

A SHORT VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION *

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If literature is what we believe it to be, a transcript of thought and experience, then our time should be producing a record of excitement and concern. Yet at first sight, and at second, this seems not to be happening in America and Britain, certainly not in respect to fiction. The consensus is that it is a dry time. Death and age have taken their toll, and replacements in number have not come forward. Other talents have tired or grown slack. Altogether the pulse has been growing so slow as to suggest catalepsy if not *rigor mortis*. Such a situation needs explanation, but no completely satisfactory answer is forthcoming. Some would account for it by a paralysis of doubt and fear besetting us. That answer seems too simple, too like an "official version." We know that letters are a child of the spirit and "the spirit bloweth where it listeth." Moreover, the luxuriant jungle growth of commercially inspired fiction quite belies the theory that our world predicament inhibits the writing faculty. Certainly what mediocrity can do, talent should do even better. In any case, the fact of leanness is inescapable and deserves study.

Let us begin with a little stocktaking. In our own country, as we all know, it has been a long time since we have heard from such respected figures as Faulkner and Hemingway. Willa Cather has gone. Steinbeck seems merely intent on rechauffing some of his earlier successes for the double market of bookclub and film. What is *Cannery Row* but *Tortilla Flat* redone without verve; and what is *The Wayward Bus* but the charabancing tourists of *The Pastures of Heaven* cast away upon the demonic earth of *To a God Unknown*? Similarly, Sinclair Lewis repeats himself; *Cass Timberlane*, that ugly survey of American marriage, is distressingly full of echoes. For one small example, do not the Zebra sisters of that book recall the "chickabiddies," Almus Pickerbaugh's brood, in *Arrowsmith*? But also it is a far call. The satire of pure good-nature and true laughter has turned mean and jaundiced. Mr. Lewis is now at

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ease in Zion, but he is not on that account a pleasant person. James T. Farrell in carrying Bernard Clare, the third of his major heroes, from Chicago to New York has merely achieved a change of place. John Dos Passos, having apparently given over fiction, must now be read if at all in the pages of *Life* magazine, where he appears in full flight from the brilliant record of his long-time liberalism. Only John O'Hara seems in form with his acid etchings.

The British scene exhibits much the same impoverishment. By and large, the great names of the earlier century have not been replaced. E. M. Forster, silent since his *Passage to India*, has lived on to become a classic, the subject of study and revival. Aldous Huxley has apparently been absorbed into the "common ground" of his shamanistic inquiry, an event for some time foreseeable and unregrettable for fiction *qua* fiction. Robert Graves continues to potter learnedly among ancient cultures; of course, he is an old casualty from the earlier war. He and Huxley together represent withdrawal from the arena of conflict: the one into the alluring vistas of an unchanging past, the other into the deeps of metaphysics. Perhaps along with these figures of retreat should be included Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, both converts to Roman Catholicism. Waugh's conversion, however, seems to have done very little to alter his splenetic temper or to increase his love for his fellowmen, with the result that in *Brideshead Revisited* Catholicism appears merely as a sentimental and highly inappropriate addition to the portrayal of some peculiarly repulsive people. A better pleader for the validity of the Catholic answer is Graham Greene in his *Labyrinthine Ways*. Among the names of Catholic converts, Bruce Marshall too should be mentioned, although his is a lesser talent.

Among other British names, J. B. Priestley and Howard Spring continue to show predilection for the late Victorian age in which they grew up. Mr. Priestley's *Bright Day*, warmly nostalgic, is perhaps his best novel since *Angel Pavement*. Mrs. Thirkell continues to be industrious with her sharp comedy of manners in the new Barsetshire that she has superimposed upon Trollope's earlier one. And in her train comes John Moore, a man of sentiment. Rosamund Lehman has written nothing since the beautiful Jamesian revelation of *The Ballad and the Source*; and Elizabeth Bowen nothing since the subtleties of *The Ivy Grippled the Steps*. Rumer Godden, capable in the style of a kind of popular Virginia Woolf,

has produced nothing recently but the slight *The River*. Kate O'Brien, the Galsworthy of the Irish bourgeoisie, was last heard from in the Spain of Philip II. Her fellow countryman, Liam O'Flaherty, has lapsed into unreadability. And across in Scotland, J. B. Cronin, having apparently mined out the last thin vein of memory, is reported to be emigrating to us for permanent settlement; while Somerset Maugham basks in the sun as a kind of beslippered critic. Altogether, it is clear that current production from our older authors constitutes no great achievement, scarcely enough to go on with unless recruitments are found.

