

Frederick J. Hoffman

THE 20's

THE TEMPER OF THE 1920's

THE WAR AND THE POSTWAR TEMPER

THE VERY YOUNG

FORMS OF TRADITIONALISM

FORMS OF EXPERIMENT AND IMPROVISATION

SCIENCE AND THE "PRECIOUS OBJECT"

CRITIQUES OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

SOME PERSPECTIVES ON THE 1920's

American Writing in the Postwar Decade



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THE TWENTIES

American Writing in the Postwar Decade

Revised Edition

Frederick J. Hoffman

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New York

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The Twenties

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Preface to the Second Edition

I HAVE MADE two kinds of changes in this new edition of *The Twenties*: stylistic revisions, and some additions both to text and to footnotes, with the aim of bringing certain sections of the book up to date. In neither case have the changes been radical or substantive. The organization and the order remain as they were in the 1955 edition. My convictions concerning their value (explained in the 1955 preface) are, if anything, reinforced by the history of the book's reception.

Not only has the method proved satisfactory; it has seemed to me a genuine contribution to the study of literary and cultural history. I have elaborated upon my explanation and defense of them on at least two occasions: in my address to the American Studies Association, September, 1957; and in a long paper (and in subsequent discussions of it) prepared for the first annual Conference on Modern Literature, Michigan State University, May, 1961. The first of these is printed in the *American Quarterly* of Summer, 1958; the second will be printed at Michigan State University within this year. If I appear to be unnecessarily assertive in this matter, it is because *The Twenties* should be read with the method in mind. It can of course be read in any way a person chooses (from the table of contents, forward, or from the index backward); but the strategy of presentation seems to me indispensable to the best experience of reading it.

I take the occasion of this new preface as an opportunity especially to point to two risks in the interpretation of my book, of its purpose and of its arrangement. The first has to do with kinds and levels of evidence. I have used a wide variety of sources; they range from the grossest kinds of documentary detail to genuinely first-rate works of the literary art, the "representative anecdotes" of which I spoke in my first preface. The point is that all of these particulars of the intellectual life of the American Twenties cohere; they belong together. Further, there is a progress in each chapter from the simple to the complex; the works I have discussed as "texts" are thematic culminations. I should say therefore that to extract a minor detail from any of the chapters and to allow it an inflationary life out of context is a violation of both critical and historical responsibility. There are, of course, reasons why a person would want so to distort particulars,

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but I should imagine a discussion of them has only a polemical value.

The second *caveat* has to do with the book's subtitle: *American Writing in the Postwar Decade*. It means that the book's major emphasis is upon American writing in the 1920s. Obviously, it is necessary occasionally to go behind the decade and beyond the United States; but these excursions are deliberate and logically connected to and converging on center. For these reasons, important figures like Joyce, Mann, Gide are not discussed, or are discussed only in terms of their relationship to the subject at hand. This book is not about Dublin or London or Paris, but about American writing in the postwar decade. When American writers go to Paris to write, Paris becomes in a limited sense a *locus criticus*. When a British writer (or a German scientist or an Italian or Russian polemicist) has something of relevance to say about an issue that preoccupies Americans, he becomes for the moment a supplementary figure. This concentration upon the matter of the subtitle is not a limitation but a limit set deliberately upon the work. To have done anything else would have involved endangering both the book's order and its value. Except for a few minor works, William Faulkner's career began in 1929; he is a writer of the 1930s, as is Thomas Wolfe. They cannot be treated, except incidentally, as major figures of the postwar decade. The principal writers discussed here are those who either arrived at a peak of achievement in the 1920s or published significant works in that decade.

The Twenties has for its principal aims to give a maximum amount of information, to discuss major thematic lines of development, and to bring several kinds of critical and scholarly discipline to bear significantly upon its subject. It is not intended to be entertaining or amusing or "exciting"; nor have I ever wanted to exploit the easy, sensationalistic details of the "Jazz Age." This book is not a tabloid or the distorted result of preconceptions imposed by *force majeure* upon a literature and a history. The decade has been treated so often as evidence to support one thesis or another that I am convinced of the value and necessity of such a book as this. I shall want to leave the task of "showing the sights" of the decade to whatever kinds of Grover Whalen there are at present; they are welcome to it, and to the easy rewards it will invariably confer.

