

The Novel in Mid-Century

Of the generation of American novelists that flared to prominence during the 1920's, only William Faulkner remains undiminished as a creative force; the others are sputtering or spent. The younger writers—those who have come to public attention since the war—would thus seem to have a rare opportunity to assert themselves, but although the candidates are available, they fail to take over. And no one knows this better than the candidates themselves.

The young writers are aware of their situation and are self-critical to an extent inconceivable in the 1920's or 1930's, but they lack that *élan*, that imaginative daring or even outrageous bravado, without which major writing is impossible. Having been thrust into a dismal historical moment that shows no sign of reaching its end, they cannot honestly look forward to a new literary upsurge, a new burst of creative energy. For though they are conspicuously apolitical, history presses them with an almost vindictive ferocity.



John Hersey

Of course, all generalizations about the young writers must be highly tentative, since we are only five years out of the Second World War. In 1923 only one of the important novels by the new generation of writers, E. E. Cummings's *The Enormous Room*, had yet appeared. The major works of that generation—*A Farewell to Arms*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Sun Also Rises*—were still in the making. Perhaps the same thing is true today.

Without intending either censure or preachment, I would say that our young writers are characterized most of all by an unwillingness—often an inability—to take chances with their careers and their work. This trait seems equally present in all the literary groupings, and one finds it in a *précieux* like Frederick Buechner (*A Long Day's Dying*), a conscientious academic like Peter Taylor (*The Long Fourth*), and a popular best-seller like Irwin Shaw (*The Young Lions*).

In the 1920's such young writers as Hemingway and Fitzgerald meant to triumph despite the world; the now-forgotten writers of the 1930's thought mainly of changing the world; but most young writers of the 1940's, particularly those who consider themselves *avant-garde*, seem to have decided it will be just as well to find a comfortable nook with tenure. There was, to be sure, much nonsense afloat in the literary life of the 1920's and the 1930's, but in both decades writers clung to precious literary values.

In the 1920's the literary aspirant wanted above all to be independent from institutions—social, political, and economic. Hart Crane and Sherwood Anderson broke away from substantial business careers. Hemingway and Fitzgerald went to Europe, the former to study the moral mysteries of bullfighting and the latter to soak up sophistication in the Ritz Bar. Others



Norman Mailer

of their generation took off for the Left Bank, where they founded little magazines, championed surrealism or Dadaism, and had themselves, all the while, a merry time. In the 1930's the young writers were more solemn but equally unconventional. Their ideal was the all-round man of ideas, and for a whole generation Edmund Wilson, who seemed equally at home with symbolist poetry and radical politics, served as a model.

Today, however, one finds little of the individualistic rebellion of the 1920's or the social rebellion of the 1930's; our young writers are earnest, devoted, knowing, and accomplished—but they play it safe, perhaps because they don't know any other way to play it.

Of course, things are really more complicated. One reason few young writers try to live the role of the independent literary figure is that, as always, it is difficult to earn one's bread



B.S.

William Faulkner

by serious writing. The magazines which will take untailed fiction, poetry, and criticism pay little; the margin for personal journalism is narrow; and few of us enjoy those "small incomes" of which one hears in reminiscences of the 1920's. Yet it would be very easy to exaggerate the mere economic factor. It was probably just as hard for the young writer to live thirty years ago as it is today; there are, in fact, more outlets for good writing now than there were in the 1920's. And by comparison with the 1930's things now are downright plush. Not the need for bread but the need for security drives young writers into journalism and teaching.

