Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 208

Volume 208

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

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editors

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 208

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 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 librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

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Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the 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.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." In *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations,* edited by Reginald M. Nischik, pp. 163-74. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism.* Vol. 206, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 227-32. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Contents

Edward Dahlberg
1900-1977

American novelist, autobiographer, essayist, philosopher, critic, and poet.

The following entry provides an overview of Dahlberg's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC,* Volumes 1, 7, and 14.

INTRODUCTION

Edward Dahlberg is considered one of the most controversial and enigmatic figures of twentieth-century American literature. Often noted for his originality and versatility—he wrote in numerous genres and different literary styles—he is primarily remembered for his early naturalistic novels, his allusive philosophical essays, and, especially, his autobiography, *Because I Was Flesh* (1964). Dahlberg initially garnered critical attention in the early 1930s, after the publication of his first book, *Bottom Dogs* (1929), a starkly realistic novel that examines the life of society's underclass. With this publication, as well as his next novel, *From Flushing to Calvary* (1932), he became known as a proletarian novelist and a pioneer of social realism. Despite his success Dahlberg later repudiated his early novels and adopted a more humanistic writing style, often described as "prophetic" or "visionary," which many critics found difficult to classify. Much of Dahlberg's work is autobiographical, exploring themes of isolation and hopelessness derived from his own traumatic childhood, with *Because I Was Flesh* generally considered his most successful rendering of his past experiences. Even his most important works, however, have failed to reach a wide audience, and his standing in American literature remains uncertain at best. Ihab Hassan has argued that Dahlberg "remains a name honored only by a few beatniks or cognoscenti, a genius unknown to the world at large. His vatic wisdom, his erudition which spans the ages, his resonant prose, rolling with the ancient names of Greece and Israel, his scouring self-apprehension—all these are lost to those who remain ignorant of him. Also lost to them is a rare and gnostic view of art." Hassan concludes that "Dahlberg invites no extended critical commentaries of his work. We know him best when we quote and ponder his maxims which come from the depths."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dahlberg was born on July 22, 1900, at a charity hospital in Boston. He was the illegitimate son of Elizabeth (Lizzie) Dahlberg, a married mother of three other children, and a Jewish barber named Saul Gottdank. Soon after he was born he and his mother and father moved to Dallas. In Texas Gottdank taught Lizzie to be a barber but then stole her money and left town, a pattern he repeated after the couple was reunited in Memphis and, later, in New Orleans. Dahlberg and his mother moved several times before settling in Kansas City, Missouri, where Lizzie became the proprietor of the Star Lady Barbershop. In 1907 Dahlberg was enrolled in a Catholic school in Kansas City. Lizzie's business was successful, but she lost considerable money in a series of failed romantic relationships with opportunistic men. One of these men, Henry Smith, a retired ship's captain, convinced Lizzie that her son would fare better in an orphanage, away from the corruption of the city streets. Dahlberg was first sent to a Catholic orphanage in Kansas City and then, in 1912, to the Jewish Orphan Asylum of Cleveland, Ohio. Dahlberg later described both the boredom and brutality he experienced at the Jewish orphanage, where the windows were barred and children were assigned numbers to replace their names.

In 1917, on reaching legal age, Dahlberg left the orphanage. He worked briefly as messenger for Western Union in Cleveland before returning to Kansas City, where he reunited with his mother. In Kansas City Dahlberg worked as a drover in the stockyards and then served in the U.S. Army for a short period of time. Soon after, however, he left Kansas City and traveled west as a hobo, occasionally working odd jobs. In 1919 Dahlberg settled at the YMCA in Los Angeles, where he met Max Lewis, a self-educated man, who became his mentor. Lewis introduced him to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Samuel Butler, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and eventually encouraged him to pursue a higher education. In 1921 Dahlberg enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley, where he majored in philosophy and anthropology. Over the next two years he published two philosophical stories in the *Occident,* Berkeley's literary magazine. In 1923 he transferred to Columbia University in New York, where he completed his degree. After graduating in 1925 Dahlberg taught at James Madison and Thomas Jefferson high schools in New York and began writing a novel.