On the other hand, there is great activity upon the level of commercially stimulated writing. The popular appetite for fiction remains as strong as ever and the supply continues equal to it. A great roaring trade supplies the desired commodity and promotes it by all the tested techniques for increasing mass consumption. The resulting books are fiction but not letters. Their intention is entertainment (a worthy purpose) and presumably they afford it to many people. Perhaps their devotees are not so numerous as those of Hollywood, but none the less a profitable constituency. And in any case connection with the film city is close. Indeed, book and film together can be regarded as the twin poles of one grand nexus of popular entertainment. On occasion one may puzzle which should take the original credit, as with William Saroyan's *Human Comedy*. As books, these are the titles that compose the lists of "best-sellers" week by week. They need not detain us long, no matter how inescapable the phenomenon. Sometimes a fairly good book like Gerald Brace's *Garrettson Chronicle* gets among them and is whirled toward the top; or the book of a Marquand or a Hilton, men once capable of better things, or at least the promise of them, but now grown lymphatic. At the worst we find such items as the notorious *Amber* or *This Side of Innocence*. Here historical novels range innumerable over history and geography, to culminate in a pseudo-epic like *Raintree County*, derivative quite as much from the tradition of Margaret Mitchell and Hervey Allen as from Joyce and Wolfe. And here the documentaries find their field: Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, a study in homosexuality that in its thoroughness may vie with the Kinsey report, provides a current example. And here too are the semi-documentaries (the prefix "semi" indicates dilution by romantic interest) as found in the current offerings of Maritta

Woolf or Mary Anne Ward. And here again we see chains of successes proliferating their kind as in the pictures; novels of proletarian illiterates, preferably Irish, whose struggles are supposed to be somehow heartwarming; or novels dealing with the occupational hazards of advertising and journalism; or novels dealing with anti-semitism.

So moves the great system. It seems that little can be done about it, and I for one should be as little inclined to quarrel with it as with comic books (another phenomenon of literary substitution upon a still lower level) if it did not tend to have a lowering effect upon better books. Inescapably one has noticed the heroic rescue work of publicity immediately begun at the first sign of a "best-seller's" going off. Contrarily, one may occasionally be rejoiced to see a book extorting belatedly deserved advertisements from its publisher. In such a case the book has first caught on of itself. Jessamyn West's *The Gentle Persuasion*, of a couple of years ago, and Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding* are instances on point. But what of other books less fortunate? With the publishers gone out after their own game and the critics not very keen (let it be said!) in the chief places of public notice, they are likely to be lost to the discouragement of the authors and the deprivation of the public. For examples, two of the best books of last year were Walter O'Meara's *The Trees Went Forth* and Edward Havill's *Big Ember*. And perhaps for a third, Feike Feikema's *This is the Year* should be added. The first two mentioned are written with a simplicity befitting their lack of pretension. They are not great novels but worthwhile ones constructed from sound materials and honestly put together. At the least, they are the kind of books that we need more of, sincere, literate, satisfying. In themselves they constitute an evidence that more is moving in our fiction than at first meets the eye or is commonly accounted for. Meanwhile, the entrenched system of "puffing" and club distribution keeps the person with a modicum of literary interest incurious and complacent, having read *The Moneyman* or *Gentleman from Castile*.

But what of books of a more distinguished style by newer hands? Are there none in this drought time? The answer is yes, some, more even than few. Within the last year, and particularly within the last half year, there seems to be a stirring that may portend happy changes. It is too early to evaluate these talents or even to suppose that all that may be in the way

of emerging have actually come into view; but a beginning does seem making. Like the spring green it is thin, but the sight is grateful. For one thing it bids to put an end to the reproach that this generation is artistically uncreative. If our fiction at large be regarded as some vast, scarcely moving pool scattered with refuse, these new books are a small actively turning center that can prove to us that the wonted forces, seemingly dormant, are at work. Perhaps the great maelstrom is resuming its period. Perhaps not. In any case, there is matter for encouragement in this small body of new, serious work.

