is agreed that a change of very great proportions is taking place today in American civilization. Many feel, as did Matthew Arnold four score years ago, that they are standing between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born.

Strong, well-defined, reassuring philosophers are entirely lacking in our day. The old optimism is gone and no constructive value has taken its place. Outmoded are the preachments about the inevitability of a beneficent human progress, the corollary of the doctrine of human perfectibility. Men have begun to see that Huxley missed it somewhere, that Dean Inge is nearer the mark when he says that all idea of progress is superstition. Whether or not we are standing at the crossroads of the world's history the literature of the era does not directly say. It leaves no doubt of the fact, however, that we are in a period of major transition. As Henry Seidel Canby points out, even the most confident American writing—columnists' satire, musical comedy, movie scripts — has the note of fear of change, the implied *if*. Those factors precipitating the change are of course responsible for the disillusionment and despair that obsesses our times. It is this feeling of despair that contemporary literature mirrors as the ruling passion of our times.

Even the most casual reader of the literature published from 1918 to the present is bound to be gripped by the feeling of frustration and dejection that abounds generally in every form of writing. Edna St. Vincent Millay's long poem, "Conversation at Midnight," illustrates well the spirit of these years. Meeting at midnight in a busy city, representatives of various professions discuss at length many topics covering the range of American civilization—sports, religion, sex, politics, the arts — hoping thereby to discover some meaning to it all. The conversation proves fruitless. The priest leaves the parley early. Neither the liberal, the agnostic host, the stockbroker capitalist, nor the communist poet can find a ray of hope as he gazes at the human spectacle. The conclusion comes inevitably,

Let us abdicate now; let us disintegrate quietly
here, convivially imbibing
The pleasanter poisons.

A line from Edwin Arlington Robinson echoes the same futilitarian mood,

I cannot find my way, there is no star.

The title of T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Wasteland," is sometimes used to describe the chaos of modern life. This highly unintelligible poem, a series of staccato-like pictures, is the reaction of a brilliant mind to the utter meaninglessness of this our life. Eliot, spokesman for the great army of youth who came out of the First World War disillusioned and dismayed, exposes with cruel realism the stuff out of which our society is made. Another war-poet, Kenneth Patchen, also speaks for these same bewildered youth,

We manage to have the look that
young men have;
We feel nothing behind our faces,
one way or another.

We shall probably not be quite dead
when we die.
We were never anything all the way;
not even soldiers.

It seems that every post-war writer, major and minor, in prose as well as in poetry, has felt the call at some time or other to debunk our civilization. The novel especially has been much pre-occupied with what Halford Luccock calls "the dark capital D's"—Disenchantment, Disillusion, Disintegration, and Damnation. Not that there has been a lack of pleasant-reading fiction. Yet the crop of historical fiction and exotic novels like Hilton's *The Lost Horizon* only serve to express the more strongly, civilized man's longing to escape from the present. It is significant that humor is conspicuously absent from the writing of the past two decades. When in 1941 E. B. White compiled his *Sub-Treas-*

ury of *American Humor* it is said that he found it possible to include only one extract from an American novel; that was the first chapter of Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*. Why this surprising lack of humor? Could it be because our novelists have been angry at something?

II.

A survey of the literature produced since the close of the First World War would suggest that three or four dominant factors are responsible for the general disintegration of American life and culture. In the first place, a host of authors, particularly in the twenties and thirties, are the victim of a narrow, naturalistic philosophy which is the offspring of the nineteenth century thought and which has been completely devastating in its reach into every area of modern life. Unlike the realist in fiction the naturalist, yielding to some form of scientific determinism, preaches that man is at the mercy of his environment. Free-will is considered a "spark of fantastic imagination." Man is either the pawn of certain mechanical, world-controlling forces which are hostile or indifferent to him or he is the victim of his own glandular secretions. It is not to be wondered at that younger men, writing in the naturalistic vein, should show a pronounced sadist strain. What else could be expected when men have no standards, no faith, no inhibitions, no confidence in their own free moral agency? If they are cruel it is because life is cruel to them. If they lack the inner poise which characterized the leaders of the last intellectual revolt in America — Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, and Whitman—it is because they feel that the odds against them are insurmountable. Sadism reaches its peak in Faulkner's *Sanctuary*. This story of a young innocent girl tortured by a moron, is told with a crude realism that is truly

terrifying. Faulkner, reputed to have written some of the most tortured prose in American fiction, says that he chose the horror medium as the right answer to current trends. The "sanctuary" he offers is the insane asylum and the county jail.

