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20th Century American Literature

Introduction by
Warren French

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20th-CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION BY
WARREN FRENCH

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The entry for each writer consists of a biography, a complete list of his published books, a selected list of published bibliographies and critical studies on the writer, and a signed critical essay on his work.

In the biographies, details of education, military service, and marriage(s) are generally given before the usual chronological summary of the life of the writer; awards and honours are given last.

The Publications section is meant to include all book publications, though as a rule broadsheets, single sermons and lectures, minor pamphlets, exhibition catalogues, etc. are omitted. Under the heading Collections, we have listed the most recent collections of the complete works and those of individual genres (verse, plays, novels, stories, and letters); only those collections which have some editorial authority and were issued after the writer's death are listed; on-going editions are indicated by a dash after the date of publication; often a general selection from the writer's works or a selection from the works in the individual genres listed above is included.

Titles are given in modern spelling, though the essayists were allowed to use original spelling for titles and quotations; often the titles are "short." The date given is that of the first book publication, which often followed the first periodical or anthology publication by some time; we have listed the actual year of publication, often different from that given on the title-page. No attempt has been made to indicate which works were published anonymously or pseudonymously, or which works of fiction were published in more than one volume. We have listed plays which were produced but not published; librettos and musical plays are listed along with the other plays; no attempt has been made to list lost or unverified plays. Reprints of books (including facsimile editions) and revivals of plays are not listed unless a revision or change of title is involved. The most recent edited version of individual works is included if it supersedes the collected edition cited.

In the essays, short references to critical remarks refer to items cited in the Publications section or in the Reading List. Introductions, memoirs, editorial matter, etc. in works cited in the Publications section are not repeated in the Reading List.

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INTRODUCTION

"In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel." Thus ends Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, the first outstanding American novel of the twentieth century, published in 1900, though largely ignored for the next ten years. Dreiser's description of Carrie's fate is uncannily prophetic of what awaits the protagonists of the major American literary works for the next eight decades that we can now recognize as the Age of Modernism. Dreiser brought to a reluctant United States a Modernist sensibility characterized by a feeling of isolation and alienation from an urbanized, mechanized society.

Dreiser was ahead of his time, however, even though he had conceived all of the novels that he would publish – including his Cowperwood trilogy about a corrupt businessman – by 1914. The "pre-Modernists," conventionally labeled "realists," gave up slowly and grudgingly the struggle to dominate American taste with the dogma that William Dean Howells had pronounced – that the writer "can no longer expect to be received on the ground of entertainment only; he assumes a higher function, something like that of a physician or priest," working within established society to adjust the individual to its institutions. While the Modernists were not content, either, only to entertain, they saw themselves as enemies of oppressive social institutions, presenting the individual's only hope as lying in flight.

1. The Age of Innocence, 1900–19

The beginning of the twentieth century was more than an arbitrary chronological dividing line in American literature. Few established writers of the previous century produced significant work after 1900; and the early death of Stephen Crane, who envisioned the individual transcendence of society in *The Red Badge of Courage* and his bitterly ironic poems, deprived us of a key transitional figure. Howells bravely attempted to maintain the status quo in *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904); but his subsequent work retreated to the midwest of his own childhood before the Civil War. Mark Twain's writings became so angry and bitter that readers shunned *What Is Man?* (1906) and *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916). Only Henry James produced triumphant curtain calls – *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Golden Bowl* (1904), and *The Ambassadors* (1903), in which Lambert Strether's last eloquent speech – "That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself" – definitively enunciates just as the voices of the pre-Modernists were fading into silence the altruistic principles their age failed to realize in practice.

Except for Booth Tarkington, who offered an indulgent criticism of the middle class in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918) and the Penrod stories, the novelists who flourished during the first years of the twentieth century were "muckrakers" concerned about the social breakdown resulting from persons in responsible positions seeking to get everything for themselves. These writers continued, however, to try to work within the Establishment, hoping that it might yet prove capable of reform. *The Thirteenth District* (1902) by Brand Whitlock, who became a reform mayor of Toledo, Ohio, was less successful than David Graham Phillips's exposure of New York City corruption in novels like *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1917). Winston Churchill (no kin to the British political leader) explored such problems against American historical backgrounds in novels like *The Crisis* (1901) and *Coniston* (1906).

By far the most popular and successful of the novelists who indicted American business ethics, however, was Upton Sinclair, whose *The Jungle* (1906) led to reform of the meat-packing industry. Although Sinclair continued to expose corruption for another thirty years

and even ran for governor of California, he never equaled his early success until during World War II when he began a series of eleven novels about a kind of cosmopolitan superhero, Lanny Budd. Most critics, however, found the premise that altruistic and patriotic supermen could take over and redeem the international industrial/military complex old-fashioned.

