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Notes on American Literature.

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NOTES ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

By K l a u s M a n n

Read and approved
Klaus Mann
Capt. Inf.

P.W.B., 11th Airborne Div., Army.

I am living in a tent, somewhere in Italy -- as a soldier of the U.S. Army.

Soldiers are not in the habit of traveling with a lot of literature. Books are heavy stuff -- and we have to carry our ^{own} luggage, which weighs enough as it is.

Yet books are not the kind of thing an American soldier would sneer at. ^{Am. w. man} In the U.S. Armed Forces, a fellow interested in books will not necessarily be considered a sissy or a lunatic. Even the toughest, most ignorant "G.I." has a certain vague respect for books and for ^{these} the curious people who produce or read such stuff. This is a very essential and significant difference between the American "tough guy" and the corresponding type on the German side. The German primitives are viciously and aggressively anti-intellectual. The American primitives have a good-natured curiosity and naive appreciation for intellectual values.

The Americans used to be proud of their skyscrapers, Ford cars, prize fighters, and refrigerators. More recently they have begun to pride themselves on their literature.

They have indeed a literature to be proud of.

When I try to recall my first impressions of American literature, it is Mark Twain's name that promptly comes to my mind. My father read "Tom Sawyer" to us (in a German translation) when my sister and I were children. We thought it tremendously funny, and most exciting.

and quite wonderful. About the same time, we became familiar with "The Leather Stocking," by James Fenimore Cooper -- which was another delight and a new adventure. Still as children, we were enchanted by the uncanny hallucinations of Edgar Allan Poe, whom I have never ceased to admire. Beaudelaire's spiritual brother (and literary discovery), he almost equals the French genius in the weird intensity of his vision and in the mathematical accuracy of his craftsmanship.

Some years later, I ^{received} ~~acquired~~ my first notion of contemporary American life from books like "Rabbit" and "Main Street" by Sinclair Lewis, "Boston" and ^{The} "Jungle," by Upton Sinclair, and Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie" and "An American Tragedy," -- works of sturdy realism and forceful veracity. From an artistic point of view, however, I think it is Sherwood Anderson who, as the only novelist of that American generation, has found a new idiom and new images of his own. True, he is more limited in his outlook, and more subjective in his approach, than are Dreiser, Sinclair, and Lewis. If these three remarkable narrators, in an almost journalistic manner, seem to be primarily concerned with social conditions and relationships, Sherwood Anderson had the creative boldness to explore the mysteries of the individual -- especially the adolescent -- and to venture, with psychological insight and poetic intuition, on the eternal themes of sex and solitude.

.... Then I came to know America-- the real thing, not its literary reflection --: first as a visitor, in 1927 and 1928; then ^{from 1937,} as a regular resident of New York City. It did not take me long to

find out that none of the American books I had read, contained and communicated the whole complexity of the American reality. I found American life richer -- more colourful, more dynamic -- than American novelists had led me to expect.

Gift was
The American genius has not yet found as complete and valid an expression as the French genius found in Stendhal and Balzac; the Russian, in Tolstoi and Dostoevski; the Italian, in Dante; the German, in Goethe; the English, in Shakespeare. Writers like Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Poe, *Mark Twain*, or Emerson -- for all their representative significance -- give only certain aspects and potentialities of the American national character.

Of course, there is one poet in whose powerful ~~message~~ ^{late} message the genius of the New World seems to become truly articulate -- Walt Whitman. The voice of the "Leaves of Grass" is indeed the voice of America: we hear America singing when we listen to those thunderous rhapsodies and invocations. Walt Whitman, "a kosmos, of Manhattan the son;" Walt Whitman, the lover and bard of all open roads, all rivers, all races, all crowds, all full-blooded men and women, all Children of Adam, all "camerados;" Walt Whitman, the prophet of a spirited democracy and world-wide brotherhood -- the great, admirable, ~~bearded~~ ^{turbulent} bearded, talkative, ~~maniacal~~ Walt Whitman is not only America's greatest poet: he is the great poet of America, the American poet.