The perils of popular journalism for the serious writer have become almost a national myth. Those perils are real enough, but if a writer has character and purpose he can usually overcome them. In recent years there has appeared a spate of novels by such young journalists as John Brooks (*The Big Wheel*) and Merle Miller (*That Winter*) describing their "escape" from magazines similar to *Time*. So far as I can see, these novels demonstrate that their authors have only the skimpiest notion of the real moral pitfalls tempting the modern mind, and are unequipped for much more than the chores from which they so painfully extricated themselves. Had they been secure in their own moral values, they would not have felt so threatened by the mere fact of working as journalists and would not have been so righteous-

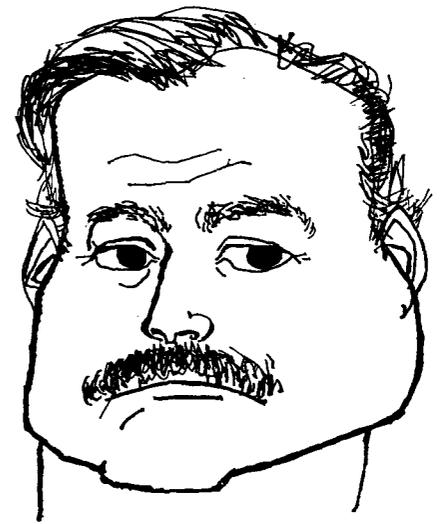
ly self-congratulatory when they found new jobs.

The perils of the academy are perhaps less gross, but at the moment they seem at least as prevalent, particularly for a large number of more or less *avant-garde* writers who are not nationally known but who often show genuine talent. When these writers might otherwise be taking in a wide variety of impressions, they are now confined to the university milieu, a narrow and pallid sector of society. The graduate-school setup, in particular, tends to perpetuate relations of dependence and attitudes of adolescence at the moment when writers should be breaking into maturity.

For the young critic these dangers are equally urgent. In the universities there has recently arisen a critical school, the "new criticism," which specializes in close textual dissection of poetry and looks with disfavor on the use of such "extrinsic" disciplines as history and psychoanalysis in the study of literature. The major "new critics" write with dedicated intensity, but in the work of their younger disciples one finds a sterilization of an already somewhat sterile approach. Busily burrowing into ambiguities and chopping metaphors in essays as flavorless as sawdust, these young dons make of criticism an impersonal and pleasureless exercise in pseudo-scientific categories when it should be an outgrowth of personal taste.

Instead of coming together in the Greenwich Villages, the scorned but indispensable Bohemias, where they can exchange hopes, ideas, insults, and flattery, too many of the young writers live in sallow university circles or in modest suburban isolation. The rebellious and exuberant *avant-garde* hardly exists today, and to the extent that it does, it is becoming a respectable institution accepted almost as much in *Flair* and *Harper's Bazaar* as in the little magazines.

The trend in the little-magazine world is largely toward caution, toward obeisance to the proven great and toward a petrifying awe of the totems of the "literary tradition." Take as an example the programmatic statement of a New York literary quarterly, the *Hudson Review*: It "is committed to no politics or philosophy, but *will not hesitate to consider* these subjects



Ernest Hemingway

where they affect the general cultural situation" (my emphasis—I. H.). Before such boldness, who could cavil?

In such a literary climate one could hardly expect to find richly emotional and impassioned writing. One finds instead the wan preciousness of Frederick Buechner's *A Long Day's Dying*, a stylized novel about a university instructor's seduction of his favorite pupil's mother and the subsequent discomfort of the lady's highly unimpressive suitors. Together with elaborate passes at the problem of Good and Evil, Buechner offers a style evidently modeled on a close study of Max Beerbohm's parody of Henry James. Beneath the rococo trimmings of Buechner's prose one finally does find a pinpoint's worth of feeling—and it is frigid—frigid as youth that is everything but youthful.

If we now turn to the other literary extreme, to the young novelists who are supposedly tough, plebeian, and naturalistic, we may expect to find reflections of the compulsive violence and emotional laceration of our age. Particularly in the novels written about the war, we might anticipate moods of indignation and rebellion. But the astonishing and dismaying fact is that with one or two exceptions we find nothing of the kind. For all their verbal grimacing and muscle-flexing, our young "toughie" writers are as spiritually quiescent and intellectually tame as the graduate students.