In some the talent seems as yet imperfectly harnessed. Such a one is John Horne Burns, whose bright and animated African and Neapolitan pictures in *The Gallery* must certainly be noticed. Here is crowding and excess but also a promise. And promising too, more soberly, is Robert Gibbons, whose *The Patchwork Time*, in spite of pretentiousness and fumbling, succeeds in striking off many vivid indications of character and place in a small town of the deep South.

More deftly the artist is Truman Capote. His writing as writing seems to go a long way to justify Mr. Cyril Connolly's kind words. But it appears that his gift is limited by its being purely descriptive. He can make the reader see places with a kind of wand-magic. He waves and one sees the little Southern village choking in sloth somewhere beyond the bayou swamp; another pass, and one sees the great mansion half-destroyed with its garden run wild. Or again, on the borderland of dream he renders a more phantasmal scene, a tawdry carnival in purple and gold, its bright lights vanishing in a storm; or some particular fearful image like that of the mule with shiny eyes self-hanged in its harness from the rotten balcony of an abandoned hotel lobby. With his people, a mere horrid puppetry, he is less successful; and to his protagonist he gives so little inward life that one scarcely comes to know him at all and so can scarcely guess his fate at the end.

Perhaps the most distinguished American novel at the moment from the point of view of style is Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March*. His dossier of purported documents relating the last days of Great Caesar is amusingly clever until it begins to pall, but throughout it is notable for its precise, low-toned prose suggestive of the great tradition it mimics. Paradoxically, the effect of this

limpid medium is at once to suggest distance and space and marmoreal vistas, whilst it secures too the intimacy of a clear glass pane opening on neighbors. The story is beautifully noncommittal; it teases with its implications.

That there exists a large reading public eager for better written books is evidenced not only by the success of Mr. Wilder's book, but by other current successes attributable largely to the quality of the ware. As an example of these may be taken Frank O'Connor's *The Common Chord*, a volume of stories developed about the theme of the repressed sexual mores of the Irish. Mr. O'Connor has not done nearly so well by himself in this his latest effort as in his *Crab-apple Jelly*, which marked him as a fine stylist and a wit; nevertheless his loyal public has given it an extraordinarily hearty welcome.

In the same way, A. L. Barker's *The Innocents* (first winner of the annual Somerset Maugham Award) has won immediate favor. The stories which involve a psychological interest are beautifully projected in terms of sensuous values that help transmute their somewhat ugly material. Miss Barker has remarkable powers of evocation. At present they are being employed on comparatively trifling exercises; still immediately the public is up with interest.

For whatever it may betoken, the books of greatest technical originality or complication are coming out of England. One wonders what they represent: whether a despairing turn-away from the confused present to find the solace of a pure artistic creation; or a confidence to proceed in the refinement of already well-established patterns in a public art. Two such books have been to the fore in recent months. One of them, Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*, has been fairly widely read and critically much admired. Mr. White is an Australian and his tale begins in that land. Its development falls into three sections: the first wherein the protagonist, Theodosia Goodman, is shown as a frustrated young woman released by the death of her mother from a loveless service; the second wherein, at a pension on the Riviera, Theodosia loses her mind; and the third wherein she, wandering in our own West, is mad. In telling this simple story of an inhibition conducing to madness, Mr. White, with great virtuosity in his handling of language, which he uses as a poetic-prose medium, works some very subtle changes upon the standard stream-of-consciousness

technique. In the first episode, the style is simple and clear as befits rationality; in the second episode, the language begins to show strange warpings. In a kind of indirect discourse of the stream of consciousness, Theodosia is going mad. The action becomes increasingly unreal, the language, boldly metaphoric. In the third episode the style again becomes easy. Theodosia has passed over, her tensions have ceased. So her world (and the reader's) becomes clear again, although now hers is a very "private world."