The Modernist concept of escape began to dominate American writing with the fiction of Jack London. Though presumably a Socialist who predicted the return of a primitive Golden Age following a Fascist revolution in *The Iron Heel* (1908), London praised the Nietzschean superman in *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) and, in his most self-revelatory tale, *Martin Eden* (1909), portrayed a hero driven at last to suicide by the personal and political problems that he sought vainly to solve. George Cabot Lodge's even more bleakly cynical *The Genius of the Commonplace*, suppressed by the Howells consistory and only recently published, dramatizes the disillusionment as the century began of even Boston's traditionalist Brahmin society, as does also the posthumously published *Education of Henry Adams* (1918, privately printed in 1907) by the scholarly scion of one of the nation's most famous families. The collapse of the venerated role of the aristocrat as guardian of public morals finds its ultimate statement in philosopher George Santayana's novel *The Last Puritan* (1935).

The transition to Modernism was made most importantly but much less violently in the works of three distinguished women novelists who tempered their traditional conservatism with an awareness that the past was irretrievable in a changing world. Edith Wharton, one of the few American writers born into the wealthy international set, symbolically provided the name for the period that ended exactly with the appearance of her novel in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), which depicts the cost in human happiness of the rigid rules regulating New York's Victorian society. Earlier, in *The House of Mirth* (1905), she had shown the suicidal cost of attempting to play society's games. Most of her other fiction portrayed ironically international society, except for *Ethan Frome* (1911), which disposed of dreams of primitive virtue by showing how bad things could be in backwoods New England. Ellen Glasgow offered a similarly cheerless picture of another traditional society in her native Virginia.

More complex and most important is the fiction of Willa Cather, which seemed to offer fresh hope in two epic tributes to the passing frontier, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918). Later, however, after she made the statement that her world fell apart in 1922 (the year of Eliot's *The Waste Land*), her fiction, especially *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor's House* (1925), reflected a bitter disillusionment with contemporary materialistic society. Her increasing desire to escape into memories of a more glorious past colors two of her finest works, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931).

The Modernist sensibility also manifested itself in American poetry almost exactly at the turn of the century, when the genteel influence of New England's "fireside poets" was ebbing. About the only traditional poet active at the turn of the century likely to be anthologized today is William Vaughn Moody, whose "An Ode in Time of Hesitation" (1901) exactly captures in its title the bankruptcy of America's genteel dream in the face of a growing imperialism. Moody's Harvard friends, Trumbull Stickney and George Cabot Lodge, were already sounding in their poetry the notes of alienation and the rejection of American culture that would characterize Modernist expatriate writings; but both men died—like Stephen Crane—early in the century. Even Moody turned principally to drama before his death in 1910.

At first a dark new vision manifested itself in American poetry through the ironic regionalism of Edwin Arlington Robinson's *The Children of the Night* (1897) and Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). Robert Frost's *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914) exhibit a wider range of sympathies; but all are unprecedented psychological probings of determined and frustrated villagers and farmers from New England and the Midwest. Vachel Lindsay's attempt to promote "the higher vaudeville" through his "Gospel of Beauty," as exemplified by *General William Booth Enters into Heaven and Other Poems* (1913) also emphasized the use of small town figures and native legendry in a new "public poetry."

The triumph of an urban, cosmopolitan, elitist viewpoint was signaled, however, by the most important event in the development of twentieth-century American poetry, Harriet Monroe's founding in Chicago in 1912 of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, which still remains the journal in which poets courting recognition wish to be published. An indifferent poet herself, Monroe helped re-establish the Whitman strain in American poetry by her early support of Carl Sandburg's Chicago songs; but her influence was more widely felt when she became allied with the international Imagist movement, led by Bostonian heiress Amy Lowell and her cohort and later bitter foe, Ezra Pound. Pound had removed to Europe in 1908 and had begun to develop an international reputation as a translator; but he was to loom largest when he turned to bitter social criticism after World War I.

The American drama made less progress than other native arts between 1900 and World War I. At the peak of its popularity during these years before it was seriously challenged by the cinema, the American theater was also at the nadir of its never previously very impressive artistic power. Turn of the century audiences favored exotic romantic works produced with elaborate naturalistic scenery, like David Belasco's *Madame Butterfly* (1900) and *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905), which live on as the basis for Puccini's operas. Genteel longings for a theater that combined high art with high seriousness were vainly focused upon William Vaughn Moody's idealistic appeals for human dignity in *The Great Divide* (1906) and *The Faith Healer* (1909) and Percy MacKaye's spectacular historical dramas like *The Scarecrow* (1908). Almost none of the hundreds of American dramas produced between 1900 and 1915 are revived today, even as period curiosities; the event that was to prove the equivalent for American drama of what the founding of *Poetry* magazine had been for American poetry was the establishment in 1915 of the Provincetown Players, which began in 1916 to produce the one-act plays of Eugene O'Neill, subsequently grouped as *The Long Voyage Home*.

Memorable American humor was also in short supply early in the century. Many of Mark Twain's later and bitter works were withheld from the public, while Finley Peter Dunne and George Ade did not repeat their initial successes with folksy humor in *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War* (1898) and *Fables in Slang* (1900). Vaudeville and film clowns like W. C. Fields, Charlie Chaplin, and the Keystone Cops had taken over.