Yet Whitman's work was not conceived and presented as the last word of the American genius, but rather as his first -- a stirring prelude rather than the symphony itself. The "Leaves of Grass"

is not so much a fulfilment as a vast promise and a daring experiment -- to use two of Whitman's favourite expressions.

These two words -- Experiment and Promise -- are particularly apt to characterize American creative writing in its entirety. Indeed, one might almost say that America itself -- its social, political and economic structure -- is still a promise, an experiment -- not yet an accomplished fact. While the national cultures of old Europe and older Asia seem to be frozen in rigid patterns and conventions, in America everything remains fluctuating, uncertain, changeable, half-inarticulate; always striving for improvement, ^(a halfhearted way) ~~almost~~ experimental, always promising.

"America is promises to me!" -- as one of Whitman's contemporary successors, the poet Archibald MacLeish, exclaims with generous enthusiasm and joyful pride.

^{*** between the two world wars}
~~The~~ American literature of the past 25 years is a series of experiments and promises.

First, there were the hectic, nervous, most exciting experiments of the "Roaring Twenties" -- the curious period from the end of World War One ^{to} ~~until~~ the beginning of the Depression, in 1929.

It was the great time of the literary American "expatriats" in Paris, who busied themselves with esoteric magazines, coteries, controversies, debaucheries, and other amusing things; the time when Ernest Hemingway discovered the grandeur of bull fights and Gertrude Stein discovered Dadaism; the time of prohibition in America, of speakeasies, gangsters, narcotics, and hot jazz.

— poems —

The "lost generation" -- as the young writers of the twenties called themselves -- was full of talent and disillusionment. A great war had been won -- and the peace had been lost. All the ideals of past epochs seemed to tarnish and wane -- mercilessly "debunked" by the brilliant and desperate "enfants terribles" of Greenwich Village and Montparnasse. What dynamic anger in John Dos Passos' unforgettable anti-war novel, "Three Soldiers"! What tragic accents in Faulkner's sinister tales of the American South! What spirited flippancy in Dorothy Parker's psychological poems and in that cynical, charmingly joke of Miss Anita Loos, "Gentlemen Prefer ~~Blondes~~ Blondes"!

The catchword of the next episod in American literature was, "Social Consciousness" -- corresponding, first, with the Depression; then with the bold, constructive economic experiment of the New Deal. The literary vanguard of the thirties in America was more earnest and realistic, but definitely less inspired, than the promiscuous globetrotters and bohemians of the post-war period had been. Yet the neo-realistic school of social criticism produced some work of poignant seriousness and lasting value -- like John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" and the sensational Negro novel by Richard Wright, "Native Son."

As conditions in Europe turned more and more confused and catastrophic, and the War appeared imminent, American writers became increasingly interested in patriotic themes, rather than in social or ^{international} cosmopolitan topics; they rediscovered the great events and characters of the American past in ballads, novels, essays, and biographies. The reading public responded enthusiastically to this

new patriotic-historical fashion -- as is proven by the enormous success of Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind"; by the great popularity of Stephen Vincent Benét's stories and poems; and by the deep impression the poet Carl Sandburg made with his fine Lincoln biography.

At the ~~the~~ same time (about 1939), another theme -- burninglly topical and disquieting -- began to become predominant ^{an} in American letters -- anti-Fascism and anti-Nazism. John Steinbeck, once more, was leading with his famous novelette, "The Moon Is Down," which was also successful as a play and in a screen version. Other widely discussed anti-Nazi hits were Robert Sherwood's play, "There Shall Be No Night," (originally directed against both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, but subsequently revised, according to recent developments...), and Lillian Hel^lman's skillful thriller, "The Watch On The Rhine."

Only a few authors managed, not to get mixed up with either American history or Nazi atrocities -- William Saroyan, for instance, that naughty and capricious favourite of the American public. Some of his short stories, and some scenes in some of his many plays, are indeed superb -- full of lyric ^{melody} ~~language~~ and an original sense of humor. His first novel, too -- a slim ^{booklet} ~~novel~~ with the naively pretentious title, "Human Comedy" -- sparkles with wit and charm; but then, it contains also ^{a good deal of} ~~cheap~~ sentimentalities and ^{capricious} ~~pequettish~~ nonsense. Clearly, William Saroyan -- a remarkably gifted man -- is already ^{in danger} ~~on the point~~ of becoming spoiled and conceited. Will his beautiful talent develop? Will it last? Will it live? Or will it soon be ruined by too much, too easy success?

