

AMERICAN FICTION

1920—1940

By Joseph Warren Beach

JOHN DOS PASSOS · ERNEST HEMINGWAY
WILLIAM FAULKNER · THOMAS WOLFE
ERSKINE CALDWELL · JAMES T. FARRELL
JOHN P. MARQUAND · JOHN STEINBECK

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I. THE LAY OF THE LAND

This book is written at the request of a friend who is a wide reader in many fields, but would like to know more about American fiction in our time and especially about those novelists whom I consider of first importance. His suggestion is that I choose half a dozen of them and discuss them in some detail, so as to make clear to the general reader what there is about each one that gives him a particular claim on our interest and attention. The assumption is that a critical analysis of their themes, their social attitudes, and their literary methods would help the reader to sort out his own ideas and form a reasoned opinion on their performance. It is even hoped that from a study of a few of our outstanding storytellers some conclusions might be drawn as to the general temper of our times—at least in fiction—the prevailing attitudes toward human nature and society, the dominant philosophy of life.

As to my choice of authors for display, the principle is plain. I have picked eight men who, after due consideration, seem to me most worth our thoughtful consideration. I have naturally picked them from writers who interest me. In the last analysis we must be guided in matters of taste by—taste. Nothing will appeal to our taste which does not first lay hold of our attention, and nothing will continue to appeal which cannot maintain its hold on our attention. This is not, of course, as simple as it sounds, for we are anything but simple in our psychological make-up. We can dis-

tinguish, among the sides of our nature, mind, heart and imagination, and it might be thought sufficient for a work of art to make its appeal to any one of these. But the fact is that, while we can roughly distinguish these elements in our nature, they are not strictly separate faculties of the spirit; none of them exists in isolation. Each one constantly affects the others, and the thing we call interest is the result of their combined appeal. This is particularly the case with literature, since its medium is words, which have their intellectual as well as their sentimental and imaginative reference. And in fiction, which deals with human nature, it is peculiarly true that deep and lasting interest cannot be roused in intelligent readers unless the appeal to the heart and the imagination is supported by a simultaneous appeal to the mind. The creation of characters might seem to be made primarily by way of the imagination; but it is seldom that, with characters that live, no element of sentiment, of sympathy, enters in to reinforce the imaginative effect. In fiction that deals seriously with human nature, the mind is perpetually on the alert distinguishing motives and passing more or less conscious judgments on behavior. But who can say just where the judgment of the mind begins and the judgment of the heart leaves off? The effort of realism is to present human nature objectively, to label it scientifically. But what scientific labels can be attached to human behavior that have no reference to norms of conduct derived from some notion of social good and bad, some moral standards or preferences? And when we speak of moral preferences, we are using a term which implies the joint action of mind and heart in the estimate of conduct.

The vast mass of popular fiction makes, and has ever made, its appeal to uncritical sentiment. It serves the reader's need for wishful thinking. The plots are so contrived as to gratify the cravings of the heart. The characters are so conceived as to rouse disgust, where they are villains, and, where

they are sympathetic, to feed the reader's appetite for nobility, for wit, refinement, altruism, intelligence, and resourcefulness. All romantic stories are success stories; and the reader who identifies himself with the hero or heroine has the gratification of vicariously realizing his ideals and attaining the object of his ambitions. Such fiction serves, no doubt, its useful function in the human economy. It is one of the most innocuous forms of entertainment and diversion; and the provision of such forms of entertainment is one of the most crying needs of urban life. They lend their glamour to drab and commonplace lives, and give heart to readers depressed by what they have seen of the world. I would not think of discouraging the production or consumption of this trashy fiction any more than I would the production and consumption of moving pictures.

I go to the movies a good deal myself and have no apologies to make for that way of passing an evening. It is a form of relaxation as salutary for the tired scholar as for the tired businessman. Besides, the movies offer certain artistic features not present in the trashy novel. They appeal to the love of picture and spectacle and to the love of acting; under present conditions they are the most accessible form of drama. But in their handling of human nature and character they are on no higher level than standard sentimental fiction. In fact, they are on a lower level of seriousness, since the conditions of production are such that they must make an appeal to greater masses, including the mass of the juvenile and the illiterate. Their view of human nature is even more standardized, sentimental, uncritical and childish than that of the average popular novel. Intellectually they are for the most part entirely without interest. And even esthetically—apart from the acting and photography—they are generally most unnourishing food. So that the instinct to seek a balanced diet calls for something as different as possible in the form of reading.

It is even conceivable that the sentimental trashiness of our popular drama works unconsciously to determine the direction of serious fiction—by which I mean the work of our clever men who are aiming at something more than sales. It may be partly by reaction from the taste of the vulgar as shown in our most popular art form that our best novelists lean over backwards in their avoidance of sentimentalism and the pseudo-refinements of bourgeois taste. Now, let me say at once that the authors whom I am featuring as representative of present-day fiction are not necessarily such as I would have summoned out of the void had I been the Proteus of American fiction. Nourished as I was on Dickens and Trollope and Hawthorne, on James and Hardy and Tolstoy—fond as I am, among present-day writers, of Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann and André Malraux—it is unlikely that I should have had the hardihood, not to say the imagination, to have conceived of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, of Thomas Wolfe and John Steinbeck, as standard-bearers of our cultural effort. I might easily have been too conventional, too Victorian, in my taste to have uttered the word which called into being such “questionable shapes” as these. But the threads of fate were not in the hands of any college professor. These figures came by other than academic compulsions to utter other than academic gospels, and satisfy urges powerful and obscure that move like ocean currents through the depths of our national culture.

