

INTRODUCTION

When John Dos Passos gathered up his travel sketches of Spain to put them together in a book, he called it *Rocinante to the Road Again*. These words might well be echoed whenever any novelist has written a new novel. It is certainly true for Northern American novelists. William Faulkner attested to this fact when he reread *Don Quixote* every year. The writers I shall be discussing in these seminars were all modernists. All of them, to be sure, had their roots in the past. Indeed, their sibyl, Gertrude Stein, used to like to say that the United States was "the oldest country in the world," and on one occasion she explained what she meant: that the twentieth century had begun with us just after our Civil War, when transportation and communication were technologized with resultant changes in the cultural outlook.

In the past, a European sojourn had been a school for American writers and artists. "Paris was where the twenties was," said Madam Stein. Somewhat more grammatically, Dos Passos detected "an unprecedented explosion, a creative tidal wave that converged at Paris and spread out to distant shores." Modernism had fostered a multiplication of "isms": cubism, dadaism, surrealism, futurism, ultraism. We could trace historic correlations with the development of science on the one hand and with revolution, political and social, on the other. The emphasis was on experimentation, the avant-garde, movements which were viewed by German critics as "Kultur-bolschewismus."

In the nineteenth century, exponents of American literature aimed at a search for self-identity, independence, individuality, and a sense of its own uniqueness. In the twentieth century it found a realization, a recognition as one of the world's major literatures, rather than as a colonial branch whose outstanding talents—say Henry James or T.S. Eliot—would be accepted as naturalized Englishman. If we want a textbook date in round numbers, we might take 1930, when Sinclair Lewis became the first American to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. There have been seven since, not counting Eliot, by then a

British subject, or Isaac Bashevis Singer, an American citizen who wrote in Yiddish mostly about his native Poland.

Whereas what we would like to call our American Renaissance—from Emerson through Whitman—was engaged in working out a manifesto, a bill of rights, our writers of the twenties were engaged in working out a critique, a criticism of what had gone before. Critics were exposing—debunking, in H.L. Mencken's term—what they looked back on as the genteel tradition, pieties and platitudes, and exposing the philistinism of the bumbling, well-meaning, go-getting business man personified by Lewis' anti-hero, George F. Babbitt.

Through her reaction from a fading gentility, from the hierarchies and matriarchies and tribal customs of old New York, as a protégée of her fellow cosmopolitan, Henry James, Edith Wharton could distance her perspective, like an anthropologist surveying the natives, or like the deracinated heroine of her *The Age of Innocence*. And hence that book might serve as a retrospective prologue to our further discussions. Appearing in 1920, it won the national Pulitzer Prize for fiction in that year, though the jury had recommended Lewis' *Main Street* and was subsequently reversed. It's hard to think of two more different novels about American life appearing in the same year. There was a generous exchange between Mrs. Wharton and Lewis, who six years later won the prize for *Arrowsmith*, a satiric study of the medical profession.

That same year, 1920, also saw the emergence of F. Scott Fitzgerald at twenty-four, jauntily if naively speaking up for the college generation. "Here was a new generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds, destined finally to go out into that dirty gray turmoil, to follow love and pride. A new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success, grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faith in man shaken." That was not exactly a credo, quite the opposite; it was a skeptical recoil from traditional values and a reassertion of the ego.

Not long thereafter, Ernest Hemingway's first collection of stories and sketches appeared, entitled *In Our Time*. In our time? Today, the present hour, the very moment. Always showing and never telling—the modernistic formula for narrative—Hemingway involved us with

a peculiar immediacy in that sequence of thought and motion which produces emotion. When the Spanish gunner is ready to shoot or be shot in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, his mind is pervaded by a single adverb in four languages: "now, ahora, heute, maintenant." Of course, "now" moves on very quickly. In the generation after Hemingway's death, his nows have become our thens. He has been so echoed, so imitated –not the least by his later self– that the nowness, the newness, the novelty of his stylistic innovations, then so fresh, would be hard to recapture today.