FREDERICK J. HOFFMAN

Riverside, California
March 3, 1962

Preface

THE 1920s ARE a decade especially susceptible to the image-making and stereotyping of historians, literary or otherwise. The reason for this tendency to give the easiest definition of the decade's character lies partly in the special place it has had in our century. Bounded as it was by a war and a depression, it very early acquired an isolated position in cultural history. The peculiarities of the decade, or of the large minority who articulated its feelings, were put under an especially narrow scrutiny, from which they emerged in several kinds of distortion. For the most part, the story of the decade has been told with an improper emphasis upon the most sensational of its effects.

The Twenties is, at least in part, a corrective of the most extreme forms of distortion. When I began writing it I was convinced that a period of years responsible for so many distinguished products in the arts, one capable of holding the interest of subsequent generations so fully, must have been more substantial than it is usually represented as being. It seemed to me that there were several reasons why the 1920s had not so far been fairly portrayed. The most important was that the methods used, while not dishonest or improper, were inadequate to the task of giving the full quality of the decade. A chronological presentation of events does not really give more than their surface. Emphasis upon historical and social matters leaves much that is either ignored or insufficiently realized. The most popular method so far used in studies of the 1920s has been the journalistic one of searching out and featuring prominently the sensational events or characteristics of the time. This approach, while it entertained readers, did so at a considerable sacrifice of perspective and of what I insist is the truth of the decade. The real value lies, not merely in newspaper copy or in public event, but in the ways in which the literature expressed, formally, climactically, and meaningfully, the several important preoccupations, modes of thought, and attitudes of the times.

I did not want to write either a political or a literary history of the decade; I needed an approach that revealed the value of the thousands of documents one finds in the popular and

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semi-popular writings of the period but at the same time subordinated them to the central values they suggested. I encountered several problems in my search for the center of the decade's value. Not the least of these was the need to give a sense of the proper balance of the literary work with its documentary environment. How valuable were the hundreds of statements, arguments, editorials, charges, and counter-charges, concerned with essential matters but not in any real sense literature? What was the true relationship of these documents to works of acknowledged literary value? Most important of all, what insights into the major issues of the decade were available in the literature, and how could one best represent them? It has often seemed to me that quarrels over the importance of the formal as opposed to the social values of literature ignore (sometimes quite arbitrarily) the genuine opportunities for seeing the true virtues of a literature, which are neither purely formal nor exclusively documentary but—in achieving a balance of both—moral. The aesthetic forms employ the evidence which the journals of the age accumulate; the social, the political, and the journalistic responses to issues of the time are responsible for a vast, often undifferentiated mass of detail which in its crude form is the "raw material" of a literature.

If literature is important to history, it is not because it serves as a social document or as a footnote to political or intellectual history, but primarily because it is a culmination, a genuine means of realizing the major issues of its time. With this truth in mind, I tried to see the 1920s from the perspective of its literature; and I selected for each of the book's eight chapters a literary text which I felt would serve best to present in a sharp and meaningful way the issues, concerns, and points of view discussed in it. These texts thus serve as "representative anecdotes" of the matter found in the chapters. In selecting them I took into account three important matters: the artist's sense of form, his appreciation of the special emotional tone of his subject, and his grasp of its "reality." These, in their various kinds of balance and integration, constitute the "anecdote" that illustrates, formulates, and represents the subject of the chapter. The artist has at his disposal certain qualities of form—he has been educated in them, or has educated himself; he has also, in his personal view of the reality of the subject, access to certain theories, moral and social forms, and conventions; and his use of these is qualified by his way of seeing and judging the subject.

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The reality itself can be seen in an informal and often an unenlightened state in hundreds of documents of the time: editorials, feature articles, and minor works of literature. Ultimately the value of any idea rests not merely in the fact that it is talked about at length and in detail, but rather in its having been realized formally, given meaning by an artist sensitive to both its formal and its moral implications. The importance of literature as text and anecdote, therefore, is that it gives the subject of its time back to us in one or another form of heightened, enriched, and sensible realization. Literature is not valuable simply because it "uses" the matter of the time, nor merely because it has degrees of formal excellence, but because it helps us to see the reality of any idea in a full, clear, and meaningful form; the form is the matter, the matter is *in* the form, and the reality which is thus formally given is a moral and aesthetic anecdote of one or another aspect of the time. I have selected texts neither because they are "great works" (some of them are not) nor because they are "interesting social evidence"; I have tried, however, to choose those works of literature that come nearest to being the best of their kind and at the same time the most representative of the preoccupations and attitudes discussed in the chapters.

The selection of texts is, therefore, a major principle of this book's organization. In every chapter the discussions of the subject, the use of secondary material, the quotations from documents are all presented with two principal aims: to give a sense of the *abundance* of detail and illustration which the subject of the chapter possesses (that is, to show its *complicated* nature); and to move toward the concluding text, as representative anecdote, by one or several strategies of development (in other words, to show the *complexity* of the subject).