Even more elaborate is Philip Toynbee's *Tea with Mrs. Goodman*, voted by a band of English critics one of the most significant novels of last year. It has recently made an untouted appearance in this country. Here the novel becomes, if possible, more involuted. The single scene is a richly furnished living-room in Coburg Square, evidently a semi-subterranean chamber, a darkling room with green light from the plants in its windows. Into this place (a womb symbol, a world symbol, a grave symbol) there come nine people to an afternoon tea; and all that is shown is revealed through the visual and auditory impressions of seven of these. Thus a little circle of impression is created, running from one to the other of the consciousnesses involved, the same few words recurring as spoken or overheard, but interpreted with a world of difference as each sentence colors them for him- or herself. Strong and distinct personalities appear, disparate yet complementary and even identical at the most unlikely points. Of course, these people are symbols, figures of the race in its progress from youth to age and in its ambivalences of life: love and hatred, fear and courage, wisdom and superstition, etc. Accordingly, Father Morton, the aged priest, can know himself literally to be also the embarrassed boy who breaks a cup; while the mature Mrs. Goodman and Daisy Tillett, the young girl, are but facets of one psyche, the eternal female, Cybele-Artemis. Life is a dance, its law return; and even a tea party is a microcosm, with its entrances and departures, birth and death, and the strategy of its conversations, the adventures of the soul *in petto*. In brief, *Tea with Mrs. Goodman* becomes a kind of miniscule *Finnegan's Wake* with all the difficulties appertaining thereto; and like Joyce's work, too, shot through with beauty and with wit sometimes shocking in putridity.

On the whole, the British picture certainly seems more conservative than our own, although perhaps slightly more active. On

the other hand, the infiltration of the English scene by something akin to our own "hard-boiled" school must be noted. This phenomenon, foreshadowed in such a book as Richard Llewellyn's *None but the Lonely Heart*, is now actualized in the work of Gerald Kersh, whose fluent pen continues to turn out study after study of criminality or quasi-criminality in the "world of London." Kersh is a careless writer, loose, uneven, and often tasteless, but his revelations pack a real punch as he intends they should. Certainly not of the artistic stature of a Hemingway, he does with gusto the same sort of brutal job, seemingly out of a first-hand knowledge.

The work of Christopher Isherwood is even more noteworthy. He too commands the picture of a society in disorder—not a criminal society but one in a general and unconscious disintegration. In *Goodbye to Mr. Norris* and the *Berlin Stories* he depicted Germany in the extreme of its pre-Hitler phase, and in *Prater Violet* he shows Britain in similar phase, different in its quiet surface, of course, but similar in its inward rot. Isherwood's seems the gift of an extraordinary social awareness; and this he is able to transmit with impact through a disarmingly simple style. To compare *Prater Violet* with an earlier book like *The Memorial* is to discover how far he has come in the mastery of his craft, and to hope that he may go on farther.

Still there is a farther range of those books especially significant in their facing up to the human schism, ideological and moral, that threatens to divide the world. These books, not numerous, are among the fresh arrivals. They are not to be counted for great art, although some of them are skillfully done. Rather their best claim would seem to be their sense of the dilemma of choice as it presses imperiously upon the individual and society today and their attempts at analyzing that situation. They are thoughtful books, perhaps too studiously analytical, but modest in their assertion and manifestly sincere. Their answers and points of view are various, but together they supply the beginning of a possible humane critique of the period. They are a true reflex of men thinking.

Among those recent books that spell out most explicitly the terms of the problem are Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey* and Kenneth S. Davis's *The Years of the Pilgrimage*. In both of these books is illustrated the difficult, indeed scarcely

tenable, position of the traditional American liberal, that is, the idealist and man of good will, caught as he is between the forces of the right and the left; his growing isolation as extremists recruit their parties for an unprincipled struggle (no matter what the disguises) for power. Mr. Trilling lets us witness this marshalling of sides among a group of old friends in a summer-house in Connecticut, a strictly limited microcosm. Arthur Croom has been a New Dealish professor at Columbia. He and his wife Nancy are now "fellow-travellers" of Communism; indeed, Nancy has even further committed herself; and what she is, her husband will be. On the other hand, their old friend Gifford Maxim, a very active Communist, has recoiled from that authoritarian system to embrace another, by implication, that of Rome. These are people changing position in the tides of the time and are to be taken as typical. Only John Laskell, the protagonist, maintains his position as a moderate liberal, believing man "neither beast nor angel." His view of what he saw happening to his friends and by extension to our generation is as follows:

The idealism of Nancy and Arthur, which, raised to a higher degree, had once been the idealism of Maxim himself, had served now for some years the people who demanded ideas on which to build their lives. It had presented the world as in movement and drama, had offered the possibility of heroism or martyrdom, had made available the gift of commitment and virtue to those who chose to grasp it. But Laskell saw that the intellectual power had gone from that system of idealism and much of its power of drama had gone. The time was getting ripe for a competing system. And it would be brought by the swing of the pendulum, not by the motion of growth. Maxim was riding the pendulum.