In 1926 Lizzie Dahlberg moved to Astoria, New York, to live with her son. Soon after she arrived, however, Dahlberg married his first wife, Fanya Fass, the daughter of a Cleveland industrialist, and moved to Europe.

They were soon divorced, but Dahlberg remained overseas, living as an expatriate in Paris, where he became friends with the writers Hart Crane, Robert McAlmon, and Richard Aldington, before moving to Monte Carlo and, finally, Brussels. In Brussels Dahlberg completed *Bottom Dogs,* which was published in England in 1929 and in the United States the following year. Both editions included an influential introduction by D. H. Lawrence, who described the author, to Dahlberg's dismay, as a preeminent adherent of naturalism. Like *Bottom Dogs,* Dahlberg's next novel, *From Flushing to Calvary,* was a fictionalized treatment of the author's early years, written in a naturalistic style. Both novels received generally favorable critical reviews, though some commentators derided Dahlberg's sordid subject matter and quickly labeled his work "proletarian writing." In fact, *Bottom Dogs* became a model for many novels of poverty and despair published during the 1930s in America.

Dahlberg published a political novel, *Those Who Perish,* in 1934. The novel was written in response to an incident that took place at a bar in Berlin, in which Dahlberg was beaten by uniformed Nazis. Dahlberg, who felt that literature should address current moral issues, helped to organize the first American Writers' Congress in 1935 at New York's New School of Social Research, where he delivered a paper on fascism. During the latter half of the 1930s he traveled across the United States and compiled a collection of criticism, *Do These Bones Live,* published in 1941. During the 1940s Dahlberg wrote no new fiction but instead dedicated himself to an intense study of literature, focusing on the works of William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes, the Bible, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickinson. As a result of his studies and self-seclusion, he developed a deeper, more prophetic vision of life, one based on classical and mythological ideals beyond history. He remarried in 1942, and he and his second wife, Winifred Sheehan Moore, would have two sons, Geoffrey and Joel. In 1946 Dahlberg's mother died, an event that deeply affected his life. His close attachment to Lizzie led him to depict her troubled history and lonely death in a number of subsequent works, perhaps most notably in *Because I Was Flesh.*

During the 1950s Dahlberg divorced and remarried once again, traveled extensively, and published *The Flea of Sodom* (1950), a collection of esoteric, mythic essays written in poetic prose, and *The Sorrows of Priapus* (1957), a work of philosophy that deals with humanity's fundamental carnal nature. Both volumes reflected Dahlberg's new writing style, characterized by an allusive poetic prose that, for many critics, defied categorization and explication. Dahlberg's most prolific literary period occurred during the 1960s. He published poetry, essays, criticism, and letters, as well as a collection of aphorisms. Most notably, he completed *The Carnal Myth* (1968), the sequel to his philosophical allegory begun with *The Sorrows of Priapus,* and he published what many critics regard as his greatest work, *Because I Was Flesh,* in 1964. The 1960s also witnessed a kind of Dahlberg renaissance, as the author found a new body of readers in the counterculture movement in America. Dahlberg continued to write well into the 1970s, publishing essays, a novel, and a sequel to his autobiography. None of these works, however, were as well received as the author's earlier accomplishments. Dahlberg died on February 27, 1977, in Santa Barbara, California.