But it is Theodore Dreiser who is regarded as the most influential naturalistic novelist of our time. To him is given the credit for having brought American fiction into close harmony with American life. With the publication of *An American Tragedy* Dreiser's naturalism until a few years before his death in 1945 dominated American fiction. For more than half a century Dreiser studied his fellows more closely than did any other writer, candidly reporting what he found, indifferent to his critics. For the first twenty years of his career he was chronically abused both by critics and the reading public, notably the optimists, puritans, and sentimentalists. During the depression years of the late twenties, however, the general attitude toward him softened considerably and it was not long before many of the major authors were embracing the naturalistic point of view—men like Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neil, and Ernest Hemingway. It was Dreiser, together with Sherwood Anderson, who furnished inspiration for the parade of books in the twenties that were designed to expose the cruelty of the environment, the cheap standardization of American life, and the avariciousness of American business. Dreiser holds that existence is entirely meaningless, that the determining forces of life are physio-chemical actions and reactions which divide mankind into the strong and the weak, not the good and the bad. He confesses to having had some "lingering filaments of Catholicism" trailing him in his twenties, including faith in the

person of Christ. It was his subsequent discovery of Huxley, Tyndall, and Spencer, he says, that "blew him to bits" intellectually. *An American Tragedy*, regarded as his best work, opens in a large city with a little family of street evangelists, the Griffiths. Clyde Griffith the "hero" seduces a girl, whom he later resolves to murder. When she dies, the result of an accident, he is accused on circumstantial evidence. Confusedly he signs a confession. In the end he goes to his death uncertain of God's forgiveness and in spite of the prayers of his godly mother. The author, in tracing the steps leading to tragedy makes out that the lad from the beginning was hopelessly defeated by a web of circumstances. Since for Dreiser sin is physical in origin rather than psychological, the question of guilt is irrelevant. Moral judgment he never passes on a character or deed. The problem is one of bio-chemistry, not morality. However one feels about his philosophy, Dreiser does succeed in driving home the sorrowful plight of that vast army of beaten and bewildered men and women who limp across the stage of modern civilization. And in so doing he renders a real service to religion.

If Dreiser long ago gave up in his attempt to find a solution to life, Sherwood Anderson never quit trying. And in the end he was more lost than ever. His stories, like those in *Winesburg, Ohio*, are peopled with characters who, like himself, are always in a state of mental and spiritual chaos—"the misfits, the mutterers, the crazy rebels, the hall-room brooders," as Clifton Fadiman calls them. John Dos Passos, also in the Dreiser tradition, published in 1938 his trilogy entitled *U.S.A.*, the product of his study of the dominant tendencies in American life in the first three decades of the century. The basic judgment in *U.S.A.* is the emptiness of our modern

life. As J. D. Adams has observed,

The characters live not in relation to codes or values, but in relation to the headlines. Family life is conspicuously absent from the trilogy; human relationships are something to be snatched between wanderings on various missions. In becoming all eyes and ears, victims of the suggestibility of the radio, the newspaper, and the moving picture, mankind has lost its heart.

Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and Wright's *Native Son* both present the naturalistic viewpoint. To a greater degree than other writers in the sadist strain, both these men, maddened by class and race inequalities, use the most degenerate Southerners as terrific object lessons of social and economic injustice. Caldwell tells a grotesque tale of brutality, lynching, and murder. Whatever the humor of *Tobacco Road* it has a metallic ring amid the tragedy of human relations which produces it. *Native Son*, believed to be the strongest novel written by an American negro, is a veritable sea of hatred lashing relentlessly at the white man. Nowhere is the disillusionment of the moderns more carefully recorded than in Ernest Hemingway, the writer who is reputed to have had the greatest influence on the prose writing of our time. Hemingway's characters are active enough, but they are soulless and void of a sense of moral value. Dehumanized creatures they are, representing a reversion to the primitive. His most savage book, *To Have and Have Not*, for instance, shows the spiritual bankruptcy of a people that feels itself completely lost, a feeling that seems to have gripped the men of letters in our generation more than it has the preachers.

