

HOW TO MAKE BOTH NEEDS MEET

—A Partial Approach to the American Writers in the Nineteen-Thirties—

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I

The nineteen-thirties is the decade of change and violence. John Steinbeck remembers it in *Esquire* (June, 1960), saying, "I can't think of any decade in history when so many happened in so many directions. Violent changes took place. Our country was modeled, our lives remolded, our government rebuilt, forced to functions and responsibilities it never had before and can never relinquish". He rightly points out the varied aspects of the decade. In the late fall of 1929, to which year Steinbeck referred as "prologue to the nineteen-thirties", there suddenly occurred a great crash in the Wall Street, bringing force, as if in the chain reactions, consequent depressions; in Europe, there were upheavals in the political world; in Spain, they had a civil war, a kind of world war, though it was a "civil" war. Indeed the nineteen-thirties is the decade with various events.

Now it is about thirty years since that decade reached its end, and, from 1967-68 many books on the 1930's have been published, almost one after another. Some of them are new publications, but not a few of them are the reprinted editions of the old issues. Some of these are meant for special studies of the 1930's and some are essays in remembrance of the decade. They are classifiable into such diverse fields as politics, economics, sociological studies, literary studies (including anthologies) etc. To publish such different kinds of books may attempt at synthetic and multilateral grasp of the decade, but it is related, more or less, with the fact that the present decade sees the lapse of thirty years (one generation).

Human beings in general need about one generation to reach their maturity from birth, with sucking age, infancy, childhood, pubescence and adolescence in between. A man will attain his maturity of human physical growth at the age of around thirty years. The same may be said of the growth of the times. Just as a human being passes various stages until he grows up to be a matured man, so an age experiences many things worth while to be recorded in the future history. It might be no wonder, in this respect, that the publications of many books on the 1930's have been seen, or announced in the monthly book catalogues.

What, then, is the value of such books in the present day? Their present value is to be estimated in terms of the purposes for which they have been published. The nineteen-thirties is now a past age, and it seems that there is a touch of remembering when the age is thought of. As "Think Back on Us", title of Malcolm Cowley's book on the 1930's, symbolically suggests, when they are going to write a book on that decade, they seem to want in their own way to look back on it. Even though their books have no such title as Cowley's book

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does, they contain to some extent reminiscences of the 1930's. The act of "looking back" upon the past days will accompany sentimentality and it is allowable if the days be "looked back" upon separately from the present day. But, as T.S. Eliot's theory of tradition teaches us, the present and the past is inseparable. Moreover, the present-day condition of the world does not admit such sentimentalism.

The present-day America, in particular, with such crucial problems as the War in Vietnam, anxieties in the economic affairs, Negro problems, etc., has some things in common, as phenomena go, with America in the 1930's, with the Spanish Civil War, the Great Depression, labor problems, etc. in it.

Therefore it would be impossible to discuss the 1930's without any relations to the present day. It is nothing less than discussing present-day America to look into what America was like in the Thirties.

II

Everyone should face the age he is living in, and the American writers in the 1930's could not evade this duty. A writer, in the first place, should answer what his age asks him, or should satisfy the needs of the times. He does it in his works, and it is important to judge how he satisfies the needs of the times, when we are going to decide whether or not he is a great writer. By the needs of the times is meant that any writer must be sharply aware of the realities of his times. Then how the American writers could respond to what was required of them and how American writers today will think of the very age they are living in—these are the first problems to discuss.

For convenience' sake, let us take two "civil" wars, i.e. Spanish Civil War and Vietnamese War. The latter is undoubtedly the problem of the world and the former was also a kind of "world" war, which some American writers including Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos had experienced, about which they had written, although in a variety of ways. Hemingway wrote *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Dos Passos did "Spain; Rehearsal for Defeat" (collected in *The Theme is Freedom*). He also referred to it in *The Adventures of a Young Man*; the hero of this novel is to be killed in the Spanish front.

What works have been written about the War in Vietnam? So far as the War is concerned, almost no contemporary American literary works have discussed it, with a few exceptions of such short stories as have appeared in *New American Review* or some other magazines. Some "New Writers" seem to be interested in the War. They "use" the War in Vietnam as their subject for a story or a novel, but it is no better than "subject"; there is little profound interest in what the War is now. They are far inferior to Hemingway's or Dos Passos's works, much more to André Malraux's or George Orwell's. But it does not follow that we shall never see any great literary works written about the War in Vietnam in future. Those short stories on the War which are to be seen in the magazines may lead the way to some great work on the Vietnamese war.