MAJOR WORKS

Bottom Dogs, one of Dahlberg's best-known works, depicts the bleak prospects of society's lower classes in early twentieth-century America. The novel is set in the Midwest at the turn of the century, and the plot closely follows events from the author's own childhood. The protagonist, Lorry Lewis, is the illegitimate son of Lizzie Lewis, a naïve but hardworking woman, and a gambler named Saul, who eventually abandons both Lizzie and her infant son. Lizzie and Lorry establish a life in Kansas City, until one of Lizzie's boyfriends convinces her to send her son to an orphanage. Lorry is sent to an institution in Cleveland, where he spends his adolescence. When he comes of age, Lorry eventually travels west, settling at a YMCA in Los Angeles. Dahlberg focuses on the desolation and hopelessness of the impoverished farmers, workers, and wanderers relegated to the lowest tiers of society, who, despite their ability to survive, lose something of their humanity in their struggle. In addition to the novel's bleak tone and unflinching perspective on poverty, Dahlberg incorporates coarse language and graphic depictions of the streets. Arno Karlen has commented that "*Bottom Dogs* is still a shocking book, will always be shocking—much more so than the confessions of Dahlberg's heirs, which surprise one not because of what is done in them, which we knew about anyway, but only because they are in print in this embarrassed land. *Bottom Dogs* shocks because there is barely a moment of joy in it, a moment of love or unguardedness or letting go. One critic called it reptilian. Its prose, like its spirit, is flat, leached out, accurate, yet raw."

Dahlberg's autobiography, *Because I Was Flesh,* is generally considered the author's most important work. Critic Ihab Hassan, comparing Dahlberg to the Old Testament prophets, has emphasized the note of "sorrow and lamentation" in the book, stating, "The lament of this prophet and pariah among men . . . finds major artistic expression in *Because I Was Flesh,* surely one of the most poetic, most harrowing autobiographies of

modern literature. The cruelty of America and the richness of eternity are both in it, and so is the tortured effort of a man seeking knowledge." Dahlberg used the same background material for *Because I Was Flesh* that he used previously in *Bottom Dogs*. The book begins with the author's birth in a charity hospital, where his mother, Lizzie, gives him her father's last name to hide his illegitimacy. Dahlberg examines life with his mother in Kansas City and exposes the details of his regimented upbringing in the Cleveland orphanage. He also reveals the general longing, for both physical and emotional nourishment, experienced by all of the children at the orphanage.

Isolation is a major theme in the book, as Dahlberg describes wandering across the country after leaving Cleveland. He delves into his personal experiences, openly addressing his illegitimate birth and his desire to learn more about his father, while tracing his development as a writer. Dahlberg also studies the inner life of his mother, who emerges as a central figure in *Because I Was Flesh*. For him, Lizzie represents the three Mary figures in the New Testament: Mary the Virgin Mother, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Using myth as a backdrop, Dahlberg creates a multidimensional portrait of his mother, illuminating her fears and desires, as well as her relationship with her son. Some critics have described *Because I Was Flesh* as a fusion of myth and reality, in which Dahlberg synthesizes epigrams, philosophical commentary, and realistic detail. Josephine Herbst has called the book "a masterpiece," maintaining that in its "culmination of a long, arduous, dedicated, creative venture during which the contraries, the irascible, the didactic were finally reconciled with the *Amor Fati* of acceptance, it is also a triumph."

Although Dahlberg had rejected the limitations of proletarian literature, he nevertheless incorporated the thematic concerns of the genre in his autobiography. Carol Shloss has observed that "without standing in the tradition of proletarian naturalism, *Because I Was Flesh* belongs to the literature of revolt against the illusions of American civilization. It is a book that makes a claim for the legitimacy of misfortune as a subject for autobiography and one in which the hermeneutics of landscape and selfhood show the wilderness within and around to be still untamed."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

During the 1930s, when he first emerged on the American literary scene, Dahlberg was primarily known as a proletarian writer. D. H. Lawrence, who wrote the introduction to the author's debut novel, emphasized the book's gritty writing style and placed its author within the literary tradition of naturalism. Lawrence praised the novel's "sheer bottom-dog style" and argued that Dahlberg's "directness, that unsentimental and non-dramatized thoroughness of setting down the under-dog mind, surpasses anything I know." Other prominent literary critics of the 1930s also praised Dahlberg's early achievements. In his review of the 1930 American edition of *Bottom Dogs,* Edmund Wilson asserted that the novel "is a work of literature that has the stamp of a real and original gift." Fred T. Marsh, writing in 1932, emphasized the realism of Dahlberg's writing, remarking that his "gift lies in his ability to re-create actuality." Marsh concluded that "in Dahlberg we have a peculiar talent which has discovered its own unmistakable field of expression."

