

INTRODUCTION TO UNIT 7

SHERWOOD ANDERSON

I. WHITMAN'S CHALLENGE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the early decades of the twentieth century the United States emerged as a major power whose actions in diplomacy, warfare, and political and economic affairs had profound and durable consequences on the international scene. There was a comparable accession of power in American writing which gave new urgency to the view of American culture set forth in 1870 in *Democratic Vistas* by Walt Whitman. There the poet issued a double challenge to the American imagination. On the one hand he celebrated the emergence of artists "commensurate with the people" and burdened them with the mission to remold society and to bring to their fulfillment the new eras in human history that he found incarnate in the American experiment. On the other hand he defined a profound crisis in the arts, itemizing the manifest deficiencies, the diseased corruptions of American civilization, which threatened increasingly to betray the high expectations it had aroused, and he warned that they might bring on a catastrophe comparable to the fate in hell of the "fabled damned". In the period encompassing two world wars and the Great Depression of 1929, ambitious missions for the arts comparable to those defined by Whitman, and comparably dire warnings agitated American writers, defining the confidence and boldness with which the best pursued their careers and sought recognition, but defining also the anxiety, even desperate urgency, with which most scrutinized their traditions and their contemporary environment as they

weighed the chances for human fulfillment and sought to shape conditions that would enable them to fulfill their aspirations as artists.

II. REASSESSMENT OF AMERICAN CULTURAL TRADITIONS

A reassessment of American cultural traditions was one of the major undertakings of creative writers and critics alike. Emerson's awareness that his traditions were in a state of flux and that an age of "transition" was a stimulus to creativity was heightened in the twentieth century. They discovered the poetry of Emily Dickinson, first published in the 1890 and issued piecemeal (fragments) until the 1940s, and established her as one of the chief figures in American letters. They rediscovered Melville in the 1920s and reassessed Henry James in the 1930s, reargued the merits of Whitman and Mark Twain, and defined a durable importance for these writers that continued to be influential after World War II in American cultural circles and in the new British universities as well.

The New Englanders Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne remained highly esteemed, and the poets Robinson and Frost paid tribute to their New England predecessors. But the long-dominant New England tradition more widely came under attack for the evasive gentility (false delicacy) and prim (decorous, neat) idealism that it had encouraged. Aspects of the specifically Puritan tradition came under particularly intense scrutiny. It was attacked in the 1920s for its constraints and moral severity by the critic H. L. Mencken and others and for its reinforcement of the inhibiting complacencies of the middle-class "booboisie" (stupidity of bourgeoisie). But the subtleties of its contributors to American culture and its importance in defining the national

character and America's "mission" were emphasized by Harvard historians and others in the 1930s and 1940s.

Groups and regions outside New England asserted their claims to recognition and importance, possibly because shifts in population and economic power were generating new energies there or because these subcultures -their familiar values and the mores of their communities- seemed threatened by industrialism and the increasing standardization of American life.

New York City, however, remained the publishing center of the nation, and two neighborhoods there became important literary centers. In uptown Manhattan, Harlem, its fine avenues, its night spots featuring jazz music, as well as its congested slums, became the metropolitan center of black culture in the United States beginning in the earliest decades of the century, when rural black people were migrating by the thousands to urban centers and Blacks in New York City, responding to the pressures of residential and economic segregation, completed the transformation of white suburban Harlem into a black ghetto. With heightened consciousness of their racial and community identity, black intellectuals launched in the 1920s the first important movement in black American literature, the "Harlem Renaissance", to strengthen the cultural traditions of their people and demonstrate their achievements to the white society that habitually ignored them. During the same decades, Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan, with its inexpensive tenements and relative isolation from the institutions of the native-born white middle-class, became the haven of literary and intellectual bohemians, prominent writers and intellectuals as well as "inglorious Miltons by the score, and Rodins, one to every floor", as the radical John Reed wrote mockingly in *The Day in Bohemia*. In the Village they found the freedom to pursue styles of

living at odds(disagreement) with notions of propriety prevailing elsewhere, to circumvent the Prohibition laws against the sale of alcoholic beverages, and to experiment with radical political ideas and new literary forms.

