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* Trends in American Literature

by

J. Randolph Fisher

Interest in American literature has become worldwide. Scholars are giving the literature of the United States increasing attention. Hence a consideration of the chief trends in American literature is particularly appropos.

Randall Stewart dealt with this topic in 1957. He discovered that the critical approach dominates English departments—and the study of American Literature, substituting for the old historical approach. The critical approach is commanding attention—compelling emphasis in the literary courses. Certain American writers (Poe, Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Faulkner) have won marked eminence in the English curriculum. Hawthorne especially enjoys greater critical esteem than ever before. In addition to that, more publication is going on in the American field than ever before. An unusual number of young scholars have chosen American literature as a field of endeavor. It is interesting to note with respect to this matter that Dr. Stewart feels “that too many graduate students, proportionately, have been and still are going into American literature.” Continuing with the trends, our literature is being re-evaluated as never before. The American Studies Program, which Carl Bode calls the newest of academic developments, has gained remarkable popularity.

In their excellent *American Heritage* (an Anthology and Interpretive History of Our Literature) Leon Howard, Louis B. Wright, and Carl Bode designate another major trend: “With Faulkner as its greatest figure, Ransom as its most influential leader, and the Fugitives as its central group, the Southern Renaissance is the leading literary phenomenon of our generation. Even after reductions have been made, it still may be as remarkable a fact for this century as New England Transcendentalism was for the last.” Among the giants of the Southern Renaissance are John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donal Davidson, Merrill Moore, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner.

Then there is emphasis on the American road and what Kingsley Widner calls the naturalistic American Joe in the American novel, i.e., Faulkner's *Light in August* (Joe Christmas), Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (Jack Burden, Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (Augie), Robert Gold's *The Man Who Was Not With It* (Budd Williams).

Presently more books are being published than ever before. So much so, indeed, that John Fischer (editor-in-chief of Harper's Magazine) complains, “. . . any rational man could see that far too many books are being published already.” Completely in agreement, Albert

* Twenty-First Annual Conference of the College Language Association. Panel II A. Morgan State College. 14 April 1961.

Van Nostrand (*The Denatured Novel*) presents the thesis that "too many books are being published for too few readers."

Rosalind Constable (*Time Magazine*) notes a boom in little magazines and in paperback editions of books. *Life Magazine* also calls attention to these trends in American writing and, in addition, informs us of a nation-wide poetry boom—"Paperbacks have given poetry its widest reading audience ever." Kenneth Rexroth argues that poetry has become a powerful social force, stimulated chiefly by the Beatnik influence in American literature. In his uncommonly thought-provoking *A Casebook on the Beat*, Thomas Parkinson gives particular attention to this matter. He not only presents an able defense for Beat literature, but he goes on to designate Beat literature as a healthy influence on and as the dominant trend in present-day American writing.

So much then for the present trends in American literature. Finally it may be enlightening to consider another movement which is effectively described by Professors Howard, Wright, and Bode: "To make a bold summary of the main social trend in American writing for the past twenty-five or thirty years, we could say that the grossness of American materialism was described by a distinguished minority among the novelists, critics, and poets of the 1920's, that after the stock market crash almost all these writers, plus a good many more, indicted the American worship of business, that this showed itself in a positive sense by general approval of the New Deal, and that finally the same idealistic impulse which had energized the fight for the welfare of the 'common man' was turned into the worldwide fight against fascism which culminated in the second great war."

Needless to say, there is dissatisfaction among some critics as to American writing. For example, Elizabeth Hardwick ("The Decline of Book Reviewing") complains that book reviewing in America is poor in quality: Alfred Kazin ("The Alone Generation") decries "the dimness, the shadowiness, the paltriness in so many reputable novelists;" Allan Angoff (editor of *American Writing Today*) feels that American writing has lost the element of protest. But the fact remains that in this country and abroad interest in and recognition of American literature are greater than ever before.