
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE AMERICAN NOVEL

In 1923, D. H. Lawrence rebuked his fellow intellectuals. "American art-speech contains an alien quality, which belongs to the American continent and to nowhere else," the British novelist-critic wrote. "But, of course, so long as we insist on reading the books as children's tales, we miss all that."

His **STUDIES IN CLASSIC AMERICAN LITERATURE** (Seltzer, 1923; Penguin, 1977, paper), which zigs and zags through the works of Fenimore Cooper (Lawrence's use of the name), Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and others, created something of a sensation. Lawrence found psychological elements in *The Scarlet Letter* ("on the top . . . as nice as pie, goody-goody, and lovey-dovey"), in the Leatherstocking tales, in *Moby Dick*, in Edgar Allan Poe's *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which were to suggest to many later critics some previously unperceived connections between 19th-century American writing and the concerns of modern fiction.

His timeless reminder to critics—and ordinary readers: "It is hard to hear a new voice, as hard as it is to listen to an unknown language. We just don't listen. There is a new voice in the old American classics. The world has declined to hear it. . . . Why?—Out of fear. The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything . . . [more than] a new idea. . . . It can't pigeon-hole a real new experience."

Numerous scholars have by now examined the American novel, past and present, in terms of successive waves of fictional response to new experiences, beginning where Lawrence did, with the opening up of the American continent. Harvard's F. O. Matthiessen was the first to give academic respectability to Law-

rence's intuitions. In **AMERICAN RENAISSANCE** (Oxford, 1941, cloth; 1968, paper), he describes the astonishing five-year burst of "new" writing that saw the appearance not only of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), but also of Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and works by Whittier, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

To Emerson, Matthiessen applies the master transcendentalist's own words about Goethe: "He was the cow from which the rest drew their milk." Emerson's little-known *Representative Men* (1850) is one of the five works—Hawthorne's and Melville's novels, above, are the others—that Matthiessen examines most closely.

Alfred Kazin's **ON NATIVE GROUNDS** (Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942; Harcourt, 1972, paper) followed shortly after Matthiessen. Scanning the American literary periods that he labels "The Search for Reality (1890-1917)," "The Great Liberation (1918-1929)," and "The Literature of Crisis (1930-1940)," Kazin provides a highly readable cultural-historical-biographical treatment.

His cast of characters is sizable: William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe—not to mention their predecessors (especially Mark Twain and Henry James).

In **AFTER THE LOST GENERATION: A Critical Study of the Writers of Two**

Wars (McGraw-Hill, 1951; Books for Libraries Press, 1971), John W. Aldridge describes the '40s novelists and their ties to Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos. Many of his "new writers" have faded from the scene; others survived to produce best sellers (Gore Vidal, Irwin Shaw, Norman Mailer). As Aldridge saw them in 1951, the neo-Hemingways and others "whose small, confused, and misguided talents concern us now" lacked "the basic requirement of the healthy artist—a dogmatic belief in his supreme power as an individual and a complete contempt for everything which stands in the way of its exercise."

Hemingway's need to impose order on the chaos of life is discussed in a later work by Alfred Kazin, **BRIGHT BOOK OF LIFE: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer** (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1973, cloth; Dell/Delta, 1974, paper). "Hemingway died of Faulkner as much as he died of Hemingway," Kazin writes. "In [his] last years it was Faulkner, coming up after having been ignored so long, who was to be a constant shock and bewilderment to Hemingway in the new age of ambiguity. Faulkner was another name for a world—for history—that could not be reduced to a style." Kazin sees Norman Mailer, like Truman Capote, as a novelist turning to reportage out of a sense of being "ridden down by history" and wanting to do something about it.

The landmark **LITERARY HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES**, edited by Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry S. Canby (Macmillan, 4th ed., 1974, cloth & paper), first appeared in 1948. Part anthology, part critical overview, several times updated, it remains a basic three-volume text for students of the American novel and other literary forms, including criticism. Its chief editor, Spiller, recently put together his recollections of the making of the LHUS with some of his own early reviews

under the title **MILESTONES IN AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY** (Greenwood, 1977).

In a foreword to this collage, Robert H. Walker notes the assertion in the first edition of the LHUS that "each generation should produce at least one literary history of the United States, for each generation must define the past in its own terms. Where," Walker goes on to ask, "as we slide toward the 1980s . . . is the new literary statement for that generation which has seemed so exceptionally committed to throwing out the past and trusting no one born before 1948?"