In the 1940s, despite the critical acclaim of his early achievements, Dahlberg abandoned naturalist fiction and developed an enigmatic, obscure writing style, one that incorporated elements of myth, allusion, classical beauty, and personal lyricism. This transition confounded critics and readers. Commenting on his change in style in a 1965 interview with Fred Moramarco, Dahlberg noted, "I discovered that employing the vernacular was not very effective; that uncouth words were not a path toward the inward nature of man. So after writing three novels which gave me great unhappiness, I resolved to become a man of letters." Many scholars, however, considered Dahlberg's critical and philosophical writings of the 1940s and 1950s as not only unclassifiable but, in some cases, unintelligible. Remarking on this reaction, Allen Tate asserted that "Mr. Dahlberg, like Thoreau whom he admires more than any other nineteenth-century American, eludes his contemporaries; he may have to wait for understanding until the historians of ideas of the next generation can place him historically. For we have at present neither literary nor historical standards which can guide us into Mr. Dahlberg's books written since *Bottom Dogs*."

Of those critics who continue to assess his work, many have highlighted the mythical allusions and scriptural cadences of Dahlberg's later writing style, placing him outside the trajectory of contemporary American literature. Other scholars, however, have suggested that in his willingness to experiment with form and expression, Dahlberg is clearly situated within the modernist tradition. According to Arno Karlen, "Dahlberg, with his unfashionable grand style of archaicisms and contemporary speech, is more truly modern than most of the slingers of coolness, hipness and sexual confession who now live in the world he left when he outgrew *Bottom Dogs*. The modern is not a subject, a posture, a narcotic revery, a clique vocabulary: it is an attitude toward craft. Dahlberg, with his irony and eclectic inventiveness, embodies it." Highlighting the "passionate excellence" and "painstaking craft" of his work, Karlen avers that "Dahlberg's writing has taken a course exactly contrary to that of his time. He is out of fashion during

this revival of the naturalism he left behind decades ago," concluding that while his detractors "call him sour and mannered," he is, in Karlen's words, "astringent, stubborn, complex."

In addition to repudiating his own early novels, Dahlberg largely rejected the traditions and conventions of contemporary American literature, attacking, in the process, many of his peers. As a result he earned a reputation as an exile and misanthropic figure. In his introduction to the 1967 *The Edward Dahlberg Reader,* Paul Carroll conceded that "Dahlberg has become one of the scandals of American Letters, although a distinguished one. He is one of our own. Yet his stance appears so absolute and odd that anyone with a conventionally solid knowledge of American literary traditions can be disarmed or exasperated when first exposed to it." Nevertheless, Carroll concluded, "there is no prose like Dahlberg's prose in all of American literature. At its best, the Dahlberg style is monumental and astonishing. Decades were spent in its evolution."

Despite its brief popularity with the intellectual counterculture of the 1960s, Dahlberg's work has failed to attract a wide audience, and he has generally remained a marginalized American writer. As Roger J. Porter has observed, "Edward Dahlberg has been one of the great exiles and isolator of modern American letters. He has written fiction and criticism since the late twenties, but his work has been met with contempt or indifference, driving its author variously into silence, diatribe, or literary polemics against imagined enemies."

