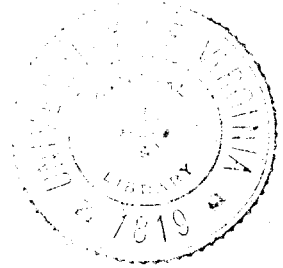


The New REPUBLIC

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The Promise of American Life

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FIFTEEN CENTS

IN TWO PARTS: PART ONE

A Farewell to the 1930's

JUST AS THE 1920's were the post-war decade, so the 1930's were post-boom and post-crash. Just as the 1920's were ended by the depression, so the 1930's were ended by the new war in Europe. It is a neat pattern that we have to consider: a decade that actually lasted for nine years and ten months, that began on October 29, 1929—Black Thursday—and ended on the early morning of September 1, 1939, when the German armies marched into Poland; or perhaps had already ended on August 23, with the news of the Russo-German pact. The decade began for many writers with a sense of relief; they had been unhappy in the boom days, which were dominated by their enemies, the business men. It ended with a sense of defeat and disillusionment, when they saw the world falling into the hands of their other enemies, the generals and the power politicians. As one writer said, laying down his copy of *The New York Times*, "You can't expect good news in an earthquake."

There has never been a period when literary events followed so closely on the flying coat-tails of social events. In ordinary times, it takes a man of long memory to recognize that such and such a book may have been inspired by such and such a political struggle, now generally forgotten. The novels that we connect with the Populist movement were published in the early 1900's; the movement itself had been shattered in 1896, at the end of Bryan's first campaign. But during the 1930's, the time between event and expression was so short that no one could miss their connection—and least of all the author himself. The Gastonia strike was fought and broken in 1929; during the first three years of the crisis there were at least six novels and two plays with Gastonia as their background. As for the crisis itself, there was no end to its literary echoes. Almost all the books published after 1932 belonged to the literature of the depression, in the sense that they either revealed its effect on their authors, or studied its causes, or tried to evade it by fleeing to the ends of the earth and the depths of time—only to return with a lesson for tomorrow.

Yet the crisis in general is not much help to us in describing and separating the literary currents of the 1930's; it explains entirely too much. Before using it as a basis for interpretation, we have to divide it into three different clusters or series of events. There are first the political and social struggles rising out of the crisis—the strikes and demonstrations, the growth of radical and fascist groups, the fight over the New Deal. There are second the events resulting from the new position of the United States in world affairs, which in turn resulted from the crisis in Europe and left this country as the greatest and perhaps the last

stronghold of bourgeois democracy. Last of all are the events connected with the closing of the frontier in American business—that is, the growth of larger corporations at the expense of smaller ones, the narrowing opportunities for pecuniary success and the changes that followed in middle-class ideals. Each cluster of events has been the background for hundreds of novels, essays, poems, plays; and each of them should be discussed in turn.

The political and social struggles that I mentioned were mirrored in proletarian writing—or, to use a milder academic term, in the literature of social protest. Strikes born of hunger and desperation were among the features of the new decade; and strikes were the usual subject of the earlier proletarian novels. The cotton mills, the coal mines, the garment industry, the California orchards, the West Coast lumber mills and logging camps, were assaulted each in its turn; in those days literature was a weapon of attack. Weapons grow to resemble one another; and very soon these strike novels began to follow a pattern almost as rigid and conventional as that of a Petrarchan sonnet. The hero was usually a young worker, honest, naïve and politically undeveloped. Through intolerable mistreatment, he was driven to take part in a strike. Always the strike was ruthlessly suppressed, and usually its leader was killed. But the young worker, conscious now of the mission that united him to the whole working class, marched on toward new battles.

In part this story reflected the pattern of actual strikes, like that in Gastonia. In part it echoed the slogans of the Communists in days when their chief contact with industrial workers was through the small revolutionary unions they had organized in fields where the struggle was so bitter and hopeless that ordinary trade unions were frightened off. In those days the Communists never won a big strike; and except in the fur trade they rarely or never succeeded in holding the gains sometimes made in smaller strikes. Their plan must have been to march on from defeat to defeat, always training more recruits—like the young worker of the strike novel—till they were strong enough to face the final conflict.