In short, what is preparing is a struggle of rival absolutes, each demanding man's unconditional acceptance. Maxim, stirred to anger by the resistance of his former friends to the claims of his new procrustean creed and particularly by Laskell's persisting moderation, forcefully sums up the issue in an angry defy:

"You are being proud of that flexibility of mind. It is too late for that—the Renaissance is dead. . . . You know it as well as I do—the day for being human in the way you feel is now over. Gone. Done for. Finished. Maybe it will come again. But not for a long time, John, not until the Crooms and I (extremists but opposites) have won and established ourselves against the anarchy of the world."

Against this arrogant utterance, however, the power of insight if not of retort is given to Laskell, who perceives that Maxim's anger is the "anger of the masked will at the appearance of an idea in modulation."

It is upon a very similar situation in the prairie town of Beecher, Kansas, that light is thrown in "The Years of the Pilgrimage." Here the ranged forces of absolutism and liberalism are particularized in the persons of Harcourt Stevens, the town's wealthiest and most famous son and a fascist-minded mystic, and Ferris Morehead, the pastor of the historic Congregational Church of the town. To the philosophical pastor:

Harcourt Stevens was one symptom of a spreading disease. It seemed to him obvious that what Stevens had done in his so-called philosophy was to extend a private neurosis to the universe at large—but since so many were doing the same thing the social universe had become actually neurotic.

And, in fact, Harcourt Stevens was the victim of psychic trauma. Inhibited by his rearing at the hands of a Puritan mother and sensitive to his dishonor by an unfaithful wife, he had exercised by way of compensation an incisive mind and a not-inconsiderable literary talent in formulating a dialectic asserting the superiority of intuition over science and the gospel that life is struggle. But because philosophical projection in a weak reed against psychic involution, we are privileged to witness the stages of Stevens' degeneration through furtive incest, sadism, and shameless lust, at last, to suicide; and these stages provide the excitement of the novel's melodrama upon its lower level where it ranges with Bellaman's *King's Row*.

The Rev. Mr. Morehead was correct upon both counts of his diagnosis of Harcourt Stevens. Stevens was not only corrupt in his personal life but corrupting in his household and in the whole community of thoughtful men. Only the indifferent, Festus-like proprietor of the town newspaper remained unscathed, while ironically the minister became his chief victim. Gradually, by the consistency of his argument, again by its subtlety, the proponent of violence confused the easy-going liberalism of the clergyman until he became lost upon seas of dialectic. Later, reviewing his difficulties, he was able to understand Stevens' unsettling power; his terms of explanation are the same as those of Trilling's Laskell against Maxim:

The quest of the absolute is really a disguised lust for power, which, appealing to the will to believe as against the contradictions of an "either" logic, justifies a "strife principle."

The danger then consists, it seems, in letting oneself be caught upon the horns of dilemma. To their own great advantage, the absolutists divide logic and emotion. To drive whither they will, they employ either "logic-chopping" (either/or) or invoke passion, which as intuition becomes religion and therefore unassailable. With intellect as a plastic force binding logic and emotion together for the interpretation of life, they will have nothing to do. This is the brief sum of the considerations that Mr. Davis gives to his Mr. Morehead in a thoughtful but most unfictionlike chapter which he bids his more heedless readers pass over. Both artistically and philosophically, Mr. Davis finds himself in very good company: at once of Professor Trilling in his critical plea for "moral imagination" in fiction, and of the physicist-philosopher L. L. Whyte who in his book *The Next Development of Modern Man* makes a plea for the abandonment of mutually exclusive absolutes (i.e. spirit—matter, love—hate, etc.), the prolonged addiction to which he sees as the bane of man, particularly of Western man and the great cause of his present ill-state.