2. The Triumph of Modernism, 1919-29

Just as the decade of boom and bust really began with the end of World War I, so 1919 also marked the Modernist breakthrough in American fiction with the publication of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen*. These were joined the next year by Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, Eugene O'Neill's first full-length plays and the collected lyrics of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Above all 1920 brought Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, which lambasted the ugliness, complacency and vulgarity of the small Midwestern town and satirized the death of the pioneering spirit. These set the tone for the decade; sympathetic novels about rural America, like Rølvaag's immigrant epic, *Giants in the Earth* (1927), were rare.

Although Anderson's subsequent stories and Cabell's further legends of the mythical Poictesme were not widely read, Sinclair Lewis became the country's most famous novelist with *Babbitt* (1922), which provided the derogatory tag still attached to the kind of fatuous community booster it depicted; *Arrowsmith* (1925), about the persecution that drives a genuinely idealistic doctor into exile; *Elmer Gantry* (1927), about the hypocritical religious revivalists who save souls for the preacher's profit; and *Dodsworth* (1929), Lewis's first sympathetic international novel about a retired business man who goes abroad to find a decent life. These confirmations of the European intelligentsia's view of the parvenu excesses of the United States led to Lewis's becoming in 1930 the first American to win the Nobel Prize for literature.

None of Lewis's novels so well epitomizes, however, the reaction of a Modernist sensibility to a demoralized United States as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which presents Jay Gatsby, born James Gatz, who "springs from his Platonic conception of

himself," as the possessor of "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," which in his innocence and ignorance, he puts at "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty," only to be destroyed by "what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams." Although he became a legendary figure himself, Fitzgerald never matched *The Great Gatsby*. His novel about expatriate society, *Tender Is the Night*, never found its final form; and his tale of Hollywood, *The Last Tycoon*, is only a collection of brilliant fragments.

Fitzgerald's accomplishment in *Gatsby* was not quickly recognized because it was overshadowed in 1925 by the long-awaited publication of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Though the novel does in a way epitomize the decadence of twentieth-century American society by portraying the inexorable way in which the appeal of quick material rewards ultimately destroys an attractive, impressionable, but not too bright youth, readers of a faster-paced age began to lose patience with Dreiser's lumbering style and heavy-handed moralizing.

Fitzgerald's reputation was also for years overshadowed by that of his sometime friend, often bitter foe and critic, the fellow expatriate Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway leaped to fame as the principal spokesman for the "lost generation" in his novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), about an aimless group of American expatriates in Europe after World War I, and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), with its tragic message, set against the background of an Italian retreat during the war, that even the man who wishes to make "a separate peace" is at the mercy of a nature that man's puny dreams cannot control.

Like Hemingway, John Dos Passos began his literary career after serving as an ambulance driver in World War I and became subsequently involved in the Spanish Civil War. His *One Man's Initiation - 1917* (1919) and *Three Soldiers* (1921) rank with *A Farewell to Arms* as the classic American accounts of World War I. Dos Passos then went on to develop the technique of a montage novel in order to present first a cross-section of the chaos of New York City life in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), and then an epic portrait of the decay of American life and values in the three novels constituting the U.S.A. trilogy - *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936), which portrays the spectacular excesses leading to the stock market crash through a variety of factual and fictional materials.

The famous appellation "lost generation" for those morally disoriented by World War I has been attributed to Gertrude Stein's impatience with a Parisian auto mechanic. Whether or not she can be credited with the phrase, this redoubtable avant-garde writer, an expatriate since 1902, when she began to feel stifled by American conventionality, was the center of the American literary community in France between the World Wars. Her experimental works are also both thematically and formally at the very center of the Modernist tradition because of their attempt, on one hand, to adapt for literary purposes the techniques of the cubist painters like Picasso and, on the other, to portray the pointlessness and frustration of women's lives, from the clearly delineated portrayals of long-suffering women in *Three Lives* (1909) through the mazes of the massive *The Making of Americans* (1925) to the mysterious *Ida* (1941) and her opera librettos like *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934, with music by Virgil Thomson). Despite the range and variety of her incessant experiments, however, Stein's reputation with the general public rested on *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), her account of her life with her long-time companion.

Few other expatriates or experimentalists shared her fame. Djuna Barnes is known almost entirely for *Nightwood* (1936), a stream-of-consciousness novel about disturbed people; none of Glenway Wescott's other works enjoyed the popularity of his early *The Grandmothers* (1927), about a pioneering Wisconsin family as seen through the eyes of an expatriate descendant; and the lives of writers like Robert McAlmon, Harry and Caresse Crosby, and Charles Henri Ford remain better known than their works. Not all the uprooted went to Paris. The still mysterious B. Traven (Traven Torsvan?), wrote social protest novels like *The Death Ship* in Mexico for initial publication in Germany. Americans preferred, however, the exoticism of one of Gertrude Stein's friends, Thornton Wilder, whose *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), about an inscrutable tragedy in 18th century Peru, became one best-selling novel of permanent value.