The colourful literary scene of the United States is always teeming with promising juveniles, but there are not ~~so~~ many mature, fully developed writers, and there are ~~no~~ ^{any figures whom we would desire to be called} "grand old men." *cf. Am. Lit. Mus.*

H.L. Mencken might have become a "grand old man", but utterly failed to do so. The leading critic of the post-war period, author of "The American Language," and editor of "The American Mercury," he~~d~~ has had, for a while, a decisive and most stimulating influence ⁱⁿ ~~on~~ American writing. But long since, that provocative and ^{daring} ~~obstinate~~ individualist has become a cranky reactionary with ^{a reactionary} ~~a pro-Nazi~~ touch -- sitting isolated in Baltimore and making angry cracks against democracy and progress in general, and against Mr. Roosevelt in particular. His autobiography -- of which a new volume, "Heathen Days," has recently appeared -- shows still traces of the old, full-blooded, hard-striking Mencken, but is deplorably lacking in vision and novelty.

An even more melancholy case is that of Theodore Dreiser, one of Mencken's most important ^a literary discoveries. He, too, has turned "political," in a sterile and tiresome manner, and has established himself as a kind of ^{quarrelsome} ~~popular~~ "fellow traveller" of the Communist Party. For years the author of "An American Tragedy" has not written anything of any literary interest.

Many of the great promises somehow fail to come off. American authors seem to have a dangerous tendency to make ^{their} ~~the~~ most valuable, most personal contribution right at the beginning of their literary career. The instance of Ezra Pound may be too extraordinarily shocking to be quoted as typical. Yet that there is something significant and symptomatic

X Hergesheimer, quotation

The only one
Up to Sinclair

about the appalling decline of that once-talented poet, who made a fool of himself -- and, moreover, became a downright traitor -- by playing Mussolini's "Lord Haw-Haw" and broadcasting criminal trash from ~~German-occupied~~ ^{Fascist} Rome to his fighting homeland.

In other cases, the decline is less obvious and rather assumes the character of stagnation and self-repetition. Gertrude Stein -- the one American expatriat who remained faithful to France -- is still amusing enough: in fact, her recent books on Picasso and "Paris, France" are among the most brilliant things she has written. Yet her vagaries and devices have somehow become stale and meaningless. Clearly, the venerable old rebel has nothing new to say anymore...

Has William Faulkner written anything, during the past decade, that equals his "Light in August"? Has John Dos Passos lived up to the stirring promises of "Manhattan Transfer" and "The 42nd Parallel"? His recent novel, "Number One," shows solid craftsmanship, but falls short of those early outbursts of talent.

Eugene O'Neill -- one says -- is laboring on an enormously ambitious dramatic project -- a colossal affair, in nine parts, each of them as long as "Die Goetterdaemmerung." Will it turn out to be as ^{revolutionary} ~~new~~ and fascinating as were his ^{previous} ~~early~~ works for the theatre -- "The Hairy Ape," "Strange Interlude," and "Emperor Jones"?

As for the dramatic efforts of Thornton Wilder -- "Our Town" and "The Skin of Your Teeth" --, they are effective enough; still, I prefer "The Bridge of St. Luis Rey." Also, I prefer Hemingway's ^{ng} ~~ng~~ "A Farewell to Arms," and some of his early stories, to his recent bestseller, "For

Whom The Bell Tolls."

The one genius among the many gifted American ~~were~~ novelists ^{is} ~~was~~, in my opinion, Thomas Wolfe, who died as a young man -- several years ago. But he, too, seemed to give his best -- the very essence of his rich, explosive being -- in his first book, "Look Homewards, Angel!" -- one of the greatest, most moving American novels, since Melville's "Moby Dick." What followed -- "Of Time and River," etc -- seemed only to paraphrase and repeat, not to deepen ^{or} ~~intensify~~ intensify -- the message of that ^{initial} ~~supra~~ confession.