One of the problems which the American writers in the 1930's had to face was that of the Great Depression. A similar subject in the present-day America may be "Dollar Crises", but the similarity lies only in the superficial resemblance as subject to look into. And what is contained in the "dollar problems" is quite different from what the problems of the Great

Depression had in the 1930's. The greatest difference between the two economic crises is that the Great Depression had directly affected the public lives, as we understand in the word "bread line" which appears very often in the books on the Thirties. Some of the writers in the 1930's must have been in the queue for daily bread. John Steinbeck, one of the leading American writers, cynically remembers himself that he had been practising for the Depression a long time and that he wasn't involved with loss because he didn't have money to lose, but it admits of a certain doubt if his remembrances are true to what he was then. His works such as *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) seem to fail his cynical remembrances. On the contrary, they reveal how intimately their author was engaged with the age. Those writers coping drastically with the Great Depression of which the venom had immersed into their actual life, naturally described the phases of the Depression. Hence the so-called "Proletarian Writers". It was a necessity of history, or a reality of the times. It was necessary for the writers in the Thirties that they should have faced the necessity and grasp the reality of the Thirties.

Among literary works of the 1930's are those which do not directly refer to the Great Depression and its influences on the public, as in the case of Robert Nathan's *One More Spring* (1933). Although it is not written about the Great Depression, *One More Spring* tells the story of a common run of people in the period of the Depression. Symbolically enough, this work was published in 1933, which year was the acme of the hardships of the decade and saw the beginning of F.D.R.'s New Deal. The characters in this work live through the hard times with apparent cheerfulness and even humor and sympathy with others, waiting for the coming of titular spring. Merely superficial reading of this book may deny the reader concluding that this book tells about people being harassed under the burden of the Great Depression, but a closer reading will serve to such conclusion.

But there is a danger for a writer in satisfying what the times require of him. The danger lies in the fact that the excessive satisfaction of the needs of the times tends to produce what may be called the "Propaganda Novels"; those novels which propagandize the cause of, say, Communism, Marxism, etc. Many of the American novels in the 1930's have something or other of the factors of propaganda and a greater part of the so-called "Proletarian Novels" advocate the legitimacy of the Communist cause. A typical Communist agitation goes like this: "It is Capitalism that is to blame. Damn the Capitalists! It is up to you, Comrades, to beat them down, and only Communism can protect you against exploitations". Of course some of the writers of the decade deemed it their duty to make propaganda for Communist cause as in the cases of the contributors to the *New Masses*, but some of them must have deemed otherwise, as is observable in the "Non-*New Masses*" novels, which, though with a faint smack of propaganda, are far from being called the "Propaganda Novels". What makes the "Non-*New Masses*" novels unique among the "Proletarian Novels" is that they have something other than the needs of the times, which I might call the inner needs of the writers.

III

All the American writers that had lived in such critical decade as the nineteen-thirties had to satisfy at once the needs of the times and the inner needs of writers themselves.

None of them perhaps could meet the two needs, so much so that it was a great problem for them how to make both needs meet, and a comment on this by Louis Filler will suggest to us some problems concerning American writers in the 1930's.

"A curious fact about some of the authors and the spirits of the times", he maintains, "was that many whose work seemed intimately engaged with the needs of the times did not, in fact, satisfy their own deepest needs". Whom he had in mind as "some of the authors" is not clear to us, but it seems to me that they are such "radical" writers as those contributors to the *New Masses* rather than the novelists such as John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos and James T. Farrell, etc., because "the needs of the times" and "their own deepest needs" may be equivalent to "the advocacy of the Communist cause" and "the inner needs of the writers themselves". However much a writer may uphold Communism, he has his own limitations, since he is a writer.

Even though he is a Communist, a writer cannot be a genuine Communist who will work only for the Party as some characters in *In Dubious Battle* do. A Communist writer must tell the public how Communism will work in the age. If the writer is a novelist, his integrity as an artist may cause him to produce "literary", not propaganda, works. A novelist cannot make either political or economic *researches* on Communism, or the Communist Party. When he wills to make such research in his writing, it tends to cease to be a literary work. The so-called "Propaganda Novels" leave us with clear-cut impressions, but they are often apt to be so cold that we fail to find certain humane flavors in them. The coldness of the clear-cut impressions of such novels is probably due to the fact that their writers were so much preoccupied with meeting the needs of the times as to be partial to the satisfaction of their inner needs. In terms of this, Louis Filler's comment is quite to the point. The *New Masses* writers produced novels like *Jews Without Money* (authored by Michael Gold) or *The Disinherited* (by Jack Conroy) (how engaged these titles are with the times!), but they are less "literary" than Steinbeck's, Dos Passos's or Farrell's works. Then, are their "literary" works entirely free from what Louis Filler critically comments on some of the authors of the Thirties?