Some writers like Maxwell Bodenheim (*Replenishing Jessica*, 1925) and Carl Van Vechten (*Peter Whiffle*, 1922) simply fled the midwest for Greenwich Village, where they joined poets like E. E. Cummings and Edna St. Vincent Millay in turning out highly stylized and wittily cynical works about the jazz age that are valued today principally as period pieces. Van Vechten, however, achieved a more enduring reputation through his association with the Harlem Renaissance, which he depicted with sympathetic realism in *Nigger Heaven* (1926).

This Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's provided the first serious opportunity for black writers to depict a developing black culture in a black community, in the hope of cultivating a black audience; but their contemporary audiences were largely sympathetic white patrons. Black writers had been producing notable novels since late in the nineteenth century; but the works of Charles W. Chesnutt, like *The Wife of His Youth* (1899), and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) dealt principally with the problems of light-skinned blacks "passing" for whites to overcome the handicaps of racial prejudices. Encouraged, however, by the freedom of "jazz age" Harlem, blacks like sociologist-educator W. E. B. DuBois and Claude McKay began to produce distinguished novels about the problems of aspiring members of a black community that would be fragmented again by the Depression.

Most striking of these novels was the long-neglected but now much discussed *Cane* (1923) by Jean Toomer, a mysterious figure of uncertain origins who abandoned a promising career to devote himself to the teachings of philosopher Georgi Gurdjieff. A collage of stories, songs, and plays, *Cane* has often been the subject of pointless controversy over its form; what matters is that Toomer uses all the means at his disposal to dramatize the plight of blacks twice alienated both by race and the common neglect of artists in the twentieth century.

Although Langston Hughes has written one of the finest novels about black life, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), he is best known for his stories of a black folk-philosopher, Simple, and the poetry in which he experimented with the use of black folk song and jazz rhythms. Countée Cullen also experimented with lyrical forms in *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927) and *The Black Christ* (1929), but he used traditional English forms and, as Gerald Moore explains, "attacked the whole notion of an American-Negro school of poetry and urged the importance of the Anglo-American poetic tradition upon his fellow black writers."

Cullen's attitude was closely in tune with the most respected poets of the decade who viewed their dissolute period with dismay: Ezra Pound launched the attack in 1920 with his "Maunderley" poems. The opening stanza of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* epitomizes the Modernist poet's state of mind: "For three years, out of key with his time,/He strove to resuscitate the dead art/Of poetry; to maintain 'The sublime'/In the old sense. Wrong from the start -." Pound's increasing displeasure took the form of a long series of "Cantos," collages of miscellaneous erudition drawn from cultures of all times and all places mixed with the rantings against modern economic and political systems that became the substance also of his increasingly frequent prose polemics. While a small cult of ultra-elitists has admired these works hysterically, most readers have found them too cryptic, dogmatic, or offensive. Pound ultimately became much more a political symbol than a poetic force when, after making propaganda broadcasts for Italy's fascist government during World War II, he was arrested for treason and confined for some years in an insane asylum.

Pound's place in the poetic hierarchy was early usurped, however unintentionally, by his major discovery, T. S. Eliot, an American expatriate in London, whose *The Waste Land* (1922) became the most quoted and imitated poem of the century - the high-water mark of the Modernist era. It is entirely possible to take at face value the statement attributed to Eliot that to him the poem was "only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life" and yet to maintain as I have in *The Twenties* that it is "the embodiment of a world-view widely characteristic of thoughtful and sensitive individuals during the 1920s." Eliot's personal protest happened to give voice to the feelings of the sensitive persons of a generally gross age.

Yet, despite the idolization of Eliot, there were vigorous dissenters from his view. Chief among these were Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams, who could only begin to win

proper recognition when Eliot's influence began to wane after World War II. As Donald Pease points out, Hart Crane felt that it was Eliot who had to be transcended in creating *The Bridge* (1930), his "epic of modern consciousness." Although scholars still debate the "unity" of Crane's mystical epic with some finding it only a chaos of fragments like the age it mirrors, others find its vast structure a coherent reinvigoration of the lapsed tradition of Walt Whitman (whom Eliot greatly mistrusted).

Williams even more indignantly protested that "Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of escape . . . to a new art form . . . rooted in the locality which should give it fruit." As Robert K. Johnson points out, Williams put forward, against Eliot's increasingly metaphysical concerns, a creed based on the beauty contained in physical reality that is best illustrated by his own epic of the commonplace, *Paterson* (1946-58), based on impressions of his home city in New Jersey.

Another dissenting voice took an even bleaker view than Eliot's of the contemporary world and the entire human experience. Also going against the grain of an age that cultivated principally the brief lyric by writing long blank verse narratives about the forbidding California coast near Big Sur, where he lived, Robinson Jeffers in works like *Tamar* (1924) and *Road Stallion* (1925) shocked readers with his misanthropic legends of violent, amoral people bent on courses leading to self-destruction.

