Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 95

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Volume 95

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Jennifer Baise
Editor

Thomas Ligotti
Associate Editor

GALE GROUP

Detroit
New York
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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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Major authors from the Renaissance to the present	*WORLD LITERATURE CRITICISM, 1500 TO THE PRESENT* (*WLC*)

Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities, and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many libraries would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1960 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topic entries widen the focus of the series from individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* which reprints commentary on authors now living or who have died since 1960. Because of the different periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For additional information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism titles, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Coverage

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to present:

- criticism of authors, or literary topics, representing a variety of genres and nationalities
- both major and lesser-known writers and literary works of the period
- 6-12 authors or 3-6 topics per volume
- individual entries that survey critical response to each author's work or each topic in literary history, including early criticism to reflect initial reactions; later criticism to represent any rise or decline in reputation; and current retrospective analyses.

Organization of This Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, reprints of criticism (each preceded by an annotation and a bibliographic citation), and a bibliography of further reading.

- The **Author Heading** consists of the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the begin-

ning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- The **Biographical and Critical Introduction** outlines the author's life and career, as well as the critical issues surrounding his or her work. References to past volumes of *TCLC* are provided at the beginning of the introduction. Additional sources of information in other biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Short Story Criticism, Children's Literature Review, Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography,* and *Something about the Author,* are listed in a box at the end of the entry.

- Some *TCLC* entries include **Portraits** of the author. Entries also may contain reproductions of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, and drawings, as well as photographs of important people, places, and events in an author's life.

- The **List of Principal Works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors with both foreign-language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Critical essays are prefaced by **Annotations** providing the reader with information about both the critic and the criticism that follows. Included are the critic's reputation, individual approach to literary criticism, and particular expertise in an author's works. Also noted are the relative importance of a work of criticism, the scope of the essay, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author. In some cases, these annotations cross-reference essays by critics who discuss each other's commentary.

- A complete **Bibliographic Citation** designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- Criticism is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles of works by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to easily locate discussion of particular works. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. Some of the essays in *TCLC* also contain translated material. Unless otherwise noted, translations in brackets are by the editors; translations in parentheses or continuous with the text are by the critic. Publication information (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.

- An annotated list of **Further Reading** appearing at the end of each author entry suggests secondary sources on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Cumulative Indexes

- Each volume of *TCLC* contains a cumulative **Author Index** listing all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross references to such biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* For readers' convenience, a complete list of Gale titles included appears on the first page of the author index. Useful for locating authors within the various series, this index is particularly valuable for those authors who are identified by a certain period but who, because of their death dates, are placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC,* yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC.*

- Each *TCLC* volume includes a cumulative **Nationality Index** which lists all authors who have appeared in *TCLC* volumes, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities, as well as Topics volume entries devoted to particular national literatures.

- Each new volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series includes a cumulative **Topic Index,** which lists all literary topics treated in *NCLC, TCLC, LC 1400-1800,* and the *CLC* yearbook.

- Each new volume of *TCLC,* with the exception of the Topics volumes, includes a **Title Index** listing the titles of all literary works discussed in the volume. In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paperbound Edition** of the *TCLC* title index. This annual cumulation lists all titles discussed in the series since its inception and is issued with the first volume of *TCLC* published each year. Additional copies of the index are available on request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation. Titles discussed in the Topics volume entries are not included *TCLC* cumulative index.

Citing Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in Gale's literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to materials drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

[1]William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined,* (AMS Press, 1987); reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 94-105.

[2]George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review,* 6 (Winter 1949), pp. 85-92; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Gariepy (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 40-3.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including annotations to critical essays, a cumulative index to authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors or topics to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.

