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The Twentieth Century

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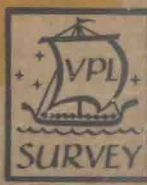
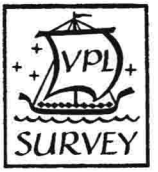
Prefatory Essay by

MALCOLM COWLEY





THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

WITH A PREFATORY ESSAY BY

Malcolm Cowley

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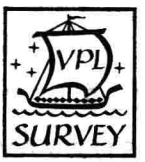

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THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
Prefatory Essay by Malcolm Cowley

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EDITORS' NOTE

No student of American literature can feel that he has made a reasonably full perusal of the materials unless he has read complete Thoreau's *Walden,* Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* Melville's *Moby-Dick,* Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* Twain's *Huckleberry Finn,* and a novel or two each of James, Hemingway, and Faulkner. These authors are most profitably read in full-length works; but before the reading revolution occasioned by inexpensive paperback reprints, anthologists were forced to present these authors in more or less fragmented form. This is no longer necessary. The teacher today can include in his course, in addition to anthologized material, such representative works as those mentioned above without feeling that he is demanding from his students an unreasonable expenditure for books.

In view of this change in the practical realities of teaching courses in American literature, we have felt that it is both wise and necessary to omit from our anthology those authors who would be read under separate cover anyway. Moreover, by deleting such material, we have been able to provide a wider selection than is usual from such authors, for example, as Edward Taylor and Emily Dickinson, who most probably would not be read in separate editions. Given the present textbook situation, we feel that these volumes maintain the proper balance of materials, meeting the widest demands of common practice, flexibility, and usefulness.

Milton R. Stern
Seymour L. Gross

PREFACE

By Malcolm Cowley

The new century started badly for American writers. In going over the literary records of the early 1900s, one senses a mood of discouragement that contrasts with the bounce and rebelliousness of the preceding decade. The 1890s had been a time of little magazines and avant-garde publishers, of new critical journals, of the first American little theater, and also of contending literary doctrines. Besides the established realists and local colorists—and besides the best-selling romantic novelists, whom all the younger men despised—there were also naturalists, impressionists, symbolists, decadents, high-minded socialists, Harvard poets (an impressively gifted group), and at least one Veritist, capitalized, in the person of Hamlin Garland, who invented the term. There was talent, there was conviction, there was almost everything, in fact, except a sympathetic audience for outspoken or experimental writing. The lack of an audience proved fatal, and by the end of the decade all this activity had been swept out of sight by what the *Bookman* described, at the time, as a "sudden onrush of ideality and romance which arose like a fresh sweet wind to clear the literary atmosphere. In this resistless new movement toward light and hope and peace," the *Bookman* continued, "those black books were cast aside and forgotten."

It is curious to note how writers can be discouraged by a resistless movement toward light, hope, and ideality. Soon the little magazines vanished with the groups that supported them, and the avant-garde publishers went bankrupt after losing most of their authors. The fact is that many of the

rebel authors, and most of their leaders, had died shortly after the turn of the century, stricken in their early prime as if by some contagious blight. Among the careers that suddenly ended were those of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Lafcadio Hearn, Trumbull Stickney (the most original of the Harvard poets), James A. Herne (once known as the American Ibsen), and Kate Chopin of New Orleans, who had tried to write an American *Madame Bovary*. There were only a few survivors of this tragic generation. Among them, Theodore Dreiser suffered a prolonged breakdown after *Sister Carrie* was treated by its publisher and its critics as a scandal to be hushed up; he would write no fiction for ten years. Edwin Arlington Robinson was on the edge of succumbing to drink and disheartenment. Hamlin Garland, who also survived, had lost his early convictions; step by by step he was going over to the enemy.

The enemy was of course the Genteel Tradition, which held that no book should be published unless it was a "decent" work that could "safely" be placed on the center table in the parlor and read by proper young girls. "It is the 'young girl' and the family center table," Frank Norris once complained, "that determine the standard of the American short story." He might also have said that they determined the standard of American novels, plays, essays, and poetry. Although his complaint was made in the 1890s, there was no improvement during the early 1900s, when in fact the Genteel Tradition seemed more oppressive than ever. Mark Twain deferred to it, during those years, by reserving most of what he regarded as his serious work for posthumous publication. Edith Wharton was bolder, being encouraged by her wealth and her social position, but she found it more congenial to live in Europe. Although some interesting books were written at home by the muckraking journalists, they were not intended to be permanent. One might say of the decade that almost all the lasting works it produced were either written in Europe (as note Henry James's major novels and the first books of younger writers like Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein) or else were privately printed, as was *The Education of Henry Adams*.