Although naturalistic philosophy has exerted a predominant influence in contemporary fiction and poetry it must not be thought that all the major writers, though decidedly pessimistic, have used the naturalistic

approach. No novelist offers a sharper and more searching criticism of the superficial quality of American life than does Sinclair Lewis, perhaps the greatest photographer in American fiction. In *Main Street* Lewis sees

a savorless people gulping tasteless food and sitting afterwards coatless and thoughtless in rocking chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, and saying mechanical things about the excellencies of Ford automobiles.

But unlike his followers Lewis is not without vision and hope, for through it all he holds fast to a belief in the intrinsic worth of man. Other serious-minded novelists who are unsparing in their exposures of the hollowness of our society but who steadfastly refuse to yield to the environment are Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Pearl Buck, and John Steinbeck. Although no less realistic than their male contemporaries the women writers seem less inclined to accept defeat. It is said that when a practically-minded publisher once asked Miss Glasgow why she did not write an optimistic novel about the West, she replied that if there was anything she knew less about than the West it was optimism.

III.

If the leaven of naturalism was creeping like a paralysis over our men of letters of the last few decades leaving them cynical and despairing, the propaganda of modern psychology, especially of the Freudian variety, was doing an excellent job in bringing about their complete moral disintegration. It became fashionable to speak as if we had at last caught up as by some infallible means with all the answers to the problems of human nature. With the behaviorists insisting that a changed environment should cure practically all the ills that the flesh is heir to, and the psychoanalysts digging for cues to personality disorders in the deep well of the

unconscious, it is no wonder that much current literature reflects mental confusion and bewilderment. In opening up the field of the "unconscious" and in stressing the role played by sex and gland factors in the development of personality, Freud has rendered some service to man and religion. But the psychoanalyst's insistence that the ego can never be master in his own house has succeeded only in accentuating the hopelessness of human existence. Discussing the precariousness of consciousness Jung says that we are living upon a volcano with no human means of protection against a possible deadly outburst.

As a consequence of the new teaching many writers have suffered from an unhealthy desire to tell all. This morbid urge to confess does not result from any guilt-complex or from a feeling of spiritual unworthiness. It is a confession for the sake of confessing, a "nudism of the ego" inspired by the natural rather than the supernatural.

In the new, if somewhat hazy, light of psychoanalysis it has been found that fear to an alarming degree has taken hold of men of all ranks in life. Modern man, says Jung, fears the abyss—the unknown perils of the soul. Our poets and novelists have been quick to bring this condition to our attention. Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, Hemingway, and many others demonstrate the disruptive effect fear has had on the modern mind. Hemingway with a kind of sophisticated cruelty photographically describes a post-war world of fear-ridden people—delicate, disillusioned souls who are held by a kind of malignnant fate and who strike wildly at the least provocation. James Farrell's *Stud Lonigan* series frightens us by its revelation of the insecurity and general disintegration that awaits the youth who is attracted to the big city. Other authors protest loudly at the large part the city plays

in the drama of contemporary life. In *Preludes to Memnon* Conrad Aiken sketches the dominant-type American character, the city-dweller, living a phantom existence and almost hopelessly depersonalized by the "all-pervading stony face of the city." Our poets, too, blame the centers of population for much of the fear and insecurity of our day. Separation from the soil, it seems, has seldom improved man's peace of mind. Some of these moderns are strangely taken up with the subject of death, another expression of the fear-complex. Such preoccupation is seen in MacLeish's *Hamlet* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. T. S. Eliot, watching the crowd flow over London Bridge, is reminded of Dante's line expressing sorrow at the sight of the Inferno. "I had not thought that death had undone so many."