Acknowledgments

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Brickman, William W. From "Dewey's Social and Political Commentary" in ***Guide to The Works of John Dewey***. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Southern Illinois University Press, 1970. Copyright © 1970 by Southern Illinois University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Couser, G. Thomas. From ***American Autobiography***. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1979. © 1979 by The University of Massachusetts Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the author.—Hendley, Brian Patrick. From ***Dewey, Russell, Whitehead:***

PHOTOGRAPHS AND ILLUSTRATIONS APPEARING IN *TCLC*, VOLUME 95, WERE RECEIVED FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES:

Contents

Robert P. Tristram Coffin

1892-1955

(Full name Robert Peter Tristram Coffin) American poet, novelist, and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

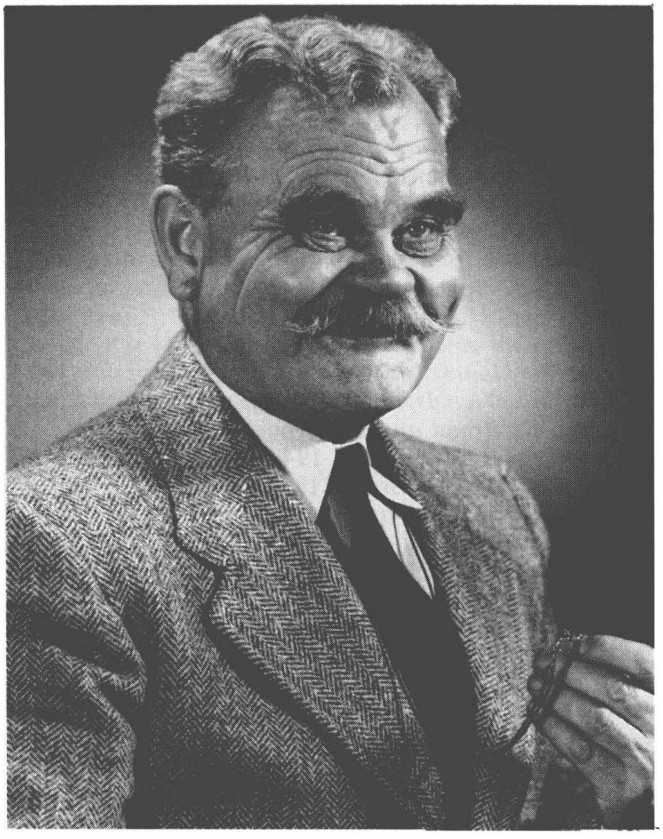
From the 1930s through the 1950s, Coffin was regarded as one of America's foremost regionalists. In poetry, novels, and essays, he wrote about the shaping influence of his birthplace, Maine, on the life and character of its inhabitants, and advocated such values as simplicity and self sufficiency that he believed sprang from its culture. He enjoyed popularity and honor in his lifetime–winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1936. While some critics praised him for revealing poetic mystery in the commonplace, others found his work sentimental, loquacious, and limited. After his death in 1955, his books were all but forgotten.

Biographical Information

Coffin's life, like his poetry, is marked by robust optimism and unflagging energy. Inspired by his father's love of song and story, he began writing when a boy. His work often celebrated his father, the state of Maine, the primitive currents in human nature, and the resourcefulness and resilience, whether heroic or tragic, of the solitary, self-reliant individual confronting Nature, which he depicted as both holy and brutally unrelenting. He entered Bowdoin College in 1911, where he was twice winner of the Hawthorne prize for short story writing. He graduated *summa cum laude,* and went on to Princeton as a Longfellow scholar. In 1916, he graduated from Princeton and went to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar to study poetry. After serving as a second lieutenant in the artillery during the First World War, he returned to Oxford to complete his studies. Back in the United States in 1921, he began teaching at Wells College in New York State until, in 1934, he was invited to teach in Maine at Bowdoin, where he stayed until his death in 1955. During these years, he won many awards for poetry, published voluminously, developed a hand for pen and ink and water color sketches, participated in the founding of poetry societies, and traveled to numerous universities to read his poems and to speak.

Major Works

Coffin's most characteristic works were poems and stories that endowed common events in the lives of ordinary people with epic proportion and mythic dimension. He drew on his own experience, as in his account of his father in *Portrait of an American,* and in the memoir, *Lost Paradise, A Boyhood on a Maine Coast Farm.* Among his novels, the first, *Red Sky in the Morning,*



concerning a son's sacrificial struggle to gain his father's recognition, is considered his best. Like all his work, it reflects his belief in the lasting influence of the intergenerational male bond, the primacy of men, and the instrumentality of women. Celebration of a male-focused engagement with Nature is central to his major collections of poetry, too, from *Ballads of Square-Toed Americans* in 1933, through the Pulitzer prize-winning *Strange Holiness* in 1935, *Poems for a Son with Wings* in 1945, and *One-Horse Farm: Down-East Georgics* in 1949.