That style was his reaction against conventional rhetoric, and as with other war novelists, notably Dos Passos, against the propaganda of the first world war, and its official American propagandist, President Woodrow Wilson. Along with Dos Passos, E.E. Cummings, and many other writers, Hemingway served as a Red Cross ambulance driver, then playing a spectatorial part in World War I. Witnessing the defeat of the Italians by the Austrians at Caporetto, he registered its incisive impact through this famous statement in *A Farewell to Arms*:

After that he could not but be embarrassed by abstract words such as "glory" and "honor", "courage" and "sacrifice." True meaning could only reside in the names of places, roads, and rivers, or the numbers of regiments and the dates. (Otherwise, the signifiers had lost their significance. Verbiage had to be renounced in favor of the simplest and most immediate realities. Slogans, speeches, proclamations, posters, meant nothing as compared to the basic acts of living, eating, drinking, loving, fighting, and dying.

It is paradoxical, with this quintessentially American writer, that so little of his fiction takes place on American soil; much of it, indeed, takes place in Spain or Hispanic America. Yet the members –he himself and others– of what Gertrude Stein liked to call "the lost generation" found themselves while finding their way home.

Nostalgically, Thomas Wolfe could echo Milton's watchword, *Look Homeward, Angel*, but his last book, issued posthumously, was *You Can't Go Home Again*. You could, but it wasn't the same. People were changing gradually from agrarian to urban, and so was the

terrain. The last frontier had been reached by the turn of the century; the homestead lands were being settled and cultivated by new pioneers from the East and from Northern Europe. The struggles over the land by Czech and Swedish farmers, and particularly their wives and daughters, were celebrated by Willa Cather in the classical prose of *Oh! Pioneers* and *My Ántonia*.

Meanwhile, the prairies of the Midwest were being dotted with small towns, points of junction and disjunction between the Yankee shopkeepers and the ethnic types now tilling the soil. Lewis had made Gopher Prairie a stereotype for that kind of provincialism in *Main Street*: if you've seen one, you've seen them all. But that message did not apply to *Winesburg, Ohio* or to its author, Sherwood Anderson, who believed that every single human being was unique. With psychoanalytic insight he managed to present an interrelated series of case histories in frustrated love and quiet desperation.

"You have to have somewhere to start from," said William Faulkner. "Then, you begin to learn." If our Southern Renaissance has been so rich, it is because its roots had gone so deep. Faulkner enlarged the dimensions of his individual novels, historically as well as geographically, by setting them in the imaginary province he created, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. But he was a good deal more than a regionalist. A notable foreign observer, André Gide, declared that Faulkner's work was as universal as Greek tragedy. He based this observation on the understanding that universality must be grounded in particulars. Over the tragic doom of the house of Compson—or, for that matter, Sutpen or Sartoris—hangs the fateful shadow of our Civil War, and the national sin of negro slavery to be repented and expiated. Faulkner is perhaps the sole American novelist who could approach such Europeans as Trollope, Balzac or Galdos in the scale and solidity of his oeuvre, that fertile progression from volume to volume whereby the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Hemingway tells us in his novella, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* about a brief exchange between himself and Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's provocative statement was, "The rich are different," and Hemingway's wisecracking response was, "Yes, they have more money." But

Hemingway missed Fitzgerald's point, that the quantity of income determines the quality of life, for better and for worse. The novelist must have an eye for the manners, the habits, the nuances of lifestyle. This does not necessarily mean that he must move in affluent circles, as Henry James and Edith Wharton and often Fitzgerald did; the underprivileged have mores of their own, which are shaped by their very lack of affluence.

Thus Lionel Trilling could refer to the Studs Lonigan trilogy of James T. Farrell, as three novels of manners. Bad manners –What else?– grounded as they were in the slums of Chicago, straining against the ties of the Catholic church and the Irish-American family, led astray not by the romances of Amadis of Gaul, but by movies and speakeasies. Farrell began where Theodore Dreiser left off, deeply concerned with environmental conditions in the very same environment, Chicago, a generation later. But Dreiser's determinism was tempered by Farrell's radicalism. Even as his would-be tough guy, Studs Lonigan lies dying, exhausted, the note of protest is brought home by a political demonstration rallying nearby.

Proletarian fiction has seldom been written, and almost never read, by members of the proletariat. Yet a novelist's involvement with the dispossessed has always warmed and expanded his sympathies. These were quite Dickensian for John Steinbeck. When he was not romping with the Chicanos at Monterey in his native California, he was analyzing the anatomy of a strike with *In Dubious Battle*. But his migratory workers are out of work more often than not. His Okies have their jalopies, his exiles from Oklahoma have their broken-down motorcars, as they head westward in *The Grapes of Wrath*, hoping against hope to live like the pair in *Of Mice and Men*, "on the fat of the land." But that Biblical phrase would ring hollow in a decade of famine.