Yet, despite the sometimes harsh criticism leveled at much of Dahlberg's writings, his autobiography, *Because I Was Flesh,* stands out for its near-universal praise. Jonathan Lethem has contended that "in his other work, Dahlberg was only a bizarre, sometimes hypnotic stylist, and a writer who forgot to love anything better than his own failure. His literary and cultural criticism, *Can These Bones Live, Leafless American,* and others, is worse than useless; it's corrupt—poisoned by his reeling distress." For Lethem, however, *Because I Was Flesh* is "a great book. Great in the saddest and simplest way, for Dahlberg has arrayed an armor of rhetoric to fend off his pain, and everywhere the armor proves inadequate. *Because I Was Flesh* is a catalogue of defenseless defenses, of feeble snarling assaults on implacable, if erratic, love. It shows Dahlberg's baroque scalpel turned inward, for once." Or, in the words of Carol Schloss, "Despite Dahlberg's rich, queer erudition and his baroque elocutions, his autobiography reconfirms and honors a naive school of writing: writing whose purpose is to remember the past, to reanimate it, and through the transformation of misfortune, to mitigate pain."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Bottom Dogs (novel) 1929
From Flushing to Calvary (novel) 1932
**Kentucky Blue Grass Henry Smith* (prose poem) 1932
Those Who Perish (novel) 1934
Do These Bones Live (criticism) 1941; revised as *Sing O Barren,*1947; revised text republished as *Can These Bones Live,* 1960
The Flea of Sodom (essays) 1950
The Sorrows of Priapus (philosophy) 1957
Truth Is More Sacred [with Herbert Read] (criticism) 1961
Alms for Oblivion (essays) 1964
Because I Was Flesh (autobiography) 1964
Reasons of the Heart (aphorisms) 1965
Cipango's Hinder Door (poetry) 1966
The Edward Dahlberg Reader (criticism, essays, autobiography, and poetry) 1967
Epitaphs of Our Times: The Letters of Edward Dahlberg (letters) 1967
The Leafless American (essays and poetry) 1967
The Carnal Myth: A Search into Classical Sensuality (philosophy) 1968
The Confessions of Edward Dahlberg (autobiography) 1971
Olive of Minerva; or, The Comedy of a Cuckold (novel) 1976
Samuel Beckett's Wake and Other Uncollected Prose (essays) 1989
In Love, in Sorrow: The Complete Correspondence of Charles Olson and Edward Dahlberg [with Charles Olson] (letters) 1990

*This work is an expanded version of Part 6 of *From Flushing to Calvary.*

CRITICISM

D. H. Lawrence (essay date 1929)

SOURCE: Lawrence, D. H. Introduction to *Bottom Dogs,* by Edward Dahlberg, pp. vii-xvii. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1930.

[*In the following essay, originally published as the introduction to the 1929 British edition of* Bottom Dogs, *Lawrence identifies the central theme of the novel as "consciousness in a state of repulsion"; though he finds it an "objectionable" book at times, Lawrence still praises its style, saying, "It is sheer bottom-dog style, the bottom-dog mind expressing itself direct, almost as if it barked."*]

When we think of America, and of her huge success, we never realize how many failures have gone, and still go to build up that success. It is not till you live in America, and go a little under the surface, that you begin to see how terrible and brutal is the mass of failure that nourishes the roots of the gigantic tree of dollars. And this is especially so in the country, and in the newer parts of the land, particularly out west. There you see how many small ranches have gone broke in despair, before the big ranches scoop them up and profit by all the back-breaking, profitless, grim labour of the pioneer. In the west you can still see the pioneer work of tough, hard first-comer, individuals, and it is astounding to see how often these individuals, pioneer first-comers who fought like devils against their difficulties, have been defeated, broken, their efforts and their amazing hard work lost, as it were, on the face of the wilderness. But it is these hard-necked failures who really broke the resistance of the stubborn, obstinate country, and made it easier for the second wave of exploiters to come in with money and reap the harvest. The real pioneer in America fought like hell and suffered till the soul was ground out of him: and then, nine times out of ten, failed, was beaten. That is why pioneer literature, which, even from the glimpses one has of it, contains the amazing Odyssey of the brute fight with savage conditions of the western continent, hardly exists, and is absolutely unpopular. Americans will not stand for the pioneer stuff, except in small, sentimentalized doses. They know too well the grimness of it, the savage fight and the savage failure which broke the back of the country but also broke something in the human soul. The spirit and the will survived: but something in the soul perished: the softness, the floweriness, the natural tenderness. How could it survive the sheer brutality of the fight with that American wilderness, which is so big, vast, and obdurate!