Current letters also reflect an undue prominence given to sex, a situation provoked by psychoanalytical theory. Indeed, as a theme of fiction sex has eclipsed all other interests. The works of D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, W. L. George, May Sinclair, and a great many others show the influence of the Freudian notion that every act of mind and body is determined by the activity of sex. But it is a morbid sex interest that is mirrored in the literature of the past twenty-five years. All the couples in Sinclair Lewis' *Cass Timberlane*, for instance, seem to lack even the common proprieties of life. The marriages in *Grand Republic*, Cass' home-town, are loose and cheap. J. D. Adams says that he cannot recall in Faulkner's entire twelve novels **and several short stories** a single instance of a normal and mature relationship between a man and a woman. Faulkner is regarded as a major novelist of our time. If the Victorian approach to sex was less honest and more hypocritical than ours, we have gone to the other extreme and, as Adams says, "beat the

tom-toms of sex like a small boy incessantly playing with the drum which has just been given to him." Where the writers of the past make wise use of suggestion and selection in whatever they describe, the moderns feel obliged to supply abundance of detail. There is evidence, however, of a turning of the tide. The constant play on sex is becoming wearisome. Readers are restive. They want to be reminded that there are decent men and women enough in the world to supply the quota of heroes and heroines that fiction demands. Although many important authors, and many more of lesser importance, continue to dwell on sex, signs of the change are to be found in Lewis' *Babbitt*, Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Betts*, Pierre Van Passen's *Days of Our Years*, Benet's *John Brown's Body*, and Edna Ferber's *Autobiography*. It is to be hoped that novels like these will prove to be the handwriting on the fictional wall.

IV.

Although the mysterious area of the unconscious which Freud opened up continued to attract the men of letters of the thirties it began gradually to yield place to the tragedy of the unemployed. Labor for a while took a front seat in literature. An endless number of novels and poems about the working classes came off the presses. The ill-fed, the ill-clothed, and the ill-housed supplied a proportionately greater number of subjects for literary treatment than ever before was the case. A desperate race against malnutrition became the motif of a large body of the literature of the last decade. Embittered by the depression, men of letters set out to discover how the other half lives. They trained their lenses on every nook and corner of American life. Conditions in field and factory, shack and tenement were investigated, with shocking results.

Novelists, poets, dramatists—all began to voice strong protest against an economic system that enslaved the masses and caused human values to become threadbare. It is generally believed that this “depression” literature, which carries no brief for a particular ideology, is much more vehement in its denunciation of the ruthless exploitation of human personality than is organized Christianity.

Considered to be one of the most powerful novels of the century so far, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* is the record of what has been called the most tragic migration in American history. The share-cropping Joads, eleven of them, are representative of 300,000 families who are driven by the machine from the Oklahoma country, only to meet with disillusionment on reaching California, the proverbial “promised land”. There suspicion eyed the Joads as “Reds” and undesirable aliens. After starvation wages and death had done their work, the surviving members of the family started back on the long trek to Oklahoma. The promised grapes of California had turned out to be grapes of wrath. The following excerpt catches the mood of the story:

There's a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all success. The fertile earth, the straight roads, the sturdy trunk, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because profit cannot be taken from an orange. The coroners must fill in the certificate—died of malnutrition—because oranges must rot, must be forced to rot.

Martha Gellhorn's *The Trouble I've Seen* (1936), a novel based on the writer's experience while working for the Federal Relief Administration, describes the moral and spiritual ruin produced by unemployment. To appreciate how a better-class family feels when it has to go on relief, one should read Joseph Vogel's *Man's Courage* (1938), an arresting tale of a family