Critical Reception

Rejected by some critics as intellectually uninventive, emotionally pat, out of touch with contemporary realities, and devoid of poetic skill, his work nevertheless enjoyed such widespread recognition and regard at the time of his death that the New York Times printed a page one obituary and declared in an editorial tribute, "His verse was sometimes rough-hewn, unplaned or homespun, but . . . there will always be those who . . . will turn to his work for a glimpse of a life that is simpler, unfettered, and . . . more beautiful."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Christchurch (poetry) 1924
Book of Crowns and Cottages (essays) 1925
Dew and Bronze (poetry) 1927
Laud, Storm Center of Stuart England (biography) 1930
Portrait of an American (memoir) 1931
The Yoke of Thunder (poetry) 1932
Ballads of Square-Toed Americans (poetry) 1933
Lost Paradise, A Boyhood on a Maine Coast Farm (memoir) 1934
Red Sky in the Morning (novel) 1935
Strange Holiness (poetry) 1935
John Dawn (novel) 1936
Kennebec, Cradle of Americans (stories) 1937
Saltwater Farm (poetry) 1937
Maine Ballads (poetry) 1938
Collected Poems of Robert P. Tristram Coffin (poetry) 1939
Thomas-Thomas-Ancil-Thomas (novel) 1941
Christmas in Maine (poetry) 1941
The Substance That Is Poetry (essays) 1942
There Will Be Bread and Love (poetry) 1942
Primer for America (essays) 1943
Mainstays of Maine (essays) 1944
Poems for a Son with Wings (poetry) 1945
People Behave like Ballads (poetry) 1946
Yankee Coast (essays) 1947
Collected Poems of Robert P. Tristram Coffin (poetry) 1948
Coast Calendar (poetry) 1949
One-Horse Farm: Down-East Georgics (poetry) 1949
The Third Hunger & The Poem Aloud (essays) 1949
Apples by Ocean (poetry) 1950
Maine Doings (essays) 1950
Life in America: New England (essays) 1951
On the Green Carpet (lectures) 1951
Hellas Revisited (poetry) 1954
Selected Poems (poetry) 1955

CRITICISM

William Rose Benét (essay date 1933)

SOURCE: A review of *Ballads of Square-Toed Americans,* in *Saturday Review of Literature,* Vol. X, No. 10, September 23, 1933, p. 135.

[*In the following excerpt, Benét reviews* Ballads of Square-Toed Americans *and praises the pictorialism and gusto he finds.*]

This week I have three books on my table for particular comment. All of them are American. Of the three, one is by Robert P. Tristram Coffin, who has now won a place for himself among the best American poets of his time. This is his fifth book of poems—and his prose work includes two books of essays and three biographies. His present volume, ***Ballads of Square-Toed Americans,*** is endemic and chiefly narrative. *The Saturday Review of Literature* first presented one of the longer narratives, **"The Schooling of Richard Orr,"** to Mr. Coffin's public. I am glad to remember that this journal gave so much space to that poem, because, as I reread it, the imaginative reliving on the author's part of an Indian raid strikes me again, in its forthright vividness, as a remarkable feat. And there are other poems in this book no less noteworthy for originality of treatment. **"The Truce of the Mohawks,"** though not one of the poems designed to carry out Mr. Coffin's more patriotic notion of his book, is an account of an early clambake that appeals to me greatly by virtue of its deft pictorial quality:

> Laughing, shrieking with delight
> The squaws turned fat clams to the light,
> Greeting each big clam with cries.
> Papooses with their blackberry eyes
> Grave as owls in their surprise
> On every sloping back would stare
> Down the part in mother's hair.