The savage America was conquered and subdued at the expense of the instinctive and intuitive sympathy of the human soul. The fight was too brutal. It is a great pity some publisher does not undertake a series of pioneer records and novels, the genuine unsweetened stuff. The books exist. But they are shoved down into oblivion by the common will-to-forget. They show the strange brutality of the struggle, what would have been called in the old language the breaking of the heart. America was not colonized and "civilized" until the heart was broken in the American pioneers. It was a price that was paid. The heart was broken. But the will, the determination to conquer the land and make it submit to productivity, this was not broken. The will-to-success and the will-to-produce became clean and indomitable once the sympathetic heart was broken.

By the sympathetic heart, we mean that instinctive belief which lies at the core of the human heart, that people and the universe itself is *ultimately* kind. This belief is fundamental, and in the old language is embodied in the doctrine: God is good. Now given an opposition too ruthless, a fight too brutal, a betrayal too bitter, this belief breaks in the heart, and is no more. Then you have either despair, bitterness, and cynicism: or you have the much braver reaction which says: God is not good, but the human will is indomitable, it cannot be broken, it will succeed against all odds. It is not God's business to be good and kind, that is man's business. God's business is to be indomitable. And man's business is essentially the same.

This is, roughly, the American position today, as it was the position of the Red Indian when the white man came, and of the Aztec and of the Peruvian. So far as we can make out, neither Redskin nor Aztec nor Inca had any conception of a "good" god. They conceived of implacable, indomitable Powers, which is very different. And that seems to me the essential American position to-day. Of course the white American believes that man should behave in a kind and benevolent manner. But this is a social belief and a social gesture, rather than an individual flow. The flow from the heart, the warmth of fellow-feeling which has animated Europe and been the best of her humanity, individual, spontaneous, flowing in thousands of little passionate currents often conflicting, this seems unable to persist on the American soil. Instead you get the social creed of benevolence and uniformity, a mass *will,* and an inward individual retraction, an isolation, an amorphous separateness like grains of sand, each grain isolated upon its own will, its own indomitableness, its own implacability, its own unyielding, yet heaped together with all the other grains. This makes the American mass the easiest mass in the world to rouse, to move. And probably, under a long stress, it would make it the most difficult mass in the world to hold together.

The deep psychic change which we call the breaking of the heart, the collapse of the flow of spontaneous warmth between a man and his fellows, happens of course now all over the world. It seems to have happened to Russia in one great blow. It brings a people into a much more complete social unison, for good or evil. But it throws them apart in their private individual emotions. Before, they were like cells in a complex tissue, alive and functioning diversely in a vast organism composed of family, clan, village, nation. Now, they are like grains of sand, friable, heaped together in a vast inorganic democracy.

While the old sympathetic glow continues, there are violent hostilities between people, but they are not secretly repugnant to one another. Once the heart is broken, people become repulsive to one another secretly, and they develop social benevolence. They smell in each other's nostrils. It has been said often enough of more primitive or old-world peoples, who live together

in a state of blind mistrust but also of close physical connection with one another, that they have no noses. They are so close, the flow from body to body is so powerful, that they hardly smell one another, and hardly are aware at all of offensive human odours that madden the new civilizations. As it says in this novel: The American senses other people by their sweat and their kitchens. By which he means, their repulsive effluvia. And this is basically true. Once the blood-sympathy breaks, and only the nerve-sympathy is left, human beings become secretly intensely repulsive to one another, physically, and sympathetic only mentally and spiritually. The secret physical repulsion between people is responsible for the perfection of American "plumbing," American sanitation, and American kitchens, utterly white-enamelled and antiseptic. It is revealed in the awful advertisements such as those about "halitosis," or bad breath. It is responsible for the American nausea at coughing, spitting, or any of those things. The American townships don't mind hideous litter of tin cans and paper and broken rubbish. But they go crazy at the sight of human excrement.

And it is this repulsion from the physical neighbour that is now coming up in the consciousness of the great democracies, in England, America, Germany. The old flow broken, men could enlarge themselves for a while in transcendentalism, Whitmanish "adhesiveness" of the social creature, noble supermen, lifted above the baser functions. For the last hundred years man has been elevating himself above his "baser functions" and posing around as a transcendentalist, a superman, a perfect social being, a spiritual entity. And now, since the war, the collapse has come.