Indeed, no major new histories of American literature have been forthcoming. But since the 1950s the critics have been busy on narrower fronts—producing full-scale biographies of major figures that add to the understanding of their work; analyzing ethnic or regional groups of writers and those especially affected by such upheavals as the Great Depression; linking the newest experimental novelists to the American past.

In the people-and-gossip-oriented 1970s, semifictional profiles of the 20th century's more glamorous writers abound. Frank but less titillating serious biographies include: Arthur Mizener's **THE FAR SIDE OF PARADISE: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald** (Houghton Mifflin, 1951, cloth; Avon, 1974, paper); Cleanth Brooks' **WILLIAM FAULKNER: The Yoknapatawpha Country** (Yale, 1963, cloth & paper); Carlos Baker's **ERNEST HEMINGWAY: A Life Story** (Scribner, 1969, cloth; 1970, paper); and **A FEAST OF WORDS: The Triumph of Edith Wharton** by Cynthia Griffin Wolff (Oxford, 1977). A short critical study worthy of note is Sarah Cohen's **SAUL BELLOW'S ENIGMATIC LAUGHTER** (Univ. of Ill., 1974).

THE AMERICAN WRITER AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION, edited by Harvey Swados (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966, cloth & paper), is a solid critical anthology with

selections from James Agee, Erskine Caldwell, James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren, and others now forgotten. It reminds us of the politically radicalized fictional response in the 1930s and 1940s to hard times. **BLACK FICTION**, by Roger Rosenblatt (Harvard, 1974, cloth & paper) is a brief, sharply written study ("Hell, then, is where *Native Son* is located"). Rosenblatt covers not only Richard Wright and other major figures such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, but also several relatively obscure black writers.

In **A WORLD ELSEWHERE: The Place of Style in American Literature** (Oxford, 1966, cloth & paper), Richard Poirier explores the formal stylistic achievements of the whole range of American literature and links many early works in surprising ways to later U.S. and European literary creations; he connects *Walden*, for instance, with its "fantasia of punning," to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

And Leslie Fiedler in two books, **LOVE AND DEATH IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL** (Stein & Day, cloth, 1960; 1975, paper) and **WAITING FOR THE END** (Stein & Day, 1964, cloth; 1970, paper), sees the major works of American fiction, from the last century to our own, as a continuum with complex psychological, sexual, and political overtones. He suggests that "the new audience no longer hated literature *per se*, as had many of their parents and grandparents; they only feared madness and unrestraint (though they had read Freud), like their spiritual ancestors."

Among critical studies of the newest "new American novel," Robert Scholes' **THE FABULATORS** (Oxford, 1967) is no-

table for early attention to the so-called black humorists—who include, in Scholes' view, Pynchon and Vonnegut. Robert Martin Adams's **AFTERJOYCE: Studies in Fiction After Ulysses** (Oxford, 1977) is based on the thesis that contemporary fiction is the exhausted, final legacy of the Joyce school of writing. Adams has some witty points to make, but his study is less significant than Frank Kermode's incisive interpretation of what is now called "postmodern writing." In **THE SENSE OF AN ENDING: Studies in the Theory of Fiction** (Oxford, 1967, cloth; 1968, paper), Kermode examines, among other things, how European and American writers since World War II have dealt with the vision of apocalypse.

CITY OF WORDS: American Fiction, 1950–1970 (Harper, 1971, cloth & paper) by Tony Tanner (see page 144) is considered by many scholars the best work to date on contemporary American fiction—and one that explains its ties to the earlier national literary tradition.

"Melville started *Moby Dick* with etymology," Tanner observes. "[Richard] Brautigan ends *Trout Fishing in America* [1967] with references to the history of language and some sport with words. . . . Both writers have a wondering sense of the ultimate elusiveness of the mysterious reality or spirit of America . . . [and of] the preserving and consoling fantasies and play which are possible in the City of Words, though both have that American wariness about accepting any fantasy . . . as the true reality. Both operate from a sense of the radical disjunction between words and things. . . . I believe these to be the characteristic attributes of a large number of American writers."

EDITOR'S NOTE. *The principal adviser for this review essay was Wilson Center Fellow Frank D. McConnell, assistant professor of English at Northwestern University and author of a new study of four contemporary American novelists (see page 167).*