One might also say that American universities neglected one of their duties during this period—and in fact as late as 1930—by paying almost no attention to American authors, living or dead. They looked fixedly across the

Atlantic. When they offered courses in comparative literature, the comparisons were among the authors of Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and sometimes Russia or Scandinavia. American literature was mentioned, if at all, as a rather disappointing and altogether colonial branch of English literature. Undergraduates might easily have gained the impression that writing was an art that flourished in Europe and nowhere else. There was indeed a break, about this time, in the whole tradition of American writing, and I think the universities helped to produce it by thus abolishing our literary past.

Writers of the new century would be condemned or privileged to start over from the beginning, as if nobody on this continent had ever practiced the art of making books. As a matter of fact, groups of young writers made several fresh starts, first in the 1910s, then in the 1920s, and then again in the 1930s, each time with a different conception of what they should do. I am not proposing to offer a history of twentieth-century American literature in capsule form. All I am trying to find is a rough sort of historical pattern that can be applied to the authors represented or recommended in the present volume, and I might start by dividing the century into segments of about ten years each. The division happens to be more than a matter of convenience. By historical accident almost every decade of our recent literature seems to possess a mood and manner of its own, as if writers had been working with their eyes on the calendar.

Once I thought of comparing the earlier—but not the later—decades to the early stages of a New England year. The 1890s, for example, would be a sort of January thaw in which the sap began to rise before the weather turned cold again. The ten years after 1900 would be a long March freeze. But winter doesn't last forever, even in New Hampshire, and the 1910s would be a sunny week in April, with flowers bursting forth everywhere under the bare trees. Some of the flowers had bloomed earlier and had miraculously survived under the snow: I am thinking here of Dreiser and Robinson, both of whom were rediscovered at the beginning of the decade. Soon there were younger rebels to bear them company, and notably there was a straggling but impressive parade of poets: Frost, Sandburg, Jeffers, Millay, Lindsay, Masters, Aiken, and Eliot, with

Amy Lowell twirling a cigar like a drum major's baton as she tried to keep them all in step. But there were also new novelists (Cather, Anderson, Lewis), there was at last an admired playwright (Eugene O'Neill), there were brilliant radical journalists (Randolph Bourne, John Reed), and there were critics like Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks, who spoke for the younger men. Brooks in particular played almost the same part in this second renaissance that Emerson had played in the thirties and forties of the preceding century.

In the 1910s there was at last an audience for serious writing, even of a sort not intended for the family center table, and there were also new ways of reaching the audience: new magazines, new publishers, and a profusion of little theaters. It is hard to characterize the extremely varied work of the writers who appeared in the decade. One can say that, with traditions broken, they seemed to owe an extremely small debt to American writers of the preceding century. One can say that they were generally critical in tone—critical, that is, of American life and institutions—but that most of them were moved by an essentially patriotic impulse. They wanted to produce books that would be worthy of this vast and still new country, by virtue of their scope, their newness, and their honesty. Hence, their emphasis was on subject matter, and they paid less than the proper attention to the structure and texture of their writing. There were notable exceptions to this rule—among them Eliot, Frost, and Cather—but in general the writers of the 1910 generation were not models of skilled craftsmanship or of discriminating taste. It was a weakness that would lead to another change in the direction of American letters.

The change became evident in the course of the following decade. There is no good seasonal analogy for the 1920s, but perhaps one could call them a second spring that followed the cold rains of wartime and of the postwar reaction. Once again young writers were starting over from the beginning, with no regard for tradition and without even knowing, in most cases, that such a thing existed in America. They went abroad to write, or many of them did; even those like William Faulkner who stayed at home were deeply affected by European and chiefly French ideals of the literary life. The tradition to which most of their work

belongs is ultimately that of Gustave Flaubert, with his belief that writing was more important than living and his addiction to the "quaint mania," as he called it, of wearing himself out in pursuit of the perfect phrase and the unchangeable paragraph. But Proust and Joyce, Pound and Eliot, are writers in the same line, and they all served as models for the work of what became known as the Lost Generation.