Man has no ultimate control of his own consciousness. If his nose doesn't notice stinks, it just doesn't, and there's the end of it. If his nose is so sensitive that a stink overpowers him, then again he's helpless. He can't prevent his senses from transmitting and his mind from registering what it does register.

And now, man has begun to be overwhelmingly conscious of the repulsiveness of his neighbour, particularly of the physical repulsiveness. There it is, in James Joyce, in Aldous Huxley, in André Gide, in modern Italian novels like *Parigi*—in all the very modern novels, the dominant note is the repulsiveness, intimate physical repulsiveness of human flesh. It is the expression of absolutely genuine experience. What the young feel intensely, and no longer so secretly, is the extreme repulsiveness of other people.

It is, perhaps, the inevitable result of the transcendental bodiless brotherliness and social "adhesiveness" of the last hundred years. People rose superior to their bodies, and soared along, till they had exhausted their energy in this performance. The energy once exhausted, they fell with a struggling plunge, not down into their bodies again, but into the cess-pools of the body.

The modern novel, the very modern novel, has passed quite away from tragedy. An American novel like *Manhattan Transfer* has in it still the last notes of tragedy, the sheer spirit of suicide. An English novel like *Point Counter Point* has gone beyond tragedy into exacerbation and continuous nervous repulsion. Man is so nervously repulsive to man, so screamingly, nerve-rackingly repulsive! This novel goes one further. Man just *smells,* offensively and unbearably, not to be borne. The human stink.

The inward revulsion of man away from man, which follows on the collapse of the physical sympathetic flow, has a slowly increasing momentum, a wider and wider swing. For a long time the *social* belief and benevolence of man towards man keeps pace with the secret physical repulsion of man away from man. But ultimately, inevitably, the one outstrips the other. The benevolence exhausts itself, the repulsion only deepens. The benevolence is external and extra-individual. But the revulsion is inward and personal. The one gains over the other. Then you get a gruesome condition, such as is displayed in this book.

The only motive power left is the sense of revulsion away from people, the sense of the repulsiveness of the neighbour. It is a condition we are rapidly coming to—a condition displayed by the intellectuals much more than by the common people. Wyndham Lewis gives a display of the utterly repulsive effect people have on him, but he retreats into the intellect to make his display. It is a question of manner and manners. The effect is the same. It is the same exclamation: They stink! My God, they stink!

And in this process of recoil and revulsion, the affective consciousness withers with amazing rapidity. Nothing I have ever read has astonished me more than the "Orphanage" chapters of this book. There I realized with amazement how rapidly the human psyche can strip itself of its awareness and its emotional contacts, and reduce itself to a sub-brutal condition of simple gross persistence. It is not animality—far from it. Those boys are much less than animals. They are cold wills functioning with a minimum of consciousness. The amount that they are *not* aware of is perhaps the most amazing aspect of their character. They are brutally and deliberately unaware. They have no hopes, no desires even. They have even no will-to-exist, for existence even is too high a term. They have a strange, stony will-to-persist, that is all. And they persist by reaction, because they still feel the repulsiveness of each other, of everything, even of themselves.

Of course the author exaggerates. The boy Lorry "Always had his nose in a book"—and he must have got things out of the books. If he had taken the intellectual

line, like Mr. Huxley or Mr. Wyndham Lewis, he would have harped on the intellectual themes, the essential feeling being the same. But he takes the non-intellectual line, is in revulsion against the intellect too, so we have the stark reduction to a persistent minimum of the human consciousness. It is a minimum lower than the savage, lower than the African Bushman. Because it is a *willed* minimum, sustained from inside by resistance, brute resistance against any flow of consciousness except that of the barest, most brutal egoistic self-interest. It is a phenomenon, and pre-eminently an American phenomenon. But the flow of repulsion, inward physical revulsion of man away from man, is passing over all the world. It is only perhaps in America, and in a book such as this, that we see it most starkly revealed.