Mr. Coffin hymns all sorts of upstanding Americans, New Englanders, Chesapeake Planters, even the Mormons. His prologue is a long poem read as the Phi Beta Kappa poem last Commencement at Cambridge. It is "Tristram Winship's" vision of America, an heroic and a poetic vision. It is the idealistic side of the American dream which we forget when we regard some of the more recent results of unbridled American independence. This poem is followed by a Yankee chantey to ancestors whose

> hands were like square sails,
> They ran the lengths of longitudes,
> Harpooning spouting whales.

Then there are **"The Men Who Pushed the Forest Down,"** the Mormons, The Tall Axe Men, and so on. There is a swaggering and amusing **"Ballad of a Grandfather,"** there is an eerie legend of **"The Foot of Tucksport,"** with its reflection cast upon the days of witch-burning. There is a sometimes remarkably impressionistic ballad account of **"The Means Massacre,"** and, lastly, **"A Man for a Father"** reveals to us the inspiration behind this volume in praise of early Americans:

> He loved to sing *Belle Brandon* to
> A mellow old guitar,
> He loved to see his chimney smoke
> Against the evening star . . .
>
> Stories he loved, and he kept men
> With beards upon the chin
> Hanging on such lively tales
> As Chaucer's at an inn.

His son has inherited something of that gusto. Indeed Mr. Coffin's range is notable. This new book is rather different from anything he has given us before. And in all his books he is apt to ambush you with sudden leaping phrase like a burning arrow. One's fear for him resides in

his facility. But he is one of the most pictorial of our poets, and the present book, published by the Macmillan Company, should appeal to those who like a picturesque presentation of certain moments of their country's past—an account flavored with the "tall talking" of true Yankees.

William Rose Benét (essay date 1935)

SOURCE: A review of *Strange Holiness,* in *Saturday Review of Literature,* Vol. XI, No. 40, April 20, 1935, p. 639.

[*In the following excerpt, Benét reviews Coffin's* Strange Holiness, *praising the poems for the quality of their workmanship and subject matter but regretting that, in them, the poet has not surpassed his previous work.*]

Robert P. Tristram Coffin is a fecund poet. His latest book, ***Strange Holiness,*** is in contrast to his latest one before that, ***Ballads of Square-Toed Americans,*** in that this is subjective as that was objective. I am only afraid that Mr. Coffin may have a fatal facility. He shapes and turns his poems well, and he usually has something not only interesting to write about but also seen and felt. Also, his phrase is often extremely good. Moreover, the devotional element in these poems has nothing mawkish about it. One feels that the poet pleasured himself in writing all of them. And yet one also feels that he might have conserved the energy expended in writing a good many of them and poured it all into one poem that would have greatly surpassed them all. Where a man has proved his powers, as Mr. Coffin has already done, I think it is allowable to expect him to surpass himself. This book does not surpass others by the same writer. Were it a first book it would not make nearly the impression upon the reader that certain other books of his have made. That he is a good workman is beyond question. But he is also, at rare intervals, a good deal more than that. In this particular volume those intervals are rare indeed.

Times Literary Supplement **(essay date 1935)**

SOURCE: A review of *Strange Holiness,* in *Times Literary Supplement,* No. 1750, August 15, 1935, p. 516.

[*In the following excerpt, a reviewer commends the theme of* Strange Holiness.]

For Mr. Coffin whatever lives is holy and in the longest poem in this collection, entitled **"First Flight,"** he records how he felt "something solemn, something like holiness" in the airplane in which he first took his seat. But while he does full justice in this poem to the cosmic reaches of the air, it is typical of him to turn away soon from these and let his vision pass lovingly over the land unrolled beneath the plane with its small towns and woods and fields and houses that "did not hurry." Far from forgetting his old fidelities in the intoxication of speed and space,

> From his high station Tristram saw that things
> Which meant most to a man were very old,
> A tree before a door, earth turned in furrows,
> A pathway by a brook, a flower-bed,
> The sounds of bees and cowbells, clean, new grass,
> An acre he had planted, sunlit panes . . .
> Doves above a dovecot, a deep sense
> That his two hands had had their fingers in
> Something vast and holy as the growth
> Of seeds to plants, of boughs across a window,
> The patterns of the sunshine and the rain.