[If Thomas Wolfe was, perhaps, the greatest American prosaist of this epoch, T.S. Eliot is, to me, the greatest poetic talent. But is he still an American? Eliot has lived in England for at least 20 years, and seems to think of himself as an Englishman (as did Henry James). Besides Eliot's Catholic mysticism and formalistic artistry are hardly rooted in American traditions. His vision and idiom have more in common with Rilke or Paul Claudel than with Walt Whitman or any other of the American masters. In his most recent book, "Quartet," Eliot reveals insights and intuitions which no other American author of this century shares with him -- except maybe Thomas Wolfe, who, too, ^{was} ~~is~~ one of those whom Rainer Maria Rilke means when he sings (in "Sonnets to Orpheus"):

Does he belong here? No, out of both
realms his wide nature grew.
More knowing would he bend the willow's branches
who has experienced the willow's roots.

(Ist er ein Hiesiger? Nein, aus beiden
Reichen erwuchs seine reiche Natur.
Kundiger bogen die Zweige der Weiden
Wer auch ^{die} ~~den~~ Wurzeln der Weiden erfuhr.)

The two great dangers facing American writers of literary ambition, are Success ^(m.v.-y) and Current Events.

The American public has not yet developed what we may term as a historical sense. Americans live completely in the present day, the present hour; all that matters is what is going on r i g h t n o w , and what might have consequences tomorrow. Hence the rampant interest of American readers in journalistic explanations and dramatizations of current events ~~on the political scene~~ -- both domestic and international. This curiosity has naturally increased since the terrific shock of Pearl Harbor, in 1941. For the past two-and-a-half or three years, most of the best-selling books were dealing either with the War or with post-War schemes (like Walther Lippmann's widely-discussed "U.S. Foreign Policy"), while others describe and analyze conditions in Allied countries (like Wendell Willkie's sensational travel report, "One World").

Of course, neither Lippmann (a shrewd and judicious political observer) nor Willkie (a dashing and attractive personality) have actually much to do with creative writing in America. The same is true of Dorothy Thompson, Vincent Sheean, Pierre van Paassen, or any of the other brilliant journalists whose political commentaries or "personal histories" are the favourite reading material of the American public. Yet it would be absurd to deny that many of those popular correspondents and columnists write with a great deal of literary skill and competence. Besides the subjects they write about are matchlessly, breathtakingly important and dramatic. No wonder, then, that many a gifted young author feels tempted to compete

Ernie Pyle: band of ordinary soldiers...

with those streamlined masters of modern reportage, rather than to concentrate on the less lucrative, less thrilling effort of creative writing.

There are other temptations. There are the popular magazines -- paying fabulous sums for literary material that fits their problematical purposes; there is the radio with its sentimental and sensational clichés; there is Broadway, with its dubious penchant for the silly or the melodramatic; and, above all, there is Hollywood -- the great magnet and the great corrupter.

Of course, the American intelligentsia is not unaware of these dangers. Edmond Wilson, for instance, -- one of the most influential younger literary critics; now the successor of Clifton Fadiman, as the book reviewer of "The New Yorker" -- has recently addressed an impressive warning to the literary vanguard, to beware of Hollywood and such periodicals as "The Saturday Evening Post." Another eloquent ^{admonition} ~~reception~~ came from a young author, Philip Wylie, whose book, "Generation of Vipers," attacks -- vitriolically and amusingly -- such sacrosanct American institutions as sexy advertising and radio programs for women.

It is ~~especially~~ the mawkish cult of the American Mother, called "Mom," by which Mr. Wylie is especially irritated. The radio, he says, is "mom's final tool, for it stamps everybody who listens with the matriarchal brand... Just as Goebbels has revealed what can be done with such a mass-stamping of the public psyche in his nation, so our land is a living representation of the same fact worked out in matriarchal sentimentality, hidden cruelty, and the foreshadow of national death."