In the decade that especially concerns us, which ended with a worldwide crash in 1929, the year of *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sound and the Fury*, post-war has again become a pre-war period. The manic Twenties, setting the rhythms for the Jazz Age, would give way to the depressive Thirties, with their strikes and breadlines. Totalitarianism abroad made leftists at home out of many intellectuals. That period

—as I believe— begins in 1927 with the Sacco-Vanzetti case and culminates just ten years afterward with the Spanish Civil War.

The original postwar release from inhibition, moving toward self-discovery, Freudian or otherwise, was countered legally by Prohibition, the constitutional amendment forbidding the sale of liquor. Those fourteen years of prohibition proved unworkable; but meanwhile it created an underworld, and fostered rebellious patterns in modern behavior which seriously endangered the second acts of literary careers. "Everybody was drunk" is the first sentence of Hemingway's *In Our Time*. Flouting the law became a dashing gesture, a mystique of living dangerously, reinforcing the cult of self-expression with the two-fold allure of drink and sex. "A whole race going hedonistic, dealing in pleasure," noted Fitzgerald, himself the laureate of sensation and luxury. It is significant that his most glamorous hero, Jay Gatsby, turns out to have been neither a captain nor a king nor a *caballero* andante, neither a pioneer nor an astronaut, but a bootlegger, a purveyor of illicit liquor. And yet, as such, a romantic outlaw. Our curve descends with the economic slump, as attention shifts toward more humanitarian concerns, away from the individual and toward society. Our novelists become committed, *engagés*, which is why they were so admired and emulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, who attested John Dos Passos to be "the greatest living writer." The work that prompted his tribute, *The U.S.A.* trilogy, rounds out our cycle. It chronicles the first thirty years of the twentieth century and its three volumes were published during the thirties. It covers its exceptionally vast terrain by moving back and forth from city to city: Washington for politics, New York for finance, Detroit for industry, Hollywood for entertainment, and for recreation Miami Beach; crossing over the Mexican border, visiting Cuba, and spending the second volume, *1919*, in France.

Dos Passos had already attacked war in his first two novels; here he attacked the phony peace of Versailles. He utilized various devices of collage and montage, inspired by James Joyce, and also by films and popular songs, to create an atmosphere of pluralism and diversity. Lives of characters are historically interwoven with the biographies of actual figures ranging from the trenchant satire on

president Wilson to the Whitmanesque eulogy of the Unknown Soldier. These are interspersed with lyrical glimpses into the author's mind. At one time he is reading Juvenal, the Latin poet who found it impossible not to write satire while he watched the Roman republic turning into an empire; and another time Dos Passos harks back "I, too, Walt Whitman" to the poet's nostalgic vision of "our storybook democracy."

Our literature has always harbored strong components of self-criticism. Yet every satirist must project his guided missiles from a launching pad of positive belief, and here the positive values are those which had been envisioned as the American dream. Faulkner once wrote an article and planned a book on that subject: *Whatever Happened to the American Dream?* Fitzgerald's response would be given on the last page of *The Great Gatsby*, where the narrator makes his nocturnal farewell to the scene of all those gaudy festivities. Now the parties are over, the lights are out, the doors are shut. And Nick Carraway imagines that Long Island setting as it must first have appeared to the Dutch explorers in the primal innocence of the new world: ...the last and greatest of all human dreams. For a transitory enchanted moment, man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And Nick Carraway ruefully concludes that the American dream no longer prefigures the future; it belongs to the past.

Satire yields to tragedy at that juncture, and there is a sense in which many of our novels could use the title that Dreiser gave to his last novel, *An American Tragedy*. Tragedy to the Greeks was the noblest of modes because it was able to face adverse conditions heroically. Such a message was summed up by Faulkner in 1950, when he received the Nobel Prize in the international wake of the atom bomb. "I decline," he dramatically affirms, "to accept the end of Man," and went on to assert that man would endure and prevail.

This points us toward cosmic vistas beyond my sphere. Faulkner himself was less concerned with prevalence than with endurance, as

exemplified by the black citizens of Yoknapatawpha County. All I would claim at this point for my subject is its continuity, not only with the past and with the future, but with the other cultures of the world today.