After the orphanage, the essential theme is repeated over a wider field. The state of revulsion continues. The young Lorry is indomitable. You can't destroy him. And at the same time, you can't catch him. He will recoil from everything, and nothing on earth will make him have a positive feeling, of affection or sympathy, or connection.

The tragedian, like Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson, still dramatizes his defeat and is in love with himself in his defeated rôle. But the Lorry Lewis is in too deep a state of revulsion to dramatize himself. He almost deliberately finds himself repulsive too. And he goes on, just to see if he can hit the world without destroying himself. Hit the world not to destroy it, but to experience in himself how repulsive it is.

Kansas City, Beatrice, Nebraska, Omaha, Salt Lake City, Portland, Oregon, Los Angeles, he finds them all alike, nothing, if not repulsive. He covers the great tracts of prairie, mountain, forest, coast-range, without seeing anything but a certain desert scaliness. His consciousness is resistant, shuts things out, and reduces itself to a minimum.

In the Y.M.C.A. it is the same. He has his gang. But the last word about them is that they stink, their effluvia is offensive. He goes with women, but the thought of women is inseparable from the thought of sexual disease and infection. He thrills to the repulsiveness of it, in a terrified, perverted way. His associates—which means himself also—read Zarathustra and Spinoza, Darwin and Hegel. But it is with a strange, external superficial mind that has no connection with the affective and effective self. One last desire he has—to write, to put down his condition in words. His will-to-persist is intellectual also. Beyond this, nothing.

It is a genuine book, as far as it goes, even if it is an objectionable one. It is, in psychic disintegration, a good many stages ahead of *Point Counter Point.* It reveals a condition that not many of us have reached, but towards which the trend of consciousness is taking us, all of us, especially the young. It is, let us hope, a *ne plus ultra.* The next step is legal insanity, or just crime. The book is perfectly sane: yet two more strides and it is criminal insanity. The style seems to me excellent, fitting the matter. It is sheer bottom-dog style, the bottom-dog mind expressing itself direct, almost as if it barked. That directness, that unsentimental and non-dramatized thoroughness of setting down the under-dog mind surpasses anything I know. I don't want to read any more books like this. But I am glad to have read this one, just to know what is the last word in repulsive consciousness, consciousness in a state of repulsion. It helps one to understand the world, and saves one the necessity of having to follow out the phenomenon of physical repulsion any further, for the time being.

Edmund Wilson (review date 26 March 1930)

SOURCE: Wilson, Edmund. "Dahlberg, Dos Passos and Wilder." In *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties,* pp. 442-50. New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1952.

[*In the following excerpt, drawn from his review of Thornton Wilder's* The Woman of Andros, *Dahlberg's* Bottom Dogs, *and John Dos Passos's* The 42nd Parallel *and originally published 26 March 1930, in the* New Republic, *Wilson disagrees with D. H. Lawrence's claim that the prevailing feeling in* Bottom Dogs *is repulsion, saying instead that the novel's "temperament" is "gentle" and "unembittered."*]

Edward Dahlberg, the author of ***Bottom Dogs,*** is, on the other hand, very close to us—he is closer to us, indeed, than we quite care to have literature be. ***Bottom Dogs*** is the back-streets of all our American cities and towns. Mr. Dahlberg, as a writer, has nothing in common with the consummate sophistication of Thornton Wilder, and his narrative is sometimes dull; but what he has brought in from the obscurer sections of Los Angeles, Cleveland, Kansas City is something more than an interesting document—it is a work of literature that has the stamp of a real and original gift. The prose of ***Bottom Dogs*** is partly derived from the language of the streets itself, but to say this may give a misleading impression: Dahlberg's prose is primarily a literary medium, hard, vivid, exact and racy, and with an odd kind of street-lighted glamor. I do not agree with D. H. Lawrence, who has written for this sordid story a curious and suggestive introduction, that the dominating feeling of the book is repulsion. It would be easy for a writer of another kind to make Dahlberg's kind of experience repulsive, but I do not feel that Dahlberg has done so: the temperament through which he has strained his orphan homes, his barber shops and bakeries, his