In the recent war novels of Irwin

Shaw, Alfred Hayes, Ira Wolfert, John Horne Burns, and Harry Brown one finds a curious moral incapacity to grapple with the sheer fact of war. In a novel such as Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* there is much bitterness about a variety of peripheral matters—training-camp indignities, G.I. anti-Semitism, military stupidity—but the great moral question of war itself is never touched. Through default, war thus comes to seem a normal condition of life, and the battlefield, training camp, and occupied zone unquestioned items of literary background. Shaw and his similars surrender the novelist's great prerogative, which is to examine and assail the values of his time, to assert a standard of humanness against war just or unjust. There may be times when a politician, of whatever kind, has to say "This war is necessary"; but the novelist must always show that, necessary or not, it is nonetheless an outrage to the human heart. Tolstoy considered Russia's war against Napoleon to be just, but in *War and Peace* he repeatedly showed the moral wretchedness of that very same war. To do less is to cease being a novelist and become a mere propagandist.

By contrast, even a wartime journalist like Ernie Pyle, while he had little to say about the war itself, did try to go beyond the packaged attitudes of "the" G.I. which had been doled out by *Yank* or the *OWI* or the liberal press. Because he wrote about individual people and cared what happened to them as indi-

viduals, Pyle sometimes communicated a sympathetic warmth and a fraternal closeness to the men in battle which our young novelists seldom do. The larger meanings that Pyle avoided, another journalist, John Hersey, has tried to reach in his books on the war. Hersey has had the social sensitivity to write about some of the most important problems of our day; the occupation, atomic destruction, the massacre of Europe's Jews. His work has shown a considerable growth, for while *A Bell for Adano* was little more than a tract for stereotyped liberalism, *The Wall* has something of that concern with the human interior and with moral complexity which should be the novelist's business. But if *The Wall* is the best a gifted journalist can do, it is certainly not the best a novelist could. What the book misses is the creative artist's individual accent, the mark of a sensibility as distinguishable as that of a Hemingway or a Dos Passos; instead, it seems to have been written by a modern man of good will—sincere, conscience-stricken, but not very philosophical in inclination. Which is to say that Hersey the journalist has yet to take his biggest risk—becoming a novelist.

Here we reach a crucial difference between the present war novelists and those who wrote after the First World War. Most of the recent war novelists are incapable of elevating their feelings about the war above the level of the Army gripe; like most G.I.'s, they know neither enthusiasm nor rebellion. Lacking a serious moral or political view of the war, they exhaust themselves in fractured responses that are completely inferior to the fiery political indignation of Barbusse or Dos Passos, the tender affection for the victimized soldier of Stefan Zweig or Cummings. Our young war novelists grumble, but soon enough fall into line; they neither accept nor reject the standard values, but seem almost oblivious to the general problem of values, as if it were a luxury they could no longer afford.

To these remarks there is one conspicuous exception, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. Judged by serious aesthetic standards, this novel must seem quite inferior to such First World War novels as *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Enormous Room*. But it does have one central value: It really

shows you the dirty, ugly, and agonized undersides of Army life. Mailer's conception of human character is painfully crude and his style is clotted with the banalities of American journalism, but at least he has enough moral seriousness to organize a total response to war: He says "No."

But in general there is a sharp decline in quality and a startling change in temper from the war novels of thirty years ago to those of today. The current specimens suffer from a loss of emotion, an inability to summon the passionate feeling available to writers after the first war. (You can see this even in the older writers themselves: Compare Dos Passos's recent work with *Three Soldiers*, Hemingway's parody of himself in *Across the River and into the Trees* with *A Farewell to Arms*.) There is a theory that this loss of emotion is due to the depersonalization of modern warfare, that the scope of modern horror defies artistic comprehension. Perhaps so, but I would point to more local causes, one strictly literary and the other broadly social.