This in fact is the theme of almost all his lyrics which run and rhyme easily, like a limpid stream in which the experiences of a farmer who has a keen relish and deep devotion for his work are reflected. Whether he is describing the day's labour of Potato Diggers, a Bull in his stall, milking or the hayfield, or **"The Barn"** in winter or summer, he communicates the sensations of simple elementary things with a fragrant intimacy. His style is at times rather too easily explicit, but his verse is suffused with the grateful tenderness of the devotee who not only lives close to Nature but works with her in watchful harmony.

C. A. Millspaugh (essay date 1938)

SOURCE: A review of *Saltwater Farm,* in *Poetry,* Vol. LI, No. V, February, 1938, pp. 267-70.

[*In the following excerpt, Millspaugh reviews* Saltwater Farm *and finds nothing to recommend it.*]

That rare person, the serious reader of poetry, may legitimately expect of experienced writers at least a minimum of care in craft, a fairly well-developed point of view from which to inspect society and the men who compose it, a character sufficiently mature to be free of such vulgarities as smugness, self-complacency, and sentimentality, and an imagination disciplined by tradition, compelled by the predicaments of contemporary life, projected by good will and wonder into the astonishing future. Measured against these none too austere standards, the present books of Robert Hillyer and Robert P. Tristram Coffin fail.

Though Mr. Hillyer is of the two the more cultivated and the more accomplished craftsman, neither of these poets achieves a level much higher than that on which the beginner strives. . . .

For the unrestrainedly pat, for machine-like regularity in uninspired loquacity, Mr. Robert P. Tristram Coffin has no competitors. Search as he will, the reader cannot find on any page of ***Saltwater Farm*** a completed poem. Fragments of pretty scenery, conventionalized characterizations, sentimentalized metaphor, a drouth of passion, a scarcity of insight, are alone discoverable. All the mistakes a beginner is warned against are here—lines padded to fill out the meter and to meet the rhyme; the afflatus, the expanded image traveling on a line of vague feeling to a gaseous end; ignorance of the limits which

the physical universe imposes on the fanciful; poetic posing, ingenuity mistaken for imagination, mere words substituted for ideas. As does Mr. Hillyer, Mr. Coffin exhibits a self-complacency that renders him valueless as a commentator on human joy and suffering. A man so thoroughly satisfied with the *status quo* can give the hurt, the poor, the insatiable, and the honestly curious little more than sickly pity and platitudinous Pollyannaism.

To demonstrate Mr. Coffin's aptitude as a versifier, one need only quote the two following excerpts—the first as an example of imprecision of fancy; the second as an example of the inferior quality of Mr. Coffin's ear even when he deals with the New England speech he is supposed to know so well:

> Cows in a pasture faded into bells.

and

> You use your body, not your head,
> When you have a boat's keel spread
> Out before you to put right.
> It is a kind of a delight
> That needs no words to make it go, *etc.*

Both Mr. Hillyer and Mr. Coffin have been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Of the first, one must say that he has proceeded with care and a certain dignity; but of the second we can only paraphrase Francis Jeffrey and affirm that Mr. Coffin has dashed his Hippocrene with too large an infusion of saltwater.

Marshall Schacht (essay date 1938)

SOURCE: A review of *Maine Ballads,* in *Poetry,* Vol. LIII, No. II, November, 1938, pp. 92-96.

[*In the following excerpt, Schacht reviews* Maine Ballads *and deplores the poems, which he sees as smug and narrow.*]

In an introduction to his eighth book of poems Mr. Coffin says, in part: "Folk living and folk speaking still go on, in spite of all our modern improvements—the stories are there for the ballads, and the words to them, for anybody who has eyes to see the shape of them and ears to hear the right rhythms and the fall of the words." He ends: "These verses—the more ambitious of them—are not to be judged by the usual poetic standards. Some of them, judged by such, are little more than doggerel. They are to be judged, both in style and in plot, by the principles of folk design."