Perhaps I can explain my method further by discussing the development of one of the chapters—Chapter II will serve. I begin on a note of contrast: certain writers presented World War I as a culminating test of man's loyalties and his moral responsibility; their work is colored and controlled by an appreciation of, a devotion to, standards which they had accepted long before. But this was *not* the most important view of the war taken in the 1920s; the major writings of the decade presented it in quite a different manner. I proceed to discuss this difference, to explain it, to show what precedent for it existed in earlier literature. I examine in some detail

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certain works of the 1920s that present the new perspective upon the war; at the same time I return (sometimes briefly, once or twice at some length) to the contrast with which the chapter began. In section iv (called "The Unreasonable Wound") I try to gather together the matter of the chapter, to examine once again what I have so far said, but this time in the work of Ernest Hemingway, the most articulate and the best writer on the subject of the chapter. Section iv anticipates the text of the chapter, prepares the way for it; section v is an additional preparation; again, minor works, what I have called "documents," are used. The final section is an analysis of the text, in this case Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. If the reader will bear in mind that the chapter is called "The War and the Postwar Temper," he will appreciate that novel (in my discussion of it) as the culmination of the chapter's meaning, suggesting and realizing as it does its full matter and its many details in several central images.

This is an example of the kinds of strategy I have used throughout the book. The specific development of each chapter depends, of course, upon its subject, the kinds of document related to it, and the kinds of presentation best suited to it. It is quite impossible in a work of this kind to give full summaries, detailed information, concerning everything discussed; the chronology and the biographical notes in the appendix should help the reader to fill in details if he wants to do so. In general, the progress of the chapters is of this order: from non-literary document to literary treatment to text. It is a development beginning with a multiplicity of detail, gradually moving toward the stressing of important themes, and culminating in a critical analysis of the text's value as literature and as representative anecdote.

There are critics, of course, who reject the idea of decade study, or of the study of any period of time isolated from its past and its future. I do not deny the importance of origins, the influence of past upon present. The area of concentration in the book is America of the years 1918 to 1932; the first date the end of World War I, the second the year when a full realization of the depression caused many men to think of the decade as "definitely finished." My principal excursions outside of these years have been in the time before 1918; I have moved back as early as 1900, and have at times devoted considerable space to the second decade of the century, but always with the single object of illuminating, explaining, and realizing the years of the postwar decade. For the same

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reason I have discussed occasionally the work of English and other European writers, when they have an important bearing upon the subject at hand. In other words, I have tried to make the 1920s in America as vivid, as genuine, and as important as I believe them to be, employing whatever means are available, but retaining throughout the image of the decade itself as the center and purpose of the investigation.

The work on this book began in 1945. I should like to express my gratitude to the Rockefeller Foundation, whose grant in that year enabled me to do much of the necessary research. Since that time I have been assisted in a number of ways: the Department of English of the Ohio State University gave me a research assistant in 1946-1947; the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin provided me with research assistants in 1949-1950, 1951-1952, and 1952-1953. I have also had two research grants from it, for the purpose of completing the work, in the fall of 1951 and the summer of 1953. I am especially grateful to the University of Wisconsin and to J. H. Herriott, Associate Dean of the Graduate School, for their genuine interest in the work. No university can possibly improve upon the University of Wisconsin in the matter of encouraging scholarly work and providing the opportunities and the time for it. The staffs of the following libraries have helped me from time to time: the libraries of the University of Wisconsin and the Ohio State University, the New York Public Library, the Widener and the Houghton Libraries at Harvard University, and the American Library of Grenoble, France.

I wish to thank David Laird and Mrs. A. B. Clements, who served as research assistants during important phases of the work. The students of my seminars at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard (spring of 1953) have given me many valuable suggestions. I am happy for the opportunity to thank Mrs. Blanche Gelfant, who helped out in the matter of checking references. I should also like to mention gratefully the following persons who gave of their time, their knowledge, and their wisdom in discussing matters related to the planning and writing of the book; none of them is responsible for any errors I may have made: Malcolm Cowley, Warren Susman, John Conley, Howard Mumford Jones, Newton Arvin, William Van O'Connor, Seymour Betsky, Saul Gottlieb, and Lionel Trilling. In addition, I profited from discussing the plans of the book in 1945 or earlier with Joseph Freeman, Waldo Frank, Matthew Josephson, H. L. Mencken, Sinclair