Midway in the 1930's, the Communist Party changed its policy, dissolved its revolutionary unions, softened its attacks on middle-class liberals and tried to win over all men of good will. It made converts of some writers and influenced many others, directly or indirectly. That helps to explain a literary development for which there were other causes as well. Briefly, the proletarian novelists began writing with greater freedom, finding different subjects and experimenting in

new forms. There were sharecropper novels—of which “Tobacco Road” was the first and best—and shanty-Irish novels like “Studs Lonigan.” There were industrial novels in which the subject, instead of being a strike, was the daily monotony and seasonal insecurity of the men on the assembly line. There were intimate novels of working-class life, with the class struggle present only as a dim but pervasive background. There were collective novels in which the hero was not an individual but a group, usually the workers of a single factory or town. The most ambitious book of the decade—“U.S.A.,” by John Dos Passos—was a collective novel in which the hero was the country as a whole.

From the very beginning, the novels of social protest received a critical attention that was out of all proportion to their popularity, considering that very few had a sale of more than 2,500 copies. Even the worst of them were extravagantly praised in the left-wing press; even the best were bitterly attacked not only by conservatives but also by dissident radicals and former radicals. By 1936 a whole chorus was chanting that proletarian literature was dead and buried. Yet it was not until 1939 that a proletarian novel, “Christ in Concrete,” received an almost official recognition by being chosen as a Book of the Month. Another proletarian novel, “The Grapes of Wrath,” was not only a best seller but the most widely read book of the year.

I do not think it is the absolutely superb novel that some critics have called it. The plot is too weak for that—at least in the last two hundred pages—and the ending is theatrical and inconclusive. Yet it shows how proletarian literature had refined itself in the ten preceding years; had built itself a method, a tradition and finally a public. Although “The Grapes of Wrath” is by no means an imitative book, it could not have been written without a whole series of experiments to guide its author—for example those of Dos Passos, which must have suggested the interludes used to broaden the story of the Joads into that of a whole people; and those of William Faulkner in “As I Lay Dying,” where a sharecropping family travels obstinately with a corpse; and the drawling conversation of “Tobacco Road”; and the violence of Steinbeck’s earlier novel, “In Dubious Battle,” where he first wrote about a strike among the fruit pickers—not to speak of what he learned from documentary films like “The Plow That Broke the Plains” and “The River.” A whole literature is summarized in this book, and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence.

A second cluster of events that affected literature during the 1930’s grew out of our relations to the rest of the world. First it was the Russian Five Year Plan that impressed us, then the rise of Hitler that frightened us, then the war in Spain that engaged our sympathies. As crisis followed crisis in Europe; as parliaments were silenced and labor unions suppressed,

people began to feel that this was one of the few countries able to solve its problems by democratic methods. But they also felt that our security was threatened—vaguely at first by fascism, then more definitely by war—and many decided that our fate was bound up with that of Europe and the world. Others preached our duty to stand apart, but that in itself was proof of our involvement. In the days when isolation was a fact and not a doctrine, nobody bothered to talk about it.

That is the general background, but the international situation also affected writers in their own persons. The depression brought hundreds of them home from Europe. Though their reason for returning was in many cases merely that their money had run out, they showed the usual tendency of writers to find historical motives and make a necessary action appear as a free and long premeditated choice. They rediscovered America, in one book after another, and it was a different America from the country they had deserted early in the 1920’s. To carry the process one step farther, European writers began to follow them westward, as political refugees or tourists, so that New York became a capital of world literature. Its importance began to be recognized abroad.

The effect of these events can be traced in hundreds of books. For example, it is evident in the long series of goodbyes—to Paris, to the south of France, to Majorca, to Moscow, to China—that were published after 1934. Most of them were written in an elegiac tone, but still with the feeling that America was somehow better and was at any rate our country. Again it is evident in the books dealing with the wars in Spain and China, by American observers or participants. It is evident in the anti-fascist novels, not all of which are melodramas. It is evident in the memoirs of foreign correspondents, among which Vincent Sheean’s “Personal History” is still by far the best. But it is also hidden in books where world affairs are not directly treated, but where they deeply affect the intellectual and emotional background. Americans have begun to write with their eyes on the world overseas.