Harsh, violent words, these! -- not quite without sound foundation, but grossly exaggerated. National death, indeed! It does not look like death, in any domain of public life in America -- including the sphere of creative writing.

Upton Sinclair:
come - back.

Is there no figure of truly impressive dimensions among the many ^{young} aspirants to literary glory in America? Well, this does not seem to be a time of literary giants -- anywhere. But, in the United States, it is a time of striving talents, earnest efforts, inspired experiments. If the past decade has not produced an American masterpiece -- it has certainly brought forth an abundance of promises -- new promises without end!

There are new names to remember. Remember Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty -- two short-story writers of remarkable sensitivity! Remember another young woman, Carson McCullers: her two first novels, "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter" and "Reflections in a Golden Eye," are full of moving images and suggestions. Note the names of Marianne Moore and Muriel Rukeyser -- two poets of fascinating originality. (Miss Rukeyser has just surprised her admirers with a competent and thorough biography of Willard Gibbs, the great American physicist and mathematician, whom she presents as a spiritual brother of Whitman and Melville.) And just a few months ago, a new name has become famous, practically over night -- Betty Smith, who captivated the hearts of ten-thousands of American readers with her engaging, unassuming story, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn."

I seem to mention only young female authors; but, of course, there are promising young men as well. I have already spoken of Saroyan and Richard Wright -- the two most successful representatives

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The Boss

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Seems - Literary production

"Come with Will"

"The Robe"

"Forever Amber"
(Katherine Winslow)

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there are promising young men as well. I have already spoken of

Barryman and Richard Wright -- the two most successful representatives

of the post-Hemingway generation. Two others who may go far are James T. Farrell -- an Irish-American, who belonged to the "Social Consciousness" group, but has managed to surpass its clichés and limitations -- and Frederic Prokosch, who is a more romantic and more cosmopolitan type. Of Austrian descent, he combines the refined sensuality of the Viennese literary tradition with a certain verve and vigor due to his American background. The style of his novels -- "The Asiatics," "The Skies of Europe," etc. -- is of extraordinary expressiveness and delicacy -- enchantingly saturated with music and mystery.

Is John Hersey a novelist from whom great things may be expected? ... In any case, his story of "A Bell for Adano" is both topical and engagingly humane -- describing the adventures and disappointments of an idealistic young AMG officer stationed in a little Sicilian town for which he tries to obtain a church bell. It's brilliant reading -- a fine first contribution from an author who may have to say more, and even more stirring things.

(Will Selden Rodman turn out to be a great poet? I like his poems about flying, and his love poems, and some candid and pensive verse he has written about the War.)

I like many things written in America, during the past few years. I might go on enumerating names and titles; but my time is up. Besides I cannot be sure that the "promising" young authors whom I could mention are indeed those who will dominate the American literary scene of tomorrow. Who knows? Maybe there is an American genius -- growing anonymously in some American city (like that famous tree in Brooklyn); maybe some provincial little magazine has just published the first

poem or story of a young writer who will change the face of American literature. The young genius is fighting, perhaps, somewhere between Naples and New Guinea; or maybe he has just been killed -- leaving behind a yet unprinted masterpiece; or maybe he is not yet born, or is just being born, at this very moment which is pregnant with future, never-heard-of potentialities.

America is young. If Americans seem at times complacent and skeptical -- that's just one of those callow poses of adolescence; it will pass.

Maybe America will have to pass through tribulations and calamities. Maybe America's great literature will have to emerge from America's future tribulations. America's poet, Walt Whitman, knew what was in store for his gigantic, immature, blessed, beloved home land:

Long, too long America,
Traveling roads all even and peaceful, you ~~have~~ learn'd from
joys and prosperity ~~alone~~ only,
But now, ah now, to learn from crises of anguish, advancing
grappling with direst fate and recoiling not,
And now to conceive and show to the world what your
children en-masse really are.

Italy, May, 1944

758011

The psychic underground... (Upton Sinclair)

There were some of his acquaintances who looked down upon him patronizingly because he had let himself be drawn into this sort of activity. An aroma of fraud hung about it, and only a weakminded person would waste time on it. ...