Although Jeffers considered protest only a bubble "in the molten mass," some surfaced in Greenwich Village in the typographically eccentric satires of E. E. Cummings like "Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal" and "Next to Of Course God America I," which are still unmatched vignettes of empty-headed pomposity. One other New York writer who managed to maintain a unique stability in the midst of madness was Marianne Moore, editor of the revived *The Dial* (1926-29), who persisted throughout the years in viewing poets as "liberators of the imagination."

A once enormously admired poem that has been virtually forgotten over a half century is Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* (1928), an epic account of the Civil War from a Union point of view. Americans have lost their taste for historical epics, for the fate of Benét's work was shared by Archibald MacLeish's narration of Cortez's conquest of Mexico, *Conquistador* (1932), though MacLeish's shorter "Ars Poetica" has continued to be regarded, perhaps wrongly, as a statement of the Modernist aesthetic, just as his much anthologized "You, Andrew Marvell" sums up a cyclical theory of destiny.

The United States developed a drama of truly international importance for the first time in the 1920's in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, whose first full-length offering in New York, *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), carried off the Pulitzer Prize. O'Neill won two more Pulitzer Prizes during the decade for *Anna Christie* (1921) and *Strange Interlude* (1928) and presented four other major productions in New York during the decade. While all his plays are Modernist statements of the need of individuals to escape the deadly constraints of monotonous lives or oppressive institutions, they are written in two strikingly different styles. While some are sombre dramas of personal frustration in the prevailing naturalistic mode of the period (*Beyond the Horizon*, *Desire under the Elms*), others are practically the only important American examples of the European Expressionist drama that sought to suggest interior states of mind through stylized sets and actions (*The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *The Great God Brown*). In his greatest triumph during his lifetime, the nine-act *Strange Interlude*, he combined naturalistic action with expressionist revelation through a double set of speeches that allow the audience to hear both what the characters are saying and what they are thinking.

Most of even the other Pulitzer prize-winning plays of the decade pale beside O'Neill's work. The few foreshadowings of a generally brilliant decade ahead included Sidney Howard's *The Silver Cord* (1926), an archetypal picture of a mother fixation, and the only other important American expressionist play besides O'Neill's, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), a devastating picture of dehumanization. Audiences enjoyed especially, however, two rollicking farces that caught the bumptious pseudo-sophisticated tone of the decade, Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings's *What Price Glory?* (1924) and Ben Hecht

and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page* (1926). But the biggest hit of all was Anne Nichols's ethnic farce, *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922).

American humor generally made a great comeback during years of careless laughter. H. L. Mencken had been delighting the "smart set" with his iconoclastic attacks on the "booboisie" and defenses of American authors like Theodore Dreiser since 1914; but he and the outrageous drama critic George Jean Nathan scored their greatest successes after founding *The American Mercury* in 1924. Its cynical wit was soon overshadowed by that of *The New Yorker*, founded in 1925 by editor Harold Ross, "not for the old lady in Dubuque." The magazine attracted the sophisticated funsters who became members of the Algonquin Round Table (named for the hotel where they met for lunch) – James Thurber, poet and short-story writer Dorothy Parker, essayist E. B. White, monologist Robert Benchley, popular book reviewer Alexander Woollcott. They did not have the New York scene to themselves, however, for even more popular were the ironically comic short stories of Ring Lardner (*The Big Town*, 1921) and the poems that Don Marquis attributed to a newspaper-office cockroach madly in love with a fickle cat (*Archy and Mehitabel*, 1927).

3. Alienation Vindicated – Depression and World War, 1929–45

If American writings of the 1920's were not equalled in brilliance by those of the 1930's, they were surpassed in profundity by the outpouring of moving responses to the human condition inspired by the international depression and the rise to power of the authoritarian regimes that precipitated World War II.

Apparently traumatized by the end of the world they had known, few established American novelists matched their earlier accomplishments after 1929. Sinclair Lewis's satirical portraits of pretentious Americans began to resemble comic strips. Only *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), a warning about the possibility of a fascist takeover by popular demagogues in the United States, and *Kingsblood Royal* (1947), an early attack on anti-Negro prejudice outside the South, won great attention, but even these were overstated, two-dimensional tracts. After publishing *U.S.A.*, John Dos Passos became embittered by his experiences with both sides in the Spanish Civil War and became increasingly a right-wing isolationist stressing the American values of the founding fathers. The Spanish Civil War, however, brought Ernest Hemingway out of a long slump to find a new voice in praising the individual whose dreams exceed the squalid possibilities of the world about him in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and again in his very popular fable, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

The most enduring novelists of the 1930's, however, were those who found their inspirations rooted in their localities, as William Carlos Williams had hoped poets would. After making a false start with the stylized history of a pirate (*Cup of Gold*, 1929), John Steinbeck found his locality in the rural valleys of central California in the mystical *To a God Unknown* (1933) and the ironic story-cycle *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932). After revealing a gift for humorous allegory in *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and naturalistic tragedy (*Of Mice and Men*, 1937), he published what both public and critics have acclaimed as the greatest work of American social protest since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1938), a novel about the sufferings of the dispossessed "Okies" from the Dust Bowl on Highway 66 and in an unfriendly California, in which his hitherto morbidly Modernist irony gives way to a transcendent faith in the ultimate triumph of simple people. Also noteworthy are his story-cycle of a boy's coming of age after the passing of the frontier in a diminished America, *The Red Pony* (1937), and his denunciation of middle-class smugness and praise of "outcasts" in his tribute to his friend Ed Ricketts, *Cannery Row* (1945).