who fought a terrible battle against economic odds, and lost. Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* is one of many books which use both text and camera to bring to our attention the hopelessness that attends ten million lives in the cotton-raising sections of the country. To emphasize further the scope and impact of the economic disaster, a few more “depression” novels of the thirties may be cited. Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* shows the moral catastrophe that takes place when Southern mountaineers are forced to quit their homestead for a hill town. Fielding Burke's *A Stone Came Rolling* has its setting in South Carolina and treats a similar theme. In *Jews Without Money* Michael Gold describes Jews living in almost ghetto-like surroundings in New York's East Side; Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* deals with Georgia's poor-white dirt farmers. The baneful effects of the collapse of North Michigan's lumber industry are accurately sketched in Louise Armstrong's *We Too Are The People*. *The Home Place* by Dorothy Thomas shows the personality clashes and strained relations that developed when the depression forced the “in-laws” to move in with the old folks on their Nebraska farm. A dramatic account of the effect of a strike in a large New York department store is found in Leane Zugsmith's *A Time To Remember*. James T. Farrell's *Judgment Day* is the tale of a Chicago youth who is cruelly beaten by the depression. And so the story goes. It is not surprising that some of this kind of writing eventually showed definite communistic leanings; for so far as literature is concerned, the collapse of human optimism seemed to be almost complete by the end of the thirties.

Poetry like fiction, quick to commiserate the sufferings of the worker, also raised her voice in angry protest

against an economic regime that was slowly crushing out human lives. Out of his ivory tower came the poet to fight the battle of human wrongs in a way that would have shocked his nineteenth century forbears. Our contemporary poet has had little time for the cultivation of the beautiful. If for the older bards,

Life, like a dome of many-colored glass
Stained the white radiance of eternity!

for the verse-makers of our day it consists of squares of box-like apartments, prefabricated homes, giant engines, and fever-driven multitudes. Some of our modern poets are more likely to tell us that "the light that never was on land or sea" might be found in Woolworth's "five-and-ten" or Macy's basement. If the heart of Wordsworth is delighted on seeing golden daffodils floating in the breeze by Windermere Lake, the mind of Carl Sandburg is satisfied at the sight of steel rails and blast furnaces. Whatever our culture has lost by the poet's turning reformer it has in part at least been offset by the active humanitarianism of contemporary verse. Sandburg's poetry strikes hard at a capitalism that bleeds the worker to death, but his violence stems from a deep-rooted humanitarianism. Another of America's distinguished poets, Alexander MacLeish, whose birth and education had placed him in the genteel tradition, has been struggling valiantly in the fight against economic abuse. The mood of this poet is seen in a fragment from his *Land of the Free*:

Maybe we were endowed by our creator
With certain inalienable rights, including
The right to assemble in peace and petition.
Maybe
But try it in South Chicago Memorial Day
With the mick police on the prairie in front of
the factory
Gunning you down from behind and for what?
For Liberty?
Maybe God Almighty wrote it out;

We could shoot off our mouths where we pleased
And with what and no Thank-yous.
But try it at River Rouge with the Ford militia.
Try it if Mister Ford's opinions are otherwise.
Try it and see where it will land you with your
back broken.

Among the scores of other serious-minded poets whose names are identified with this struggle for the rights of the common man are Edna St. Vincent Millay, Muriel Rukeyser, Stephen Vincent Binet, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Robert Frost. Frost is reputed to be not only the first American poet since Whitman but the greatest living American writer. The following quotation is taken from his poem *Unemployed*:

Under the roofs of houses a sullen force is
sleeping
resting its weight on motionless rocking chairs,
on papers fallen to floor, tables littered with
dishes,
hairpins dangling in hair.

And if the clock is the one thing still in motion,
it is because something must go on
in a world long dead, and people
wish their wish for living gone.

The dramatists were also disturbed over the economic injustices the poor had to bear. Some of them were especially inflamed when they remembered the abuses to which money was being put. Maxwell Anderson, next in reputation to Eugene O'Neil, pleads for the common man in *Winterset*, called the first poetic drama of our time. Angered at the corruption of modern society one of his characters says, "At the moment I don't think of anything you can't buy, including life, honor, virtue, glory, public office, conjugal affection, and all kinds of justice from the traffic court to the immortal nine. Go out and make yourself a pot of money and you can buy all the justice you want."