A third, more recent book, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, deals with the antagonism of autocrat *versus* liberal in terms of the army and of the war in the Pacific. Major General Edward Cummings, U.S.A., is spiritual brother to Trilling's Maxim and Davis' Harcourt Stevens to a remarkable degree of resemblance. Clothed with power, Cummings lusts for still more power; and in the pursuit of it he employs his incisive intellect upon the fabrication of a justificatory philosophy. For him the pattern that comes to hand is Hitler's fascism. This is the pendulum upon which he proposes to swing. As a further parallel it is noteworthy that Cummings for a moment toys with the idea of "turning" to Rome, but refrains because, unlike Maxim, he feels no sympathetic American groundswell. In Cummings too the excesses of thought and action are shown as the drives of a wounded psyche to redress its hurt; and in him too, through the person of Lieutenant Robert Hearn, a liberal and his victim, the power of the pathological personality at once to repel and to fascinate and above all to unsettle is again demonstrated.

A fourth significant book is the first book of a young Anglo-

Indian or more specifically Irish-Indian author, Aubrey Menen, entitled *The Prevalence of Witches*. This is a study of East versus West, of mythmaking versus rationalism. The place is a remote village in the non-existent state of Limbo somewhere on the Indian sub-continent. The *personae* consist of the British resident, the local schoolmaster, a visiting scholar from Oxford, an American missionary, an Indian Swami (a notable charlatan in Mayfair) and an Indian judge. The natives appear only exiguously, although it is a native murder that sets off the brilliant debate that is essentially the book. A Limbodian killed his wife's paramour when the two were taken *flagrante delictu*. According to the fact it appears that the man killed in a jealous rage. But he and the Limbodians explain otherwise; that it was a matter of witchcraft and malignant persecution so that the killer had acted both prudently and virtuously. Granted the premises, the Limbodian account hangs together quite as well as any other. Here is Professor Trilling's "moral imagination" out of Forster with a vengeance! Either that or moral nihilism. In any case, a comparison of values is suggested and in the resulting topsy-turveydom truth as an absolute is nowhere to be found—or found everywhere. "We live by lies," says one character, probably that delightful rascal the Swami. The word "lie" has an unfortunately harsh connotation, yet its shock may be salutary. By fictions men make their worlds, various systems supplementing nature; and all are equally good so long as they subserve an harmonious order. Such is the teaching. Not, however, that man is to compliment himself. Listen to Catullus, the urban resident:

"We paid court to Kings until the Kings of Europe got so dangerously ignorant that they could not impose even on their own flunkies. We do it now to politicians although for a half century we have been reeling from one catastrophe to another, following their guidance. Now that we tire of politicians, we shall do it for another century to charlatans who will forsake the posturings of the party committee for posturing before cameras and employing the techniques of actresses before the microphone. We know them all: Kings, Presidents, Prime Ministers and leaders, to be outstanding only in cunning and otherwise fools who began their careers through their inability to make an honest living; but we shall go on doing it. We must; we know what we are."

For Catullus then, a gentle cynic, it is man's fate to be irremediably lost. However, this is no matter for great grief since if this

world is not the best of all possible worlds, still it can be the most amusing—to a laughing philosopher.

Further, and with a special attention, religion, that *deus ex machina* that is being recommended with such ardors in some quarters for the salvage of our social catastrophe, is ruled out as an amusing impertinence; and a stern warning is administered to those who would invoke its miracle. It is significant that religion is here accurately apprehended as a term in the dialectic of the time and met head-on. Hear the learned and subtle Swami, the inventor of the meditational telephone booth and confessional telephone exchange:

“You talk of a return to religion, padre, and you may be right, and people may be going back to the churches. But when you hear the tramp of their feet on the stone floors of your cathedrals, you should tremble in your cassock. There’s something Queen Elizabeth wrote to a bishop that I’ve always remembered. . . . She wrote: ‘Proud Prelate, you know what you were before I made you what you are. Do what I ask or I shall unfrock you, by God!’ They’ll do that to you and your brother priests if you don’t give them what they ask.”