A foreword of this kind is plainly a defense as well as an explanation of ***Maine Ballads*** and of Mr. Coffin's poetic work as a whole. It says, in fact: this is my chosen range, my special region, marked off deliberately in a world of modern chaos, my way of speech "in spite of modern improvements." And because Mr. Coffin is obviously a mature poet, he is not to be lightly dismissed by those of us who feel he has hitched his wagon to a fallen star, one that has already set with the more genuine regionalism of Robert Frost. It can also be argued that a poet's purpose and range are not to be seriously questioned. "It's not what you say, but the way you say it, that counts." If so, it is only fair to take Mr. Coffin as he wishes to be taken—as a listener to, and lover of, what may seem to us disappearing New England folk-ways.

Although Mr. Coffin's poetry is on the surface very different from that of Robert Frost's, one is led to note comparison (and influence) because the purposes of the two poets are so similar. But where Frost is realistic and always uniquely personal, Mr. Coffin is sentimental and general. Where Frost is hard, Coffin is soft. Frost's genuine interest in New England speech-ways is a more intellectual one than Coffin's, which catches the obvious tones and phrases of salty Maine talk, and even the pattern beneath, but with, one tends to feel, a summer artist's bemusement with the quaint, strange, simple natives and their "doin's." Not that Mr. Coffin is an outsider; he comes from Maine. But from his published history of poetic conditioning—from ***Christchurch*** on—he can be observed gradually to have chosen his poetic range, and to have closed down to home at last, with Robert Frost. Not that one would wish to imply that regionalism is a conscious trick with Coffin, or that regionalism is now a blasphemous ideal in the face of our world of modern improvements. A poet must find his limitations somewhere, so let us grant Mr. Coffin his lovely, salty corner of earth and his worship of vanishing balladry, and see how he manages what he sets out to say.

As in his previous books, at least from ***A Yoke of Thunder*** on, Mr. Coffin continues with his chosen tricks of speech. In ***Maine Ballads*** he has curbed somewhat the distressing repetition (poverty) of image and symbol which crusted his earlier books—the incessant mention of "thighs" and "furrows," the habit of dressing holiness in a leather harness and worshipping its masculinity in bulls and farmhands from the otherworld of a lamplighted barn, or from a dainty universe of jewelled snow. He has turned this time further outward, streetward, to folklore and speech-ways of the homely, Frost-incurred short stories of New England humor and tragedy—with the frank foot-beat of an Edgar Guest, and at times with the ubiquitous thread of Housman strangely evident—as in **"Serenity,"** or **"A Hymn at Night."** He still leans on rhyme, often so carelessly that it creaks; sometimes with the desired effect of the inevitable, simple phrase. And through all the poems Mr. Coffin's strong, paternal and loving character reaches out to caress with a warmth few modern poets can express (or wish to), and this is perhaps reason enough for his chosen bulwark against "modern improvements" and the more representative living scenes, for which he has no "eyes to see the shape of them and ears to hear."

In contrast to ***Maine Ballads,*** Boris Todrin's *7 Men* speaks another man, time and place. This is the newer

poet, the unregional modern, with eyes on the world-scene, social injustice, the new city. . . .

The group of poems for which the book is named is its point of contact with ***Maine Ballads.*** This is a group of portraits and ballads, of "Hughie McPadden—Bantam," of "Olsen," of "John Poor," much in the same groove as Mr. Coffin's portraits and ballads of Jethro Alexander and Tom Bailey of Maine. And, to make the comparison which invites itself, Mr. Todrin's painting is thin portraiture compared to Mr. Coffin's, though set against a more ambitious, cosmopolitan background and concerned with more representative contemporary action. Where Mr. Coffin's portraits smile out from an easy, regional frame, Mr. Todrin attempts the more difficult canvas of the days most of us have to live and know. He includes in his observation modern thinking and social empathy, and if he fails beside Mr. Coffin's smug, popularized miniatures, it is failure which leaves open the possibility of greater success.

Colin E. MacKay (essay date 1965)

SOURCE: "The Novels of Robert P. Tristram Coffin," in *Colby Library Quarterly,* Vol. VII, No. 4, December 1965, pp. 151-61.