Many victims of the depression, in casting about to lay blame somewhere, finally turned accusingly towards the towns and villages, particularly those of the middle-west. It was thought

that here especially a vestigial Puritanism still survived in the guise of a thin, middle-class morality. William Allen White, "the embodiment of village ideals," Booth Tarkington, apostle of middle-class virtues, and other apologists of the small town had represented it a place of spiritual and material prosperity. It was the opinion of these writers that America owed to her villages whatever was worthwhile in her civilization. With the publication in 1936 of Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*, however, the country received a jar. Considered by some critics the most important single volume of verse since Whitman, this poem, made up of a series of soliloquies from dead persons in a village cemetery, is a heavy indictment against the American small town. Louis Untermeyer says that *Spoon River* is all America in microcosm. The so-called Battle of the Village was on. Among its leading antagonists were H. L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, Van Wyck Brooks, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, *The American Mercury*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*.

From this brief examination of the "depression" trend in literature we turn to consider another factor always a vital part of life and literature, one that in the light of current literature seems to have made substantial contribution to the bewilderment and despair of modern man.

V.

Even though the literature of a people seems to ignore religious values completely, such disregard constitutes a powerful negative testimony which the Church cannot afford to ignore. It is a commonplace to remark that religion both at home and abroad has failed to attract the masses. There has been much controversy over the fact that the Beards, front-line American historians, make only incidental ref-

erence to contemporary religion in two of their monumental works of recent years: *America in Midpassage*, treating the period between the two wars, and *Basic History of the United States* (1944). The editor of a religious periodical came to their defense saying that the Church today has done nothing worth reporting—surely a biased explanation. Yet it is the opinion of many both inside and outside the Church that Christianity has lost her hold on the masses. Apparently there has been no great turning to religion either in the thirties or the forties. Dr. Adolph Keller speaks of the "desert of religious indifference" everywhere in Europe. According to a recently published report made by a commission appointed by the late Archbishop of Canterbury only ten per cent of the British people are actively connected with the Christian Church. Cecil Northcutt, commenting on the commission's findings, says that Britain is as pagan as the outer reaches of Tibet. The Scottish secretary of the Christian Student Movement broods over the "present irrelevance of the Church in Britain" and the religious indifference of the great body of British youth. That the picture in America is no brighter is intimated by Morris Marky's *This Country of Yours*. To learn all he could about the people of his country, Marky in 1932 made a 16,000 mile tour of the United States during which he asked hundreds of persons of all ranks just what religion meant to them. His book records that he found only one man who said that God and the Church were adequate to his needs. Everywhere he went, Marky says, he met with skepticism, distrust, or amusement at the faith of our fathers. Highly inadequate as such sampling is in itself, the findings are in keeping with the record.

In contrast to Victorian literature, when religion was the prime concern

of all the leading men of letters, contemporary American literature, as is to be expected, is almost wholly given over to the spirit of secularism. No theme is less popular in fiction today than that of salvation, no word more heartily disliked than the word "soul." Pearl Buck, daughter of Christian missionaries to China, writes the following "Advice to Unborn Novelists":

Be born anywhere, little embryo novelist, but do not be born under the shadow of a great need, not under the burden of original sin, not under the doom of salvation. Go out and be born among the gypsies or thieves or among happy workaday people who live in the sun and do not think about their souls.

A spirit of religious negation gloomily suffuses itself throughout the literature generally. Sometimes it partakes of the nature of a varied bill of particulars drawn up against the Church, and coming, as Luccock observes, neither from the Bradlaughs nor the Ingersolls, nor from the exuberance of bad boys throwing stones, but from thoughtful men, saddened by the Church's failure to give man a solid foundation. In poetry Edna St. Vincent Millay continued a wistful and ardent seeker after something to replace her discarded religious beliefs. She writes, "Man has not been the same since God died. He has taken it very hard." Gamaliel Bradford likewise laments, "I sometimes wish that God were back." O'Neil's drama *Mourning Becomes Electra* shows Christianity to be an old garment now threadbare. Nor is there much contemporary Christian verse to offset this mood. There is indeed no poet today in the Christian tradition who is writing great poetry. As Thornton Wilder remarks, it looks as though the devout American poets are not entering into the experience of grace as the secular poets are into the experience of human misery. In what amounts to a good piece of journalistic prose en-

titled *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Caldwell and Bourke-White charge that the Church's compromising the truth has precipitated certain religious fanaticisms:

The failure of the Church to preach its own convictions in the share-cropper country has resulted in its becoming a burlesque on religion. For that reason it is not difficult to understand why so many of its houses are now places where once a week men and women go to elevate themselves into a state of religious ecstasy that enables them to forget their troubles. Men and women who writhe on the floor, shout until they have no voices left, go through various forms of hysterical behavior, do not do so merely because they believe they are Christians. They intoxicate themselves with a primitive type of religious frenzy that has its closest counterpart in alcoholic drunkenness.