We have seen Trilling’s Maxim swinging the pendulum to religion for a new commitment of his nervous strength. A complementary picture of weakness seeking commitment is offered in Julian Farren’s first novel, *The Train from Pittsburgh*. This novel, fit perhaps to be classed offensively vulgar if not obscene, is redeemed in the eyes of some reviewers by its concern for ideas. J. Thomas Bridges, its protagonist, a personality having many present-day counterparts lives consciously in the sight of his own disintegration. By surrenders and compromises of principle, he has become not only will-less but friendless in all the relations of his life. On a certain afternoon we see him make his last feeble effort to keep alive the tiny flame of his once liberal but never courageous spirit. It is a bad fumble. He returns home and vainly attempts suicide. Before that attempt he amazes his wife by expressing a notion of being converted to Catholicism. (He has been listening to Father Compton.) The Church as his boss would, he feels, compel in him passively the idealism he can no longer command for himself. His wife laughs.

A still more discouraging because more universal picture of human weakness is provided by David Davidson’s *The Steeper*

Cliff. In this novel we meet a Lieutenant Cooper of the American Army of Occupation in Germany whose work it is to help find staff for Germany's new democratic newspapers. In the course of his inquiries Cooper hears of one Lorenz, a famous anti-Nazi, since disappeared, who reputedly never bowed to Hitler's regime. Him Cooper seeks out, on the way uncovering many an example of human surrender to expediency. But always he moves on with a complete faith in the integrity of Lorenz; in fact, Cooper comes to identify himself with Lorenz, seeking to prove his own courage (he has known himself for a coward) through the example of the other man. At long last he does find Lorenz; also, he finds that Lorenz yielded, like all the others, to the pressures of an evil time. In brief, *The Steeper Cliff* unsparingly declares that human morale and moralities are fragile; that although the spirit of man has a certain noble dimension, it is not therefore guaranteed inviolate. The point, of course, is not original but also it is one not likely to be popular; and so it needs the more to be made.

Apparently, at least according to the novelists, the answer to the problem of the time is not to be found in religion—certainly not in any conventional or authoritarian system. On the other hand, the mystic is always with us; so we should not be surprised at his occasional appearance in our current fiction. Such a one is F. L. Green who in his novel *A Flask for the Journey* suggests a disciplined system of illumination, a technique conformable to the recommendations of Aldous Huxley, for preserving the individual in integrity and peace and at the same time preparing the way for a new society of the spirit. To Jack Jaspán, a British prisoner in a German camp, there comes at long last the perception that freedom in any real sense is forever impossible; that there are always limits and that wisdom lies in the acceptance of them. Meanwhile men are driven to frenzy by the figments of honor, patriotism, etc., that possess them (notice again the indictment of the absolute); therefore an effort must be made toward detachment, particularly toward those "frontiers of consciousness beyond the outermost limits of contemporary ideas." The fruit of such discipline (and it is a hard one) is the ability to resume one's life in whatever terms it is cast; and further an affinity whereby the adept can recognize those others who have learned the patience of acceptance and who constitute an informal league of "good men." Interestingly, the novel is postdated in its frame to a time of social

collapse in the 1950's and illustrates its doctrine, which it carries not so heavily as one might suppose, by means of counter-pointed stories told to while away the time by two strangers meeting by chance in a deserted house in a city of destruction.

The same deep sense of the isolation of the individual is at the core too of Rhys Davies' *The Dark Daughters*. The Welsh Davies is an undoubted master of the macabre; and those who want the proof of it are referred to his chilling *The Trip to London*. In his recent *The Dark Daughters* he is sensational in a manner suggestive of the London stories of Michael Sadleir; but also he is somberly reflective. The household of Mansell Roberts, where father and daughters live in a long-drawn-out, Lear-like agony of mutual antagonism and injury, is another microcosm. The analysis which the novelist puts into the mouth of Laura, the Cordelia-like daughter, is meant to take on the significance of a universal commentary; its accord with the findings of Trilling and Davis is pat:

"And . . . everyone possesses a private little hell inside themselves. . . . It is these private little hells that make up the total evil of the world. They're like tributaries, myriads of turbulent little streams of black bile running out and forming a great black central river. But now and again a man or woman learns to shut up their little hell and not impose it on the world or their neighbors. These are the true saints, the great warriors. . . . When I've seen that hideous black river I could weep. . . . People's hatred of each other, individual, and racial! They want the river, they want to see men drowning in it. They want death, death, death."