[*In the following essay, MacKay examines the theme of permanence running through each of Coffin's three novels and judges it is most effectively expressed in his first.*]

Robert P. Tristram Coffin was a poet who turned frequently to prose; indeed, there was almost no area of prose he did not attempt—biographies, an autobiography, collected lectures, essays, history, criticism, short stories, and novels. This report shall confine itself to the last-mentioned, for (poetry naturally excluded) the novels offered Coffin his greatest challenge.

Coffin's three novels were all written within the seven-year period from 1935 to 1941, when some of his best work as a poet was being done. The first novel, ***Red Sky in the Morning,*** was published just a year before the author won the 1936 Pulitzer Prize for poetry; the second, ***John Dawn,*** in that year of national recognition; and the third, ***Thomas-Thomas-Ancil Thomas,*** five years later. Only brief synopses of the last two books will be necessary; however, as I intend to discuss ***Red Sky in the Morning*** at some length, a more detailed summary of the plot should prove helpful.

This first novel tells the story of Will Prince, the youngest member of an old Maine sea-faring family whose men used to sail around the Horn, but whose descendants now sell clams and lobsters to the summer people. Will's Uncle Frank still maintains, marginally, the old family home; but, as the story begins, Will's father has already taken Will, an older son, David, and Mrs. Prince, to a shack on a barren coastal island named Whaleboat.

Will's is an unhappy, uneasy childhood. He can neither relate as he feels he should to his devoted mother, nor can he fill the place in his dour father's life that seems the special property of David. But for the affection between Mr. Prince and David, there is no joy in the household. The two men regard Will as a weak sister; and Mr. Prince has spells of jealousy, during which he says things to his wife which suggest to Will "the slime an eel left in your hands when you tried to hold him fast." Will senses his mother's need for love in an intolerable situation, but when she attempts to be affectionate, he feels only a vague affront to his manhood and cannot respond.

After David dies of diphtheria, Mrs. Prince refuses to return to the way of life that killed him, and Will, hoping to take David's place, is rejected too. Thus begins a second stage in Will's life—a life to be lived in Uncle Frank's home, among people, and in an old house full of memories of better days. Will is pleased to be with his uncle; pleased to roam the house, take up school again, work with his nets and lobster-traps, and save money for a future education. But Whaleboat and his father's animal existence there are never out of his mind.

Eventually, a cousin, Rupert Prince—adventurer, world traveler, and successful novelist—visits the family home. Though Will is instinctively repelled by the man's egotism and grossness, he notes that his mother is charmed and excited by the newcomer. For a while, Will swallows his revulsion and enjoys seeing his mother vital and happy, but as the relationship grows he remembers his father's old accusations. Will visits Whaleboat to beg his father to come home, only to be rejected again and to have David thrown in his face as the "manly" son.

Will is now convinced he must act for his father. Almost unconsciously, he weaves a huge net. With this under his coat, he goads Rupert into proving he is no fair-weather sailor by taking his sloop out in a storm. On the open sea, Will tries to sink the craft. When an enraged Rupert attacks him, Will twists the net around his cousin's legs, and they both slip into the water to drown. Their bodies are discovered weeks later, and the net still around Rupert is enough to convince Mr. Prince that his son made the ultimate sacrifice for him. Will is buried beside David, and this time his father turns from the dory that should take him back to Whaleboat and slowly walks into the family home.

Although this first novel is not without flaws, it is, to my taste, the most successful of the three. And paradoxically, its weaknesses and its strengths often overlap.

For example, in ***Red Sky*** (and to a lesser extent this could be said of the other novels) Coffin tends to make paragraphs primarily out of a series of short, staccato sentences:

> It was a long way to the boiling spring his father wanted the water from for David. The island was full of springs. But just that one would do for David, and no other. One of the white hen's

> chickens, David was. That was the way Will's mother often spoke of her older son. Anything he wanted was all right. She often said the sun rose and set by that boy, to hear his father tell. Will knew his father thought more of David than he did of him. David took after his father more in looks. That may have been part of the reason why.

Such passages as the above are presumably designed to suggest the fragmentary thought processes of a young boy. But the entire story is, so to speak, filtered through the mind of this boy; thus scenic and personal descriptions appear in the same style, as do revelations about characters and reactions to events. The "primer-style" can become obtrusive.