The long depressed South, however, was the region that would really experience a Renaissance while long-favored lands sank into lethargy. Beginning in 1929 with *Look Homeward, Angel*, Thomas Wolfe turned the memories of his childhood in Asheville, North Carolina, and his adult journeyings throughout this country and in Europe into epic fiction, especially in *Of Time and the River* (1935). Erskine Caldwell devastatingly satirized the rednecks of the Southern backwoods in *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933),

while Elizabeth Madox Roberts paid tribute to the heroically sacrificial life of the pioneers in Kentucky in *The Great Meadow* (1930). The most important southern writer of this period, however, a figure of international stature, was William Faulkner.

After an unpromising start in two "jazz age" novels influenced by Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner found his "little postage stamp of territory" in Yoknapatawpha County, modeled on the region where he lived in the red clay hills of northeast Mississippi. In *Sartoris* (1929), he relates a late chapter in the history of the aristocratic family that becomes the foil for the upstart, white trash Snopeses, whose tale is told in the trilogy *The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957), and *The Mansion* (1959). Other novels and short stories, including his four supreme achievements – *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) – fill in the story, pieces of which have been brilliantly arranged into a chronological history by Malcolm Cowley in *The Portable Faulkner*. The typical Modernist concept that underlies the whole cycle of the human loss of innocence that accompanies the destruction of the wilderness comes into sharpest focus in two companion stories of the *Go Down, Moses* cycle (1942) – "The Bear," in which the isolated Ike McCaslin protests greedy man's destruction of his bond with nature, and "Delta Autumn," in which a dying Ike thinks to himself, "No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution.... The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge."

Perhaps inspired by Faulkner's example, James Agee paid what remains the most sympathetic tribute to the hard life of Southern poor whites in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and Southern fiction flourished as never before. Four women novelists made especially distinguished contributions to the movement. Caroline Gordon was directly associated with the influential Southern agrarian poets and in novels from *Penhally* (1931) to *The Malefactors* (1956) a most outspoken critic of the region's departure from its traditional culture, as was her husband, Allen Tate, in his one novel, *The Fathers* (1938). More impressive, however, were Katherine Anne Porter's tales of her native Texas, like *Noon Wine* (1937), and of Mexico. Late in the period the changing life in small Southern rural communities became the subjects of stories by Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty. McCullers published her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* in 1940, and Welty's fantastic novelette *The Robber Bridegroom* appeared in 1942. McCullers, however, quickly reached the peak of her career with her third novel, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and her play version of it (1950), while Welty did not produce her most ambitious work, *Losing Battles*, until 1970. The most popular novel ever to come out of the South, however, was Margaret Mitchell's mammoth *Gone with the Wind* (1936), a mythical evocation of life in the plantation South during the Civil War that was made into what has remained the country's favorite motion picture.

The fiction that bulked largest, however, in the United States during the depression years was the work of the "tough guy" proletarian writers. The most prolific of these, James T. Farrell was never able to equal the success of his first naturalistic stories about growing up on Chicago's South Side, the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932–35), and many other prolific writers of the time like Josephine Herbst have been largely forgotten. Edward Dahlberg proved an exception when he developed a belated reputation for the autobiographical *Because I Was Flesh* (1964). James M. Cain, however, won a wide following for his tales of the seedy elements of society in glamorous Southern California like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) and *Double Indemnity* (1943).

The grimmest work about decadent movieland, however, was Nathanael West's hallucinatory prediction of the destruction of Los Angeles, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), which followed his other powerful indictments of the American myth of the self-made man (*A Cool Million*, 1934) and the Christ complex developed by an advice-to-the-lovelorn columnist (*Miss Lonelyhearts*, 1933). Another cynical attack on the shoddiness of American middle-class values was John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (1934). The most outrageous novels about the period, however, were Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), curious melanges of turgid philosophizing and explicit pornography that were banned from this country for decades until they were the subject of a court battle in the 1960's.

An even more telling indictment of social injustices was Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), an account of the corruption and destruction of an ambitious but ill-educated Chicago black boy, modeled after Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Wright was the first black novelist to win major critical and public recognition for both his novel and his harrowing autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945).