Sometimes this "negative" mood breaks out in a flood of angry satire against organized religion. So considerable is the body of writing expressing this feeling that Luccock would make its study a required course for all devoted to the progress of religion. In *Native Son*, for instance, Richard Wright goes out of his way to abuse religion. A young negro accused of murder is being cross-examined by his lawyer:

Did you ever go to church, Bigger?

Yeah, when I was little. But that was a long time ago.

Your folks were religious?

Yeah, they went to church all the time.

Why did you stop going?

I didn't like it. There was nothing in it. An' all they did was to shout and pray all the time, and it didn't get them nothing. The white folks got everything.

Did you ever feel happy in church?

Naw. I didn't want to. Nobody but poor folks get happy in church.

But you were poor, Bigger.

Again Bigger's eyes lit with bitter and feverish pride.

I ain't that poor, he said.

In a poem reminiscent of Browning's *Renaissance* Bishop Kenneth Burke satirizes the modern Christian:

You'll have an eight-cylinder car in heaven—
Air conditioning—
Indirect lighting—
A tile bathroom and a white porcelain kitchen.

Despite the phenomenal growth of population,
there'll be no traffic problem,
if you would drive out
to the Garden of Eden
for a week-end.

O the celestial sundaes—
all flavors made with the purest chemicals.

No strike—no speed-up—no lay-off
everybody a coupon-clipper in heaven,
living in peace, on the eternal drudgery
of the damned.

The same mood is suggested by the words of Milo in Anderson's drama *Winterset* where the youth is urging the girl to go indoors out of the cold winter's night:

Tell them when you get indoors where it's warm, and you love each other, and mother comes in to kiss her darling, tell them to hang on to it while they can, believe while they can, it's a warm safe world and Jesus finds his lambs and carries them into his bosom. —I've seen some lambs that Jesus missed.

Fielding Burke (Mrs. Olive T. Dargan) in *A Stone Came Rolling* voices indignation against an outmoded religion that continues to hold its devotees in a state of ignorance, that still teaches them that all their good deeds in this life will in the next blossom out into eternal payment for services rendered. Mrs. Boardman, her body wrecked by the hardness of her life, resents Ishma's sympathy because it seems to her to reflect on her Maker. Fiercely the old woman rises to defend her God:

"Don't you say anything about my God! I've worked for Him all my life, I've took poison out of the devil's hand, I've stood ever'thing a human bein' can stand, an' I'm goin' to have what I've worked for! I've got a place waitin' for me in heaven, not at anybody's feet either. I'll be right up in the front row with Jesus! An' you ner nobody's goin' to take that away from me."

But no writer has been more vitriolic

in his abuse of the Church than Sinclair Lewis. In *Main Street* one of his characters says,

My dear, Mrs. Bogart's God may be Main Street's God, but all the courageous, intelligent people are fighting Him—though he slay us."

It is said that since Paine's *Age of Reason* no religious question has ever received so hostile an examination as that accorded the religious hypocrite in *Elmer Gantry*, Lewis' most bitter satire. Sometimes an author's charge is directed against a specific variety of religion, as in Ruth McKenney's *Industrial Valley*, a novel in which much sport is made of the Buchmanites. The "dress-shirt evangelism" of the modern Oxford Group movement is represented as a sanctimonious agency for relieving the upper classes of their socio-economic obligations. Rachel Crother's drama *Susan and God* is another thrust at the movement. The religiously-effervescent Susan in her zeal for souls neglects those nearest to her—her drink-tied husband and her young daughter.