Taken individually, many paragraphs are crisp and suggestive:

> The September day was bright as polished silver. High white clouds were flying. But they never got in the way of the sun. The sun poured down on everything and lit the whole of Menhaden up. Houses stood out and glistened like squares of rock candy. Everything was like metal in the clear afternoon light. A puddle in the road was burning like a sheet of melted gold. The seagulls were going over like great snowflakes. Whiter than snowflakes. Whiter than snow.

Here the observant poet is clearly in command of the novelist, and one would not want it otherwise. The staccato effect is still apparent, but what New Englander has not seen just such an Autumn day and wished for the words to describe it?

It must be admitted, too, that Coffin's essentially poetic techniques applied to the novelist's purposes did not always produce happy results such as the lines quoted above. Here, for example, is Coffin's description of a mounting storm:

> The cold day was leaning up hard on Will's left side. As Will came up a mound of frozen spindrift, the whole dark ocean lifted up along the black ledges. A crack of white ran all the way along the island and burst into a row of blossoms like giant lilies. They hung in the air and caught the whole dim shine of coming day. Then they subsided very slowly, all at once, and Will heard thunder across the sky, and the whole granite island trembled under him. He was in a hurry. But he set the jug down carefully and stood there as still as a stone. He waited for the next swell to break. It was a long time coming. It was very quiet. The whole sky was growing unspeakably bright right along the rim of the ocean.

I was tempted to use italics to stress the point here, but even without their help, the reader will notice the repetition of the word "whole": "the whole dark ocean . . . the whole dim shine . . . the whole granite island . . . the whole sky." This could hardly be accidental; if a skilled poet did not deliberately put it there, he would unquestionably have noticed the repetition in his proofreading. Coffin must have wanted to stress the intensity of his young hero's awareness of physical nature, and he did so. However, he also, thereby, stressed the technique of the description more than the emotional experience of the storm.

There are overlapping weaknesses and strengths, too, in Coffin's creation of characters. The five major characters—David need not be considered; he is an issue more than a person—do not always have the depth of flesh-and-blood creatures. They come close to being stock characters. Mr. Prince is a hard-bitten lobsterman who can love only the son made in his own image. Will is the sensitive, hence rejected, son. Mrs. Prince is the frustrated woman who has been used to better things; Uncle Frank, the always understanding, somewhat ineffectual nice guy; and cousin Rupert, the boastful adventurer and womanizer.

We know who and what all these people are, but they remain, to a degree, peripheral—like the figures in an epic who exist essentially to act upon and react to the hero. And though Will's character is often sharply delineated, even here—again as with the epic characterization—we are not permitted to know everything. Will's feelings about David and his father are obvious and understandable, but his attitude towards his mother is properly a corollary of his attitude towards his father—and we should know about it if Will is to be more than "the rejected son." However, we must settle for Will's own confusion about his mother, or draw our own commonplace psychological implications.

But this cannot be the last word on Coffin's art of characterization. His strength lies, again, in the individual scenes. No reader of ***Red Sky in the Morning*** will easily forget Will watching his father hold the dying David up to the sun, and almost envying his brother's ability to inspire a God-like look in his father; or could fail to be moved by the scene of an unloved son afraid to touch a pair of his father's trousers because that would seem almost as personal as touching the man himself.

Regrettably, however, such scenes are not enough. Though the analogy may be forced, we do not accept a series of "dramatic monologues" as a cohesive drama; and, similarly, individual scenes in a novel, no matter what their separate force, have got to yield totality of meaning. Flashes of intuition, or feeling, or understanding will not really affect us if we do not, ultimately, identify fully with the people involved in the story. And there's the rub. One is aware that a given page has presented, say, a sensitive and accurate portrait of a "frustrated woman," but she is not often enough a *particular* frustrated woman, Mrs. Prince.

A 1935 reviewer—also reaching for an analogy—put it well, I feel, when he suggested that ***Red Sky*** "presents single emotions keenly, but with no more analysis than in a lyric." Another reference to the poet!