The poets who dominated the American academies beginning in the mid-1930's came, like Wright, from the South; but they represented not its belligerent black fugitives, but conservative white "fugitives" from the twentieth century's urban society. The group at Vanderbilt University who had styled themselves the "Fugitives" attracted national attention when they identified themselves as Agrarians and called for a return to traditional values in an essay collection, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Although the reputation of their leader, Donald Davidson, arch-foe of TVA, has declined, three of the group have heavily influenced American literary culture generally. Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" has overshadowed his more ambitious efforts to give a peculiarly Southern cast to T. S. Eliot's concept of the value of traditional orthodoxy. John Crowe Ransom has won distinction as a poet, but is best known as the theorist in *The World's Body* (1938) of the "New Criticism" that dominated American universities from the late 1930's to the 1960's. The most prominent of the group, however, has been Robert Penn Warren, who has won distinction not only as a poet, for works like *Brother to Dragons* (1953), but as a novelist, especially for *All the King's Men* (1946), a cautionary tale about a Southern demagogue resembling Louisiana's Huey Long, and particularly – along with his Yale colleague Cleanth Brooks – as the principal popularizer of New Criticism techniques in the uniquely influential *Understanding Poetry* (1938).

Despite this Southern offensive, the center of poetic activity began to shift back during the 1930's to New England, where Robert Frost – his important writing behind him – was just beginning to make his impact as a lecturer and embodiment of Yankee tradition. The most telling satirical poetry of the decade was Archibald MacLeish's *Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City*, inspired by the controversy over Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's designs for the Rockefellers' Art Deco Radio City. The caustic "Empire Builders," which tells of the "making of America in five panels" by Harriman, Commodore Vanderbilt, J. P. Morgan, Andrew Mellon, and Bruce Barton, concludes with the observation that there is "nothing to see of America but land." MacLeish's subsequent pioneering in radio dramas like *The Fall of the City* (1937) set a model not yet equalled for this aborted form.

MacLeish's polemics have been overshadowed, however, by those of the theorist of the "Supreme Fiction," the Hartford, Connecticut, insurance executive Wallace Stevens. Stevens's complex and subtle work defies brief synthesis. Perhaps one can only be as cryptic as Stevens himself in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) by specifying that the three requirements for its achievement are that "It must be abstract," "It must change," and "It must give pleasure." To suggest how such contradictory demands may be reconciled, one turns back to Stevens's early "Sunday Morning," in which the narrator specifies, "We live in an old chaos of the sun," and then leap forward to the very late "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," whose narrator tells us that "The world imagined is the ultimate good" – a world like that of "the single artificer of the world in which she sang" in "The Idea of Order at Key West," who "knew that there never was a world for her/Except the one she sang and, singing, made." It is impossible to go beyond this point in celebrating the rejection of the world of received opinion for the one that the artist creates. If American literature appears static since 1945, it is because the Modernist frame of reference had been by then established; and no important breakthrough has been made in another direction.

Within this framework, however, the drama achieved an unparalleled effectiveness. O'Neill no longer dominated the stage. After capping his great decade with a trilogy audaciously transplanting the sole surviving Greek trilogy, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, to nineteenth-century New England in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), O'Neill withdrew from the scene after his one nostalgic comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), not to be heard from again until the long, cheerless drama of the triumph of dreams over life, *The Iceman Cometh*, reached Broadway in 1946.

An unprecedented number of other dramatists, however, commanded attention. Most honored at the time was Maxwell Anderson for his commercial success with a blank-verse play, *Winterset* (1935), inspired by the notorious Sacco-Vanzetti case that had outraged many American artists. Even more popular at the time were Robert E. Sherwood's serio-comic responses to the Fascist march to European war in *Idiot's Delight* (1936) and *There Shall Be No Night* (1940). Politics also influenced the radical critique of the depravity of American bourgeois society in Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* (1935) and *Golden Boy* (1937) and especially in Lillian Hellman's bitter and controversial *The Children's Hour* (1934), *The Little Foxes* (1939) and the anti-Nazi *Watch on the Rhine* (1941). Comparable pieces were offered by the subsidized Federal Theater Project, which also provided the start for Orson Welles's Mercury Theater.

An antidote to the grim exposures of the failure of the American dream like Sidney Kingsley's *Dead End* (1935) and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) were the comic collaborations of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, especially *You Can't Take It With You* (1936), which championed individualist rejection of pressures toward social conformity in a way that delighted depression-weary Americans. William Saroyan also achieved his one enduring success with *The Time of Your Life* (1939), a zany reversal of O'Neill's tragedies about defeated dreamers. The most heartening plays of the period – and even perhaps of the world's theater – were Thornton Wilder's two internationally acclaimed meditations on the value of every moment of human experience and of the struggle to preserve the often threatened race in *Our Town* (1938) and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). These were also important experimental efforts to break away from the dominant naturalistic tradition of the proscenium-arch stage in theatrical production.

4. The Harvest of Modernism, 1946–57

Relatively few new writers published their first works during World War II. Mary McCarthy and John Cheever published short-story collections and Wright Morris, Saul Bellow, and Jean Stafford, novels; but wartime paper shortages and the absence in military service and other war work of promising young writers precluded the development of a new generation of fictionists influenced by the war until 1946.