Most young war novelists have been heavily influenced by Hemingway—the lesser, posturing Hemingway who taught a whole generation of writers that literature means an accurate clipped notation, that a display of feeling opens one to the suspicion of being "soft," that the proper mode of human address is, as it were, through the side of one's mouth, and that the mind is an organ that had best not be tampered



Truman Capote



Irwin Shaw

with. (The manly man, suggested Hemingway, thinks with his *cojones*.) For writers soon to be exposed to one of the most complex eras in human history, the Hemingway outlook was an inadequate preparation. It did not prepare them to think, and therefore they were unable to feel.

Together with this internal literary development there has been a social development that has deprived writers of their usual nourishment, an anaesthetization of political and intellectual belief. Radicalism is now fashionably passé. The writers now in their early thirties grazed the radical experience of two decades ago, some of them even giving one or two of their best college years to one or another movement. Most of them have since succumbed to a disenchantment as deep as their commitment was brief. As for liberalism, it has not appealed very strongly to young writers, who usually feel that it offers only inadequate ameliorations to a world that needs a thorough overhauling.

Even those writers who do accept liberalism are unable to integrate its assumptions into their world—it would be a little hard to imagine a heroic novel about Americans for Democratic Action. And the very youngest writers, such as Truman Capote, Buechner, and Speed Lamkin, the newest child decadent from the South, seem completely indifferent to all ideas, good or bad; or if they do care about ideas, they make the most rigorous efforts to banish them from their work.

Unsanguine though these remarks may seem, I do not mean to suggest that there is an absence of talent among the young writers. Quite the contrary; there is plenty of talent. The trouble is that few young writers have a clear idea of what to do with it.

One who does is John Hawkes, a young man in his early twenties who has recently published an arresting novel of postwar Germany, *The Cannibal*. Hawkes, through a somewhat surrealist approach, communicates a good deal of the fierce madness gripping Europe, the emotional dislocation and the tragic absurdities of life in a ruined continent. Though there is no explicit use of ideas in the novel, it is clearly informed with a sense of what is actually happening in the modern world, and for that reason *The Canni-*

bal is one of the few recent novels that seem intimately related to our experience as we immediately know it.

Hawkes is an atypical figure among the novelists of his age. Generally, their adult experience extends no further back than the war and postwar years; they show signs of the shock which comes from the defeats experienced by my generation and the generation before mine, but they show little interest in the public meaning of those defeats. Such terrible events as the Nazi pogroms, the Moscow trials, the de-



pression, and the civil war in Spain were to my generation part of the pain of growing up—they are events that have made us irremediably what we are, for good or bad. But the writers who were born when the depression began can know only the traumatic moral and political consequences of these experiences. And that is one reason for the distance in attitudes and feeling between the novelists still in their twenties and those who have preceded them.

The one group of young writers—no longer so young, however, since they are in their early thirties—who form an exception to many of these remarks is composed of such novelists and story writers as Saul Bellow, Delmore Schwartz, and Isaac Rosenfeld. Their output is small, but in it one finds represented that particular tone of malaise, of guilty uncertainty, which has characterized urban life in the 1940's. In Bellow's excellent novel *The Victim*, one feels the exhaustion, the loneliness and rootlessness which have overcome sections of the semi-intellectual urban groups. Schwartz, in his stories of Jewish city life, writes in a depressed, deflated tone, a prose of suspicion that arises in times of extreme uncertainty.

His characters float through the routine of city life, weary in manner, groping for purpose, insecure in their being. Yet even in these writers one senses a deliberate self-limitation, an unwillingness to try for the major theme as Mailer, Hersey, and other less gifted writers have done. Schwartz, Bellow, and Rosenfeld are men acutely aware of our contemporary intellectual tangles, they are gifted in handling ideas, their minds are sophisticated. But by comparison with older European novelists such as Ignazio Silone, André Malraux, Albert Camus, and George Orwell their work seems distinctly parochial.

Our best young American writers largely ignore the world of political conflict which the Europeans have made the basis of exciting and valuable novels. Partly, this has been due to the fact that political ideology has not pressed on us to the extent that it has pressed on the Europeans. But our claims to innocence cannot too long be endured, and the life situations that gave rise to *Bread and Wine* or *Darkness at Noon* or *1984* have now come closer to us.