The third cluster of events was connected with the closing of the business frontier. Competition among small corporations was giving way to price-fixing and the division of territory among big corporations; in a word, risk and change were giving way to a small-vised stability. What this means in terms of corporate structures, dividends, prices and wages has been studied in a whole series of economic monographs. What it means in terms of daily life has still to be explored. The truth seems to be that during the last ten years, the American middle class has slowly built up a different set of ideals. Once the whole aim was getting ahead, with hard work and privation willingly endured as the price of ultimate success. Now, as opportunities in business become fewer and less dramatic,

the aim is security at a somewhat lower level—that and making the best of what one has. America is beginning to resemble Europe before the First World War. There is a growing interest in the amenities of life—in cooking and gardening and decoration, in bridge and croquet, in neighborhood gossip and community affairs. There is a growing determination to hold on to one's position in society; and there is a corresponding fear of change, of the private or public misfortunes that might lead to losing one's job.

The effects on literature of this process are a little harder to trace than those of the social struggles that began with the depression. Obviously we are dealing here with the middle class rather than the proletariat, and with a state of mind rather than the events that produced it. But the state of mind is revealed in a whole group of books—like "Rich Land, Poor Land" and "Deserts on the March"—that call for the preservation of our natural resources. And it is revealed even more strikingly, I think, in the popularity of historical novels and dramas. "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" was the most successful play of 1939; "Anthony Adverse" and "Gone with the Wind" were the two most successful novels of the decade—and of the century as well, in dollar volume of sales. A man rising in the world is not concerned with history; he is too busy making it. But a citizen with a fixed place in the community wants to acquire a glorious past just as he acquires antique furniture. By that past he is reassured of his present importance; in it he finds strength to face the dangers that lie in front of him.

It is still too early to judge the literature of the 1930's, qualitatively and comparatively. The lasting works, those built, so to say, in stone, have not yet been disengaged from the plywood and tarpaper shacks that surround them. In 1905, hardly anyone could have guessed that the most important novel of that decade was a half-forgotten book called "Sister Carrie," printed in a first edition of a thousand copies, most of which were then gathering dust in a publisher's warehouse. In 1939 we may be equally blind or ill informed as to the important books of the decade that has just ended. Yet certain features of those years can already be recorded. They will be known, I think, as lean years for poetry, with no major figures appearing. They will be known as middling rich years for the novel. They will be known as decidedly rich years for autobiography, and as lively years for criticism. They will be known as the years when Crane and Wolfe, those two heraldic beasts, projected their vast legends of America, without supplying the knowledge or sympathy that might have filled in the bold outlines created by an act of will. They will be known as the years of the hard-boiled novel. They will be known as the years when general magazines declined—and the profession of literary free-lance along with them—and when most

of the comfortable incomes earned by writers were earned in Hollywood. They will be known as years when the public standing of literature improved, as a result of the greater leisure for reading. Beyond that, it is hard to fix their value. To me they seem more interesting than the 1920's and comparable in many respects with the period that preceded the First World War, though probably less fruitful.

And now they have ended, by an act of statesmanship, an act of violence and an act of the calendar.

As for the literature of the next ten years, I should prefer to write about it in 1949. It will continue to mirror what is happening in the world at large—that much is safe to say. Yet even if we had before us a complete chart of historical events during the 1940's, we still could not predict the nature of the poems and novels that such events would inspire; too much of literature depends on individual talent and simple human perversity. There will always be writers who

So much despise the crowd, that if the throng
By chance goes right, they purposely go wrong.

Normally we may expect that the principal tendencies of the 1930's will continue during the following decades, until they have exhausted their possibilities or, more likely, their public appeal, or else are halted by some such catastrophe as our entrance into the war, in 1917, which was the effective end of what used to be called the American renaissance. The new war in Europe may be the occasion for such a catastrophe. But whatever happens, we may expect that newer tendencies will also be followed. For example, one can foresee a literature of disillusionment that was announced by Dos Passos' "Adventures of a Young Man" and that will certainly be encouraged by the mood growing out of the Russo-German pact. And one can foresee a new mysticism, already indicated by the growing interest in novelists like Kafka.

Whether great books will be written, no one can say. The only statement to be ventured is that we now have certain conditions for great books that were formerly lacking. As late as 1920, this country continued to labor under the domination of English standards and under a sense of inferiority that sometimes took the form of aggressive nationalism. The intelligent reading public was comparatively small; the amateur censors were active. There were many writers of talent, but few of professional seriousness and trained competence. All that has been changed in the last twenty years. Perhaps the greatest difference is in the number of writers who, by permanent standards, are second-rate, and yet are intelligent and determined to do their best work. Although they will never produce great books, they help to produce them, by creating the necessary background and the nourishing tradition. In such men lies the promise of American literature.

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