Gore Vidal, who was to become one of our most prolific writers, was the first soldier-author to break into print with *Williwaw* (1946), a fictional account of his experiences on the little-known Alaskan front; but he was to become most famous for one of the first American novels to broach the forbidden subject of homosexuality (*The City and the Pillar*, 1948) and for the outrageously campy *Myra Breckinridge* (1968). His works were overshadowed, however, by Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), an episodic novel, influenced by John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*, about one Army squad's role in the taking of a Pacific island from the Japanese. Mailer made his dozen men, however, representative of a cross-section of American life and their story a powerful indictment of the power in this country and its army of the very fascism that we expended our resources and lives to defeat. The novelist subsequently became, in less celebrated works, culminating in the hallucinatory account of the moral disintegration of the country, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), a controversial critic of American political life, before abandoning fiction for the journalistic "non-fiction novel."

Another large-scale novel also attacked the depravities of the American military establishment – James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951) – but other forms of decadence began to command even more attention. In a novel (*Other Voices, Other Rooms*, 1948) and short stories (*A Tree of Night*, 1949), Truman Capote presented a South even more degenerate than Faulkner's before also turning to the "non-fiction novel" to present in *In Cold Blood* (1966) a minutely detailed account of the senseless murder of a family by two drifters. An even more appallingly grotesque picture of the South emerged in the novels (*Wise Blood*, 1952, and *The Violent Bear It Away*, 1960) and the short stories (*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*,

1955) of Flannery O'Connor. Less Gothic in its excesses, but equally critical of the hypocrisy of decadent Southern aristocrats was *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) by William Styron.

The South had no monopoly on decadence, however. Two of the most shocking novels of the post-war period to still tender-minded Americans seeking to preserve a few ideals were Paul Bowles's tale of Morocco, *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), and John Hawkes's surrealist account of occupied Germany, *The Cannibal* (1949). Certainly not coincidentally, the years following the war saw the development of a cult of admirers for the earlier writings of H. P. Lovecraft, who in horror fantasies principally published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* had created a mythology about the once dispossessed minions of the god Cthulu attempting to take over our planet by subversion.

It was the still inconceivable decadence of the Nazi holocaust in Europe, too, that in part accounted for the rise after the war of a group of Jewish-American novelists keenly aware of their people's ancient traditions and recent persecutions. Saul Bellow, the most remarkable of the group and the Nobel Prize winner in 1976, began to publish during the war, but first gained international recognition for *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), a picaresque account of the *wanderjahren* of a young opportunist from the Chicago slums. Bellow's cryptic *Henderson the Rain King* (1959) has attracted much speculation; but his most powerful work is *Herzog* (1964), the self-revelation of a typically alienated, overly ambitious modern man who is at last able to make peace with himself (even if the world thinks him mad) through his imaginary conversations with the living and the dead.

The most impressive of Bernard Malamud's novels remains *The Assistant* (1957), in which the novelist most directly deals with racial and religious problems through the touching account of the relationship between an aggressive young Italian and his employer, a poor Jewish grocer. Growing to be even more respected, however, are the many works, originally written in Yiddish, by Isaac Bashevis Singer, particularly stories of life before World War I in the *shtetls* in Czarist Russia from which the ancient Jewish communities were driven. (Malamud also deals with a gruesome incident involving the Jews in Russia in *The Fixer*, 1966.) The most troubling tale to involve recollections of a direct involvement with the Nazi persecution, however, is Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961).

Another oppressed group, the Blacks, also began to win greater recognition for their fiction after World War II. Although Richard Wright's later works, written in exile in France and heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy, were disappointing, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a brilliant *bildungsroman* about the transformation of a naive, ambitious Southern black boy into a sophisticated fugitive living off a society that he rejects as a result of his disillusioning experiences with both whites and other blacks, conservatives and reformers, business men and religious revivalists, transcends any racial bounds to stand beside James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a prototypical account of the creation of a Modernist sensibility. More limited in scope but deeply revealing of the sufferings of a sensitive young black are James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and the related non-fictional *The Fire Next Time* (1963), based on recollections of the indignities and illuminations experienced while growing up in Harlem.

The most popular novel of this period, especially with young readers, however, concerns the indignities and illuminations also experienced by a boy growing up during the same years as Baldwin a few miles south of Harlem in the upper-middle-class high-rise apartment district of Manhattan, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Although Salinger had been publishing short stories since 1941, he first attracted attention with a short story in the *New Yorker*, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," about the suicide of Seymour Glass, who with his six siblings was to be the subject of most of the only thirteen other stories that Salinger has allowed to be published in book form. He received almost hysterical adulation for his one novel, a colloquial monologue about the traumatic experiences of a seventeen-year-old boy seeking to maintain an innocence doomed to adulteration in the corrupted world of New York at Christmas.

Despite the popular triumph of this culmination of "waste land" thinking in *The Catcher in the Rye* and the Glass family stories, the Modernist sensibility remained under attack from