Here, it would seem, is a tremendously challenging subject for the young American writer—what Lionel Trilling has defined as “the organization of society into ideological groups.” We have gone through two decades of racking political and ideological life: the radical 1930's and the disenchanted 1940's, the energy of social idealism dispossessed by Stalinism, the chronic crises of liberalism and its frequent self-contaminations, the dramatic confessions, recantations, and accusations. Are not these subjects to stir the novelist's imagination? Would not Stendhal or the Conrad who wrote *The Secret Agent* be immensely absorbed in, say, the Hiss-Chambers case—and at a level of psychological and moral depth quite beyond the journalists who rehearse its facts?

Yet, except for Trilling's own novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, almost nothing serious has been written about our political life. It is a theme that offers, I think, the most intriguing possibilities for the young writer—to give imaginative reality to the private core of our public crises and thereby to blend in their writing the most intense feeling with the most rigorous uses of the mind. —IRVING HOWE

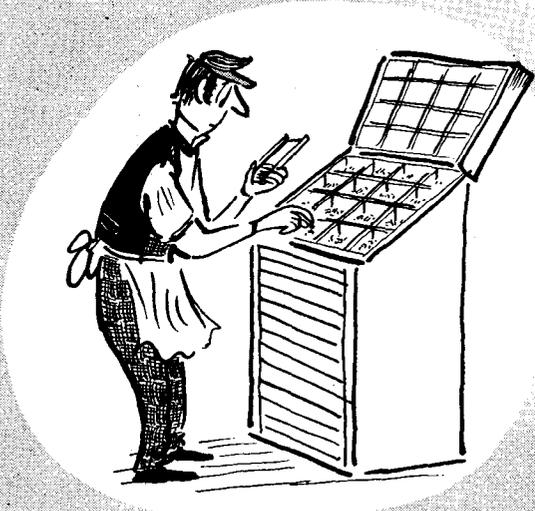


Special Christmas Rates

- One 1 Year Subscription \$5
- Two 1 Year Subscriptions \$8
- Three 1 Year Subscriptions \$10
- Each Additional Subscription \$3

An extension of your own subscription may be included at these rates.

Add \$1 per subscription per year on all orders outside U. S., U. S. Possessions, Canada and Pan American Postal Union.



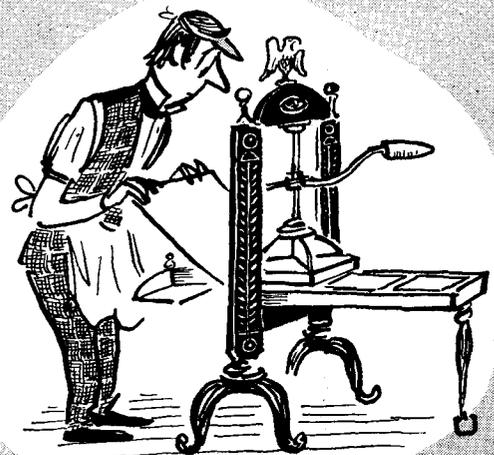
Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ Zone _____ State _____
 Gift card to read from _____

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ Zone _____ State _____
 Gift card to read from _____

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ Zone _____ State _____
 Gift card to read from _____

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ Zone _____ State _____
 Gift card to read from _____

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ Zone _____ State _____
 Gift card to read from _____



The Reporter 220 East 42nd Street, New York 17
 Please enter gift subscriptions as indicated above:

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ Zone _____ State _____

- Money enclosed Bill me later
- Please extend my present subscription for one year.

Signed _____



To Man's Measure . . .

The Collaborators

The condemned men and women crouch in the street until they are crowded into trucks. Most of them look down; some look straight into the camera—so that when we see the photographs in the newspapers it is into the eyes of the condemned that we look. The camera follows them to the place of execution outside Seoul; the camera shows them standing with their backs to the firing squad; then it shows them crumpled and dead. They are the “collaborators,” of course, and they have been duly tried and sentenced—several hundred of them according to report—by Syngman Rhee’s new courts.