Lanny had read enough to know that it was truly a mysterious universe, and the clues to its secrets had been found in odd and unexpected places. ... And what about our mind, most familiar of our possessions, yet the least investigated? Lanny was coming to the conclusion that his mind was one with all the other minds existing -- and this, not because his mystical grandfather had dreamed it, but because of facts which he was observing and for which he could find no other explanation. He saw himself as a bright and lovely bubble, floating on the surface of a ~~dark~~ vast dark ocean; he was keenly aware of his own existence, and somewhat less keenly aware of other bubbles, dancing in the sunshine all around him; but of the infinite ocean from which he had come and to which he was destined to return, he knew next to nothing, and was considered an oddity because he kept trying to find out.

An ocean of mind-stuff, a cosmic consciousness, or unconsciousness -- whatever that could be and however it could function. Some called it evolution and others called it God. Whatever its name, it brought you into existence and kept you going. Very certainly you hadn't made yourself, either body or mind; very certainly you didn't know how to make your own blood or to repair your tissues; your thoughts came, but you didn't know how...

The spirits ... : "Were they disembodied minds, spirits, or ghosts, or did they exist as fragments of mind-stuff -- just as long-buried fragments of bones exist in the grave? No scientist had to apologize for studying a piece of the skull of the Piltdown man and learning what he could about that ancestral being. Why shouldn't some of them get busy to study the mental fragments of a long-dead Amerindian chieftain, or a Greek munitions king, or a victim of the Nazis murdered in a concentration camp?"

"Madame" -- the Polish medium... Séances with Hess, Hitler... Hitler's rage as the wrong spirits appeared... The same happened to Sir Basil Zaharoff when he tried to communicate with the late wife: all his victim "came through" instead... Tecumseh -- dead 200 years ago... Tries to find his kidnapped wife, Trudi Schultz, in the spirit world: part of the mystery story... The phony medium, Bruno Proefenik, in Berlin (Nazi)... Lanny knows: "There is fraud in every part of this field; also, I have reason to believe that there are mediums who at times produce genuine phenomena, and at other times, when the phenomena fail to appear, yield to the temptation to help the spirits out."

NOTES

Introduction, as before.

Dangers -- p. 10-12...

before I left:

Yet, new talents... best-sellers (semi-literary): "The Robe" (Lloyd C. Douglas) -- on the sentimental side, but lively...;

Morgan? "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" (unassuming realism... sense of humor)
"The Human Comedy" (William Saroyan)

More recent: "A Bell for Adano" (John Hersey)

Recent books that should be translated into Italian;

Köster

Upton Sinclair, "Presidential Agent" (Lanny Budd series; panorama ... saga in the great style... contemporary Europe... Topical, gossip, well documented... journalistic... optimistic... bold ... experimental.... SPIRITUALISM; transition;

Huxley, "Time must have a Stop" (skepticism plus mysticism... after-death experience-- satire... Florence..., very pre-war, with wealthy Englishmen, etc) Sophistication... Englishmen living in U.S.

Comparison: Carson McCullers on the pattern Eliot.
Jean Stafford, "Boston Adventure" new American talent...

Essay... serious effort... Sample: Borgese, Common Cause

Wh: Yuman (Homo Sapiens (Lanny) (inst., p. 3.)

Wallace.

Poetry: Auden, Muriel Rukeyser, Frederic Prokosch, Marianne Moore...

Eliot, "Four Quartets"

"This condition of complete simplicity..."

Katherine Anne Porter

There are others whom you ought to know:
Do you know Carson McCullers?
Muriel Rukeyser? Frederic Prokosch?
Henry Miller?

What War Novels Are Made Of

“I have not come across a single American novel which tries to say a word of truth about this war: those of our novelists who are concerned with the war either write elaborate fictions about this happy land worth dying for or take out their patrioteering in forced recreations of the past, intended to prove that America through all its history has been whole-woven of the purest idealisms. (Diana Trilling, in *The Nation*, Jan. 22, 1944)