Literature's unmerciful exposure of life beneath the surface and her clamor against the Church has done much to provoke theologians to a closer examination of the evils of society. In the smug complacency of the prosperous twenties, when faith seemed to be a mere appendage to culture, Barth would never have reached first base, according to one theologian. While it cannot be said that either the depression or the last war was followed by any unusual religious awakening, Barth in recent years has surely succeeded in reaching first base.

It is not to be concluded, of course, that literature since the early thirties was utterly dominated by cynicism, religious or otherwise. Amid all the other trends of the post-war years there are signs of weariness, of a desire for positive values. In fact a

few major writers have experienced a change of temper. Aldous Huxley, whose work prior to *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) is saturated with satire, demonstrates in that novel his faith in the efficacy of the spiritual life. Until the appearance of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) the works of Hemingway are the embodiment of the spirit of negation. It is nothing less than sensational for a leading character in Hemingway to say, as he lies dying, "The world is fine place and worth fighting for, and I hate very much to leave it." A positive note is also sounded in Richard Llewellyn's *How Green Was My Valley*, John Hersey's *A Bell For Adano*, and Betty Smith's widely read novel, *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn*. Recent years, moreover, have witnessed a new biography of realism, more impartial in its viewpoint. The "debunking" biographies of an earlier day have suffered justifiable condemnation. Whereas the younger authors had used the regional novel to express their anger against the environment, there are indications here also that current writers are seeking to understand better their surroundings.

Since the end of the first war, moreover, a small but significant body of literature has continued to attest to a seeking after God. For example, the novels of Thomas Woolfe, characterized as a modern Pilgrim's Progress, represent this search for salvation. Somerset Maugham, distinguished for his drawing-room comedy, published in 1944 *The Razor's Edge*, which has a spiritual quest for its theme. The hero in Claude Brion's *David The Anointed* pursues a long search for God. Another indication of the spiritual hunger of our time is the exceeding popularity in late years of a few novels with a religious background. For two years, first place among the "best sellers" was occupied in succession by three books each dealing with man's relationship to God: A. J. Cronin's

The Keys of the Kingdom, Franz Werfel's *The Song of Bernadette*, and Lloyd Douglas' *The Robe*. Other religious novels remarkable for their sales are Sholem Asch's *The Apostle*, Laubach's *You Are My Friends*, John Erskine's *The Human Life of Jesus*, and Gladys Schmitt's *David the King*. Whatever the virtues of these books each injects into the mind of its vast uncritical audience ideas of religion that are not at all in harmony with the teachings of orthodox Protestantism. *The Robe*, for instance, gives us quite a diluted type of Christianity. Someone has suggested that Arnold Lunn might well have had the modern religious novel in mind when he said satirically, "God so loved the world that he inspired a certain Jew to inform his contemporaries that there was a great deal to be said for loving one's neighbor." In passing, it is a matter of interest to note that in the opinion of one authority at least the most notable group of novels published in 1946 has a decidedly Catholic flavor. These are George Bernacrow's *Joy*, Francois Muriac's *Woman of the Pharisees*, Bruce Marshall's *Yellow Tapers for Paris*, and Kate O'Brien's *For One Sweet Grape*.

The courageous note of affirmation and the search for spiritual values on the part of a few contemporary men of letters, and the fondness of the reading public for fiction whose theme is Biblical narrative—these half articulate expressions are straws in the wind. It is altogether possible that the literature of the next decade will reflect a more insistent demand for spiritual affirmation. Will the Church be prepared to give that assurance? In reflecting upon this question, an observation made by Irving Babbitt in 1932 is worth quoting, "The result of the Church's attempt to deal with evil socially rather than at its source in the individual, to substitute an outer for an inner control of appetite has been

a monstrous legalism. Protestantism is ceasing to be a religion of the inner life and is becoming more and more a religion of 'uplift'."

VI.

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

The annals of our time, sordid and grim, lie before us. They tell a sorry tale of men in stygian caves surrounded by cimmerian darkness. They suggest that four influences in modern life are heavily responsible for man's predicament: naturalistic philosophy, modern psychology, economic injus-

tice, and a decadent Church. Although the record of the past cannot be changed, God grant that in the light of that record the Church may be roused to such fury against evil that another generation shall rise up and call her "blessed."

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