We have seen now how little our novelists are concerned about social forms, about either disintegrating old ones or emerging new ones. Their inquiry first and last turns upon the individual; upon the analysis of his motives, the tendency of his ideas, the settling of his responsibilities. Apparently still the proper study of mankind is man. And this is good news, for if it is so, then the old humanism and the old liberalism are not so dead as has been reported. There comes a point, however, beyond which analysis cannot reach; where the essential mystery of existence begins to flood in. And so is reached the final range of our current fiction; those books where man, the falling protagonist, achieves tragic catharsis through his acceptance of the mystery of a world which he has both made and, strangely too, has not made.

Here places such a novel as Willard Motley's *Knock an Any Door*, a naturalistic novel tracing the causes whereby our cities make their hoodlums, their killers. We are shown Nick Romano, the product of slum and reform-school; another Studs Lonigan, of the same Chicago, not cut off by an early natural death, but going on to the end of his "education" in "the chair." From its material one might suppose the book just another case study, albeit one unusually well documented. Further, in terms of the protesting novels of the 1930's, one might presume it to be angry. But it is not; one may draw a great indictment from it, but the book is not insistent. It is tragic and compassionate; understanding and forgiving in the sense that to understand all is to forgive all. Its spirit becomes explicit in the climactic scene of the execution chamber:

The spectators sat tense, motionless, only their hearts beating. Curiosity and vengeance and cruelty had been in their faces. And now cowardice replaced the curiosity, the vengeance, the cruelty. Frightened and shaken, they stared. There was something in this boy who sat calmly before them that defeated them. Fear stood in their eyes and on their faces. And then the emotions of pity, sympathy, compassion. . . . They trembled and they were all a part of the man who was dying.

Another more recent book yielding this sense of catharsis before our social situation is that beautiful book out of South Africa, Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Here is a picture of the chaos that our civilization has wrought in the development of a continent: poverty, vice and crime strewn in its wake and race set against race. Poignant, inevitable with a Hardy-like inevitability is the tragedy of the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, black Anglican priest gone from Natal to seek his sister and his son among the shambles of Johannesburg—to find the one a harlot, the other a killer. The whole mechanism of man-created wastage is exposed, but here again is no indignation, no villain. On the other hand, because there is so much of men's goodness, there is actually matter for thanksgiving.

With this, the theme of man in our time as it is expressed in our novels has been pressed almost to exhaustion. Only one further comment seems possible and that comes whisperingly. Nevertheless, it gives whatever of quality and depth *Raintree County* may have, namely, the sense of a high dream that vanishes in the grasping of it. For John Wycliffe Shaunessy it was the

beloved Republic that vanished in the midst of the war to save it; but even if lost, the gleam had been written into epic. The same sort of reading in a double fold lies among the stories of Robert Penn Warren's *The Circus in the Attic*. In his story "Prime Leaf" he asks the ancient question: Can the end justify the means; may we do ill that good may come? Or specifically, what shall men of good will setting about necessary tasks of social improvement today do when confronted by the obstructionism of other selfish men? Of course, the ancient moral prohibition still stands, and uncomfortably it is told that conscience is its only reward; and, for further dismay, that in an age of violence none may escape violence. The pendent to this hard reading is found in the titled story of the volume in the implication of its dying fall that we are a kind of cosmic circus in the limbo of some unknowable demi-urge, our convulsions private and public being but an insubstantial pageant fading at each moment.

Perhaps some will feel that such impressions are the very signs of spiritual bankruptcy and the prelude to dissolution. On the other hand, it is possible that they represent the final step toward a new integration. Indeed, in spite of confused cries, there is much to indicate that man is deliberately focussing his faculties for an unsanguine yet undespairing effort at reorientation. At least, that is inferable from the evidence of our fiction. And by the same token, if that be the fact, then our fiction is beginning to function in as vital a way as can be; and in that there is hope, for like any vital process it will strengthen as it goes. It may be that we stand just past the balance of inertia—upon the threshold of a new affirmation.