III. THE CRISIS

The excitement of life in Harlem and in the Village (they became tourist attractions for other New Yorkers and outsiders alike) did much to set the tone for which "The Jazz Age" or "The Twenties" became famous. But the experimentation with radical ideas and new modes in the arts which marked the 1920s was not unique to the decade; it was an authentic response to a crisis in American culture that took shape earlier but was intensified during World War I (1914-18) and its aftermath, even though America's distance from the battlefield and relatively late entry into combat (1917) protected it from the worst consequences of a war which stained European communities, decimated their populations, and cut off the careers of countless young intellectuals. To many, like the novelists Hemingway and Dos Passos, who witnessed it, but to many more, like the pacifist philosopher John Dewey or the poet Ezra Pound, who did not, the war which President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed would "make the world safe for democracy" proved to be a senseless slaughter in the name of a "botched(detestable, wretched) civilization". Postwar diplomacy, establishing the League of Nations on the shifting sands of power politics, seemed a futile and cynical charade(empty, deceptive act).

The intellectuals' aroused concern as well as their imminent disenchantment quickened the efforts begun in the post-Civil War decades to scrutinize and challenge more forcefully the ideals of democracy and the

institutions that presumably secured it, the institutions of industrial and finance capitalism which were becoming so dominant in all aspects of social and cultural life, and the institutions of the family and sexual codes that had been central in the structure of American values. Racial violence and industrial strife in the late war years and early 1920s, an aroused socialist movement, and scandalous corruption in league with official complacency during the presidency of William G. Harding intensified the challenge.

Late in the 1920s new jolts (blows, knocks) to American society extended the crisis into the 1930s and sharpened writers' sense of urgency about their mission. Open evasion of the Prohibition laws and illicit traffic in "bootleg (smuggling)" liquor were accompanied by the advent of gang warfare in major cities, marking a decay in private and public morals. Poverty spread through rural areas in the 1920s and 1930s, and the stock market crash of 1929 bankrupted individuals and institutions throughout the nation and sent shock waves through the economies of Europe, where fascist Italy and Nazi Germany were preparing the way for the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Industrial retrenchment and widespread unemployment during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the explosive violence of industrial strife between corporations and the labor force occasioned a major reorientation of American political and economic life under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal", launched in 1933 to cope with the conditions which had reduced countless Americans to lives of unquiet desperation. To the crises of the 1920s and 1930s American writers responded by the re-examining and redefining their distinctively American traditions and by treating social problems more explicitly in fiction and poetry as well as in literary journalism. They also looked to Europe for ideas, programs, and forms that could guide or implement their efforts.

IV. AMERICA AND EUROPE

Interest in European radicalism, including anarchism and communism, was heightened by the outbreak in 1917 of the Russian Revolution, which held forth the hope of a strikingly new solution to social and political problems. Marxist thought infused the radicalism of Max Eastman and John Reed, editors of *The Masses* (at the time of its suppression in 1917 for opposition to the war) and of its successor, *The Liberator*, subsequently named *The New Masses*, which became the official journal of the American Communist party. These journals reinforced the critique of American society sustained by the conservative(right-wing) H. L. Mencken of *The American Mercury* and the liberal(left-wing) journalism of *The New Republic* and *The Nation*. And Marxist theory, along with radical organizations pursuing socialist aims, helped shape the careers of the critic Edmund Wilson and such fiction writers as Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Herbert Gold, and Richard Wright in the 1930s. Marxists and social critics informed then by Marxist thought were among those in the 1930s, following the crash of 1929, who demanded that writers take direct cognisance(knowledge, awareness) of social and economic problems and enlist their writing in the cause of advancing social change or revolution. The suppression of dissent in Russia, demands for conformity within communist organizations in this country, and the alignment in 1939 of Stalinist Russia with Hitler's Germany disillusioned many intellectuals with communist-oriented radicalism; but Marxist theory continued to be influential in subsequent decades.