Here the most familiar names are those of Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Wolfe, Dos Passos, and Katherine Anne Porter among the novelists, of Cummings, Crane, and Tate among the poets, and of Edmund Wilson among the critics. It is difficult, once again, to characterize the writers of a whole literary period. One might say, however, that their general emphasis was on form rather than subject matter, with the result that they produced better-finished and more complicated works than did most of their immediate predecessors. One might also say that the works—except for those of Dos Passos—are distinguished by intensity and depth rather than by any broad vision of the nation or the world.

Their lack of social vision came to be regarded as an inexcusable weakness and something close to a hanging crime by the young writers who appeared in the early depression years. A new period was beginning, and it is one for which one can find no seasonal comparison. One is tempted to call it a frost in June, when one thinks about the sorrows of the unemployed, but the literary atmosphere of the early years was anything but frosty or discouraged. The young writers of the 1930s were passionately convinced that they could help in their own way to end poverty and change the world. Rejecting all their predecessors except Whitman and Dreiser and John Reed, they started over once again, as the writers of the teens and twenties had done, and they moved in a new direction. At first they called themselves proletarian or revolutionary writers and then, after 1935, social realists. They were primarily concerned neither with form nor, except in appearance, with subject matter. They believed, it is true, that novels and poems should deal with the workers, or proletariat, but their real emphasis was on doctrine. If a book presented the right sort of doctrine—preferably one connected with the inevitable downfall of capitalism, or the

triumph of the workers, or the crusade against fascism—they were willing to salute it as a good or sometimes as a great work.

Actually the decade was rich in literary works, but not many of the great or merely good ones were produced by these doctrinal writers. Their poetry was deplorable, and so was most of their prose. The main currents of the time are represented for me by three big novels, all written by somewhat older men. Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* is, among other things, an attack on monopoly capitalism, written around the thesis that human values are destroyed by the inevitable concentration of wealth in a few hands. "Yes, we are two nations," the author says at last, referring to the rich and the poor; and he finds no hope for decent ordinary people, whether they choose to be radical or to be conservative. *The Grapes of Wrath* was almost the last of the proletarian novels, and it is the only one out of hundreds that is read today. Unlike *U.S.A.* it is a hopeful book, expressing the spirit of the decade as a whole; it assumes that the workers will triumph when they learn to unite. *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* published in 1940, is the one masterly American novel that deals with the anti-fascist crusade. Its hero sacrifices himself for a cause and thereby wins a respite from time and mortality; in the seventy hours before death he lives as full a life as he might have lived in seventy years. But the author and his readers know that the cause of the Spanish Republic was a lost one and that the hero's sacrifice was wasted. The decade of hope was ending in despair and disillusionment.

Our simple pattern of changing decades is obscured after 1940. Partly that is because the war was an interregnum in the literary world; young writers were busy in uniform, and everybody was waiting for them to come home and express themselves in completely new books. When the war novels began to appear by scores and then by hundreds, they mostly proved disappointing, at least to those who had been hoping for revelations. Some of them had brute power, of the sort possessed by *The Naked and the Dead* or *From Here to Eternity,* but it did not seem to be under the author's control. Though most of the other war novels were honest and surprisingly craftsmanlike, they added more to our knowl-

edge of how soldiers felt and acted than they did to American literature.

It was not fiction by younger writers that flourished in the postwar years and almost as late as 1960; rather it was criticism that became a field of discovery where new methods were applied and old masterpieces were reinterpreted. The principal labor, however, was one of consolidation. For the first time critics surveyed American writing of the twentieth century in relation to what had gone before. Universities joined in the work—in fact most of the critics were now professors, as were many of the new poets—and it was conducted on a grand scale. What emerged from the survey was a demonstration that American literature was more consistent and more unified than anyone had suspected in the past. Almost every existing current or tendency could be followed back into the nineteenth century, and some, it was shown, had started in colonial days. There was something in common between Hawthorne and Faulkner, for example, as there was between Whitman and Hart Crane; and Hemingway's best work was written in a mid-American prose style that critics traced back through Mark Twain to the old Southwestern humorists. In the same way the social realists of the 1930s had points of resemblance with the muckraking novelists of the early 1900s, and the 1920s repeated the 1890s on a grander scale.

And the 1960s? By the beginning of the decade it was clear that there would be a reaction against the academic tradition in criticism and poetry. Once again young writers were rebelling against their predecessors, and they were speaking of themselves as "alienated" or "disaffiliated," or, for a time, simply as "beat." There was even a growing body of poetry and fiction written from a new point of view. It was the work of writers who had started over from the beginning, but that was what many of their predecessors had done, and it was part of an American pattern too.

CONTENTS