IV

When we refer to John Steinbeck, Dos Passos, or Farrell as a writer of the 1930's, we will imagine in our own way what the decade was like, thinking of his works written in that decade. If the writer referred to is John Steinbeck, the work to be thought of may be *In Dubious Battle* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, if he is John Dos Passos, his work emerging in our mind will be *U.S.A.* (now one volume in three parts, but originally each part separately written as *The 42nd Parallel, 1919, The Big Money*), and if James T. Farrell, the Studs Lonigan trilogy. What is common with these works is that they reveal the authors' profound social interests or highly awakened minds to the realities of the times. Indeed the 1930's required many things of the writers; they could not evade confrontation with them. The labor problem is one of them. Since C.I.O., much more radical than A.F.L. (1881), was organized in 1935, various labor problems with the increase of "sit-down" strikes had emerged. According to what the Administration announced in 1937, "the numbers of the sitdown strikers since September 1936, are estimated nearly half a million". Truly strikes are to be described in many of the literary works produced in the 1930's. John Steinbeck's *In Dubious*

Battle is one of them. In 1935 he wrote *Tortilla Flat*, quite un-Thirties novel, and in the next year he *had to* write *In Dubious Battle*, which was about "dubious battle" between employers and employees. Dos Passos seems to have been engaged with such a general problem of a writer as responsibilities of a novelist rather than with such particular problems of the day as strikes, bread lines, etc. He wrote an introduction to the Modern Library edition (1932) of *Three Soldiers* (1921). *Three Soldiers* is the second of his works, dealing with three individuals being crashed under the wheel of giant mechanism (i.e. war). In this novel the author's concern seems to be more with the personal (three soldiers) than with the impersonal (crashing mechanism of war) and he seems to have been wavering like a swaying pendulum to choose between the integrity of an artist and the satisfaction of the needs of the times through dealing with social problems. Though a brief one (only four pages and half), his introduction is of considerable importance. He maintains in it as we read in the following: "Outside of preaching I think there is such a thing as straight writing.....The mind of a generation is its speech. A writer makes aspects of that speech enduring by putting them in print. He whistles at the words and phrases of today and makes of them forms to set the mind of tomorrow's generation. That's history." In a word, the necessity of a writer is to write straight. What does he write straight? Towards the end of the introduction, he writes, "we must deal with the raw structure of history." It is of particular significance that *U.S.A.* comes after this introduction, although *U.S.A.* was completed in 1936, because Dos Passos put into practise what he had declared in the introduction to *Three Soldiers*. Neither Dos Passos nor Steinbeck could fully deal with the "raw structure of history". Let us take Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*.

This work is "social" in that it is chiefly about how to organize fruit picking laborers in a Californian valley and lead them to the strike against their employers, but Doc Burton, one of the characters, is an un-social figure, who makes such an enigmatic statement as "I want to see, Mac. I want to watch these group-men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single men. A man in a group isn't himself at all, he is a cell in an organism that isn't like him any more than the cells in your body are like you. I want to watch the group, and see what it's like". Mac is an organizer sent down from the Party. When Mac asks Burton, "What's this got to do with the cause?", Burton answered, "When group man wants to move, he makes a standard.... May be the group wants to move, to fight...." Such an ecological view of human beings as Doc Burton's is quite irrelevant to the Communist cause which he should represent. Despite the fact that the "dubious battle" concerning fruit pickers is the central subject of the novel, Doc Burton's opinion of "group-men" is so striking to us that we might think that the author will really attempt at picturing those participants in the "dubious battle", not the battle itself. It has been pointed out of this work that the Communist Party, above all, what it was in the 1930's, is not well described, although a certain critic goes so far as to say the Party is the protagonist of the novel. Even Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* is not an all-round achievement of "dealing with the raw structure of history".

The straight writing of the raw structure of history in *U.S.A.* is to take as rounded view as possible of the Giant Mechanism (i.e. *U.S.A.*) and discuss the problems of individuals maneuvered by the hands of this Mechanism. Thomas Wolfe, one of the American writers of the 1930's, tried to grasp *U.S.A.* and Dos Passos made a somewhat similar attempt. It is not yet to be concluded whether his attempt is a failure or not, but the very last of *U.S.A.* symbolically suggests what Dos Passos attained or could not attain in the work. The last of

the book is titled as "Vag" (it is probably a diminutive of "vagabond"), and it may be that "Vag" is the very figure of Dos Passos at his wits' end after having wrestled with giant U.S.A. with all his might and main. After *U.S.A.* or even in the midst of it, Dos Passos came to feel disappointment in Communism. The belief in Communism was the support to Dos Passos and once it went off him, he had nothing to hold himself with. "Vag" waits at the roadside beside the speeding traffic, with hundred miles down the road ahead of him.

We have made some partial approach to the ways how some of the American writers tried to make two needs meet. Indeed they struggled drastically, being harassed by the anxieties of their times. It was the encounters between the needs of the times and the inner needs of the writers. Such kind of encounters may be found in any age, but the present day is an appropriate time to revalue the struggles the writers had experienced in the nineteen-thirties, since the present-day world is full of events which are capable of bringing about crises. We can never look over how they had coped with the difficulties of the times, how they had tried to get over them and how they had made artistic efforts to make the two needs meet, the needs of the times and the inner needs of the writers themselves. Without deeper sympathies with the writers' efforts and struggles for their times, the appreciations of their achievements will be short of being impartial.