Now they are very much with us; they are the voices of our day, and we cannot deny them. As for myself I have no wish to deny them. I wish to make them heard, to understand them and appreciate them. My aim is not primarily critical; the time for measured judgments is not yet come. And even for measured judgments, what we first require is sympathetic understanding. We must first live through the esthetic experience and give it descriptive formulation before we can begin to appraise it accurately, assign to each man his

rank in the esthetic hierarchy, or even determine whether, in the long view, he is sound or decadent.

It must be obvious, to be sure, that I would not give such earnest study to these eight men if I did not consider them as in many ways superior artists. They have been chosen from scores of meritorious writers, many of whom have claims to inclusion in any list of distinguished novelists. Or rather, they have chosen themselves by something in them that will not brook rejection. Each one of them has something to say about human nature and society that must be heard. And, what is more, each one of them is a master of subtle, powerful and conscious artistry. It is hard to distinguish between the power of thought and the power of esthetic statement. For the mere energy of the spirit, where it is strong enough, has a way of plowing its own esthetic channels, giving to the expression of ideas an accent both original and distinguished.

It would be well worth while, if time allowed, and if it were not invidious, to consider at some length the work of authors who fall just below the standard of distinction which we set for ourselves. For the accomplishment of the first-rate artist appears in higher relief when we set it over against work less distinguished. And the marks of distinction are more easily recognized by contrast with the negative marks of mediocrity. I have puzzled a good deal over the work of writers, like Ruth Suckow, who seem to have all the materials for significant fiction—character, background, feeling and understanding, seriousness and industry—and yet somehow just fail to ring the bell. What she has done for small-town Iowa people in stories like *The Folks* is certainly something which should be done, and it is not marred by provincialism or narrowness of spirit. It cannot fail to interest those acquainted with these localities and these conditions of living, which are in many respects most typical American conditions. The stuff is all there, and there is also in the author the sympathy and insight we should wish for the interpretation

of this human data. Yet somehow it fails to take strong hold on the imagination—that at any rate is my own experience—and the farther one reads the more troubled one grows that matter so interesting, presented so faithfully, should prove so wanting in fascination. One admires the sanity of Mrs. Suckow's approach, and one is eager to see the triumph of sanity in art. But one cannot disguise the fact that the interest flags; one wants to skip, not in order to learn the answer to some question, but hoping to find in the next chapter something more arresting than in the present one; and when one puts the book down to go to dinner, one is in no hurry to take it up again.

It is very hard to say just what is wrong. Perhaps one thing that is wanting is rigorous selection of matter. And yet there are plenty of books that are equally crowded with intimate detail which never make this impression of tediousness. It is not so much selection itself that is wanting as a principle of selection. And the principle of selection, which would affect both the style itself and the subject matter presented, would be, I think, some coloring of the mind (beyond mere honesty and goodwill) which would give a more special turn to all that is said. It is not that the effect is mild. For mildness may itself be a coloring of mind sufficient to give distinction, as in Goldsmith and Jane Austen and E. K. Forster, for example, or for that matter in Hawthorne and Howells. But mildness itself must have a kind of intensity or positiveness in order to impress itself on the esthetic sense and not be mistaken for tameness. Subtlety is mild, but it must have a sharpness, too, in order to qualify as subtle. It must have a fine edge, a nicely discriminated accent.

Each one of the men I have chosen to discuss has a marked and individual accent, giving esthetic definition to all his offering, and that precious air of being selective. Let it be the corrosive irony of Dos Passos, the weighted understatement of

Hemingway, the conscious naïveté of Caldwell; let it be the nervous intensity, the rush and incandescence of Faulkner or the lyrical Gargantuan extravagance of Wolfe—even where these qualities are present in excess, even where they lead the author at times along the perilous edge of absurdity—in every case there is something to give the individual stamp of art to the neutral stuff of common observation. It is the mind that is working, but never the mind in its purely scientific and colorless apprehension of truth. It is the mind humanized by emotion and implemented with the rhetoric of feeling. Irony and naïveté are forms of wit; they give point and savor to what might be unimpressive in direct statement.

Even the stark objectivity of Farrell—his bleak, unvarnished recording of things said and done, of brutality, stupidity, obscenity and silliness—even this seemingly photographic method involves the art of self-restraint, self-suppression, so hard for any conscious creator to observe—and from it all, from a narrative in which the author never once appears, there emanates a strong savor of his personal attitude, a sense of the cold fury of loathing with which he contemplates the cultural purgatory from which he made himself so narrow an escape. The very force of the mind, where we are specially conscious of that, as in Jonathan Swift or Michelangelo—to leave for a moment the field of fiction—this is not properly force of mind but force within the mind, power manifesting itself in the operations of the mind. The drive itself comes from the personality, from above or below the mind; the drive is furnished by the sense of values and importance in concepts of the mind, but it is not from the mind that we have our sense of values.

In all these writers we are impressed by their freedom and boldness in dealing with life and character. This boldness is again an esthetic, an emotional quality. There is a kind of ruthlessness or cruelty in their treatment of