When the North Koreans came down into South Korea they found civilians who had remained in South Korean towns, and they picked out those they did not like and shot them. They picked out South Koreans who had collaborated with the American authorities, or those who had denounced Communists to the South Korean government, or, if there is such a Korean word, they picked out “fascists.” When the South Koreans returned to Seoul they found civilians who had remained there under the North Korean occupation, and they picked out those they did not like and shot them. The North Koreans and the South Koreans acted on the principle that a front is no good unless the civilian population behind it can be counted on.

This principle has been monotonously followed in the wars and civil wars of our times. The armies advance and retreat, and a certain proportion of the civilian population—the people you see carrying their bundles along the roads—leave their homes when the armies retreat, return to their homes when the armies reconquer them. But there are others who do not go away. These are the people who live under enemy occupation. Some of them collaborate with the enemy; many more do not; gener-

ally all of them are held guilty until they prove their innocence. Their lot is a pitiful one.

It is hard to know what to do with pity these days. Pity has gone stale. We carry it about like swill in a bucket; it sloshes around, spills out in puddles; the puddles lie there stinking on the path of necessity and purpose, and humanity, hale survivor of one war after another, steps over them carefully as it marches toward a better world. Sooner or later the puddles dry.

One cannot be too careful. There are rules about pity. It must never interfere with nobler purposes. There is a hierarchy that permits pity for certain miseries, forbids it for others; there is always someone in authority who warns that first things come first, and someone who knows that charity begins at home. There is always someone ready with the right quotation.

So here are these Koreans certified for execution. They have since been shot. They may have been murderers and traitors. There is no point in speculating about them. We do not know their names. If the Koreans keep records, they are in their files. That does not matter. Their life and death is an old story now. Their pictures clipped from the newspapers are faded now. This makes things easier. One can look at old pictures without getting mawkish about them. But sometimes they remind one of others.

In Paris, long ago, at the Peace Conference after the First World War, they showed pictures from the Baltic. The war was over but German and Russian troops lingered on in a conflict of sorts, rectifying frontiers in the Baltic States, where the military and diplomatic situation was what is called “fluid.” In the process, the Germans would enter a village and execute those villagers who had collaborated with the Russians. Then they would withdraw, whereupon the Russians would enter the same village and execute those villagers who had collaborated with the Germans. No matter how

small the village there were always villagers enough. A Peace Conference mission had observed these proceedings, and the films it brought to Paris showed, if nothing else, that the Germans were more efficient executioners than the Russians.

The collaborators, no matter who was doing the shooting, looked alike; they were peasants—orderly and docile. They sat on the ground in a field waiting their turn. Unlike the Koreans, they wore boots. They sat there on the ground unlacing the boots; they took them off and placed them in a pile. The Germans and the Russians wanted the boots. The film was a silent film, so that you did not hear the orders that were given. At regular intervals ten collaborators at a time would get to their feet and line up in front of a ditch. They were not bound to any stakes; they stood there, very straight, facing the firing squad. It was a few seconds later that you noticed the difference in German and Russian efficiency. When the Germans shot, the collaborators jolted up in the air and fell cleanly into the ditch; when the Russians shot, the collaborators fell in a heap and some of them moved an arm or a leg as if they were trying to find a more comfortable position in which to sleep.

The collection of such images is becoming boring. They are much too alike. There are technical differences, it is true, the differences in race or in clothes, or in the landscape forming the background, but those are only picturesque variations. The picturesque is never enough. The Greeks of both sides or, in the long civil war, the Spanish of both sides, or the French shot at Vincennes—the pictures all look alike.

The past is irrecoverable. Secondly, there is no compulsion to think about the executions of collaborators. Finally, there are other things to think about which provide an outlet for socially acceptable pity—if anyone is wondering what to do with that sentiment.

—GOUVERNEUR PAULDING