Freudianism, the theory and practice of psychoanalysis as defined by the Viennese doctor Sigmund Freud, was another Continental movement that

penetrated deeply into American intellectual life. Psychoanalysis stressed the importance of the unconscious or the irrational in the human psyche; the dramas and dream symbols generated in the mind by mechanisms, psychological and social, or sexual repression; the pervasiveness of "discontents" that underlie all civilization; the ways in which psychic experience is masked or veiled by common language and the conscious operations of the mind; and the capacity of "depth psychology" to diagnose psychic illness and try, at least, to cure it. Freud found a readier acceptance in America (where he first lectured in 1909) than in Europe, and his theories, after becoming a fad(fashion) in the journalism of the 1920s, inspired in subsequent decades a host of novels and such reinterpretations of American culture as Ludwig Lewisohn's *Expression in America* (1932). More significantly, psychoanalytic theory seemed to sanction quest for sexual liberation in actual behavior and disdain for established conventions which inhibited fulfillment of the self. Rival psychoanalysts, including Alfred Adler and Carl Jung, added new versions to the literature of psychoanalysis. By 1940 "the psychiatrist", the "archetypal symbol", and "the Oedipus complex" had become part of modern mythology, and both the mythology and the theories of psychoanalysis had infused literature as varied as the poems of Conrad Aiken, the plays of Eugene O'Neill, and most poetry and fiction that drew heavily on the subconscious implications of symbolic forms or probed the depths of psychic experience.

V. MODERNISM

That revolution took shape in a convergence of tendencies in modern culture, accidental circumstance, and concerted effort on the part of influential writers, some politically conservative and some radical.

It began to emerge after 1908 in the movement Imagism and the reaction of the English writer T. E. Hulme and his followers against amorphous abstraction, clichéd "poetic" diction, indulgent ornamentation, and monotonous regularity of meter in Victorian and Edwardian poetry. One characteristic feature of Modernism is that it dramatizes discontinuity, the sense of distinction and imminent severance from the past, while making determined efforts to appropriate the past, its values, and its artistic forms by incorporating them in new acts of creation. A second characteristic is fragmentation: the sense that individual experience consists of severed or loosely connected pieces or moments, and that communities are atomized into individuals or groups that are antagonistic or distant from one another. The literature incorporates and expresses this fragmentation in varied ways - exposing it often in stunned repudiation or mordant satire, sometimes with a sense of futility verging on despair -while reaching beyond it towards possibilities of both self-integration and personal and social communion.

A third feature of literary Modernism is its concern with language, all aspects of its medium, and the problematic relations between literature and the audiences. American writers had been anxious about these matters since the days of Cooper, Melville, and Whitman, but modern writers felt more intensely that the language prevailing in literary works was debilitated and needed resuscitation, that the conventions comprising their medium had become stale and needed either replacement or reworking, and that audiences

had been numbed by the spread of minimal literacy and the impact of standardized journalism and cheapened tastes.

The variety of their strategies in this effort was striking, and their effects were of lasting importance. They found ways to capture the pace, tensions, and rhythms of urban life; they shaped the cadences of black dialect, of southern rhetoric, of colloquial speech as actually spoken into a medium for prose narration, for dialogue in fiction, and for lyric poetry.

Many modern productions in prose or verse are presented without overt solicitation of the reader's interest, emotions, or understanding and are difficult to apprehend because they are designed instead to have the vividness and discrete independence of a well-made artifact, the reality of an object. That objectivity is the work's claim on the reader's attention, and other appeals remain tacit or covert. Yet both the difficulty and the deviousness (cunning, deceptive) testify to the deliberateness with which the important writers of the period undertook to address their society.

Common to the strategies pursued by many vanguard writers was that of articulating or dramatizing the barrier between writer and audience by bluntly and explicitly assaulting the audience's expectations or by proceeding in seeming indifference to its needs, in either case catching and holding reader's attention by shocking them into a new alertness. Virtually new to American writing (though there were precedents in Melville and Twain) is the devious (deceptive, cunning) and sportive (frolicsome; deportivo) playfulness, the virtuoso posturing (pose, attitudinize), the indulgent (lenient; indulgent) frivolity which in some poetry and fiction replaced the solemnity with which authors customarily had addressed their subjects and their readers.