American Literature
1914–1945

THE TWO WARS AS HISTORICAL MARKERS

The conflict known as World War I broke out in Europe in 1914, with Great Britain and France fighting against Germany. The United States that holistic entered the war in 1917, on the side of Britain and France, was still in the main a nation of farmers and small towns. Although several waves of immigration from southern and eastern Europe had altered the makeup of the population, and about one American in ten was of African descent, the majority of Americans were of English or German ancestry. This majority was deeply distrustful of international politics, and after the war ended, many Americans attempted to steer the nation back to prewar modes of life. In 1924 Congress enacted the first exclusionary immigration act in the nation's history, hoping thereby to control the ethnic makeup of the American population (and the proportion of Americans born outside the United States did decline markedly from 1910 to 1940). The immediate postwar years also saw the so-called Red scare, when labor union headquarters were raided and immigrant radicals deported by a government fearful of the influence of the newly Communist Soviet Union (formerly tsarist Russia).

For other Americans, however, the war helped accelerate long-sought changes in the forms of political and social life. The long struggle to win American women the vote—even a final push by women's work as nurses and ambulance drivers during the war—ended in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, successfully argued during World War I for the commissioning of black officers in the U.S. armed forces, so they would after World War II, African Americans who fought abroad returned to fight for their rights at home. Despite the government's restrictions on leftist political activity, many Americans—among them writers and intellectuals as well as labor activists and urban immigrants—looked to the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement for a model in combating inequality and fostering workers' rights in the United States. Other Americans went abroad, for shorter or longer stretches of time, in order to taste the expatriate life (made cheaper in war-ravaged economies by the solid American dollar) in Europe's battered but still vibrant cities and countryside. Some Americans traveled physical and social distances almost as great within the boundaries of the United States, as African Americans began to migrate in large numbers out of the segregated South and young people everywhere increasingly attended college away from home and moved
to the times. African Americans, estranged urban women, and the restless young faced off against rural and urban traditionalists over the question of who, exactly, was truly "American."

Thus the 1920s saw numerous conflicts over the shape of the future, which acquired new urgency when the stock market crashed in 1929 and led to an economic depression with a 25 percent unemployment rate. Known as the Great Depression, this period of economic hardship did not fully end until the United States entered World War II, which happened after the Japanese attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Because Japan and Germany were allies, Germany declared war on the United States, thus involving the country in another European conflict. The war unified the country ideologically, revitalized industry, which devoted itself to goods needed for the war effort, and created jobs for young men. Indeed, so many men away at war, women went into the work force in unprecedented numbers. Germany surrendered in the spring of 1945. The war ended in August 1945 following the dropping of two atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Europe was in ruins and—regardless of the wishes of its citizens—the United States had become both an industrial society and a major global power.

The two wars, then, bracket a period during which, no matter how internally fractured it was, the United States became a modern nation. In fact, the internal fractures can be understood as diverse responses to the irreversible advent of modernity. American literature in these decades registers all sides of the era's struggles and debates, while striving for a commitment to explore the many meanings of modernity and express them in forms appropriate to a modern vision. Some writers rejected while others lamented; some anticipated future utopias and others believed that civilization had collapsed; but the period's most influential voices believed that old forms would not work for new times, and were inspired by the possibility of creating something entirely new.

The totality of the literary output produced during this period is called American literary modernism. Among literary conflicts, perhaps three issues stand out, all of them related to the accelerating transformations and conflicts of modernity. One conflict centered on the uses of literary tradition. To some, a work registering awareness and appreciation of literary history—through allusion to other literary works, or by using traditional poetic forms and poetic language—was an imitative and old-fashioned. To others, a work failing to register such awareness and appreciation was bad or incompetent writing. For still others, literary history was best appreciated postmodernistically, made to yield a sense of the previous literature ironically, or deliberately fracture traditional literary formulas. A related conflict involved the place of popular culture in serious literature. Throughout the era, popular culture gained momentum and influence. Some writers regarded it as crucial for the future of literature that popular forms be embraced; others, good literature by definition had to reject the cynical commercialism of popular culture. Another issue was the question of how engaged in political and social struggle a work of literature should be—of how far literature should exert itself for (or against) social transformation. Should art be a domain unto itself, exploring universal questions and enunciating transcendent truths, or should art participate in the politics of the times? For some, a work that was political in aim counted as propaganda, not art; others thought that apolitical literature was evasive and simplistic; for still others, the key to keeping at arm's length of politics was coverage in political, in conservative directions, even if it did not acknowledge itself as such.

CHANGING TIMES

The transformations of the first half of the twentieth century were driven both by ideas and by changes in the economic and technological underpinnings of daily life. Much social energy in the 1920s went into enlarging the boundaries for acceptable self-expression. Adherents to small-town, white, Protestant values such as the work ethic, social conformity, duty, and respectability, clashed ideologically not only with internationally minded radicals but also with newly affluent young people who argued for more diverse, permissive, and tolerant styles of life. To some extent this debate recapitulated the long-time American conflict between the individual and society, a conflict going back to the seventeenth-century Puritans and epitomized in Ralph Waldo Emerson's call in the 1840s: "Whoever would be a man, must be a non-conformist."

The 1920s saw significant changes in sexual mores, as was to be expected when young people were no longer under the watchful eyes of their small-town elders. These changes found their most influential theorist in the Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), inventor of the practice of psychoanalysis. According to Freud, many modern neuroses could be traced to repression and inhibition. Freud developed the idea of the self as grounded in an "unconscious," where forbidden desires, traumas, unacceptable emotions, and the like—most of these sexual in nature—were stored. Freud hoped that trained analysts could help people become aware of their repressed feelings, so that they would be able to control them productively. The American version of psychoanalysis—more utopian than Freud's cautious claim that individuals could learn to cope with their own personalities more effectively—held that emotional wholeness could be attained at once if people recognized and overcame their inhibitions. Americanized Freudian ideas provided the psychological underpinning for much literature of the interwar era, whether the focus was the individual trapped in a repressive culture or the repressive culture itself.

The middle-class double sexual standard had, in fact, always granted considerable sexual freedom to men; now, however, women—franchised and liberated by automobiles and job opportunities away from home—begged to demand "similar freedom for themselves." Women's demands went well beyond the avocational, however, encompassing education, professional work, mobility, and whatever else seemed like social goods hitherto reserved for men. Female dress changed; long, heavy, restricting garments gave way to short, lightweight, easily worn store-bought clothing. The combination of expanding urban life with new psychologies oriented to self-expression also brought into being new social possibilities for women and men whose sexual desires did not conform to traditional patterns. Freud was only one of a number of thinkers in the period who sought an answer of toleration for sexual minority...
ties, especially homosexuals—a term that entered specialized English usage in the 1890s and came into wider circulation in the years following World War I. Although the legal risks and social stigma born by homosexuals remained very much in force, gay enclaves became more visible in American life and gay lives became more imaginable as a theme in American literature.

African Americans, who had been colonized, became models in these years as never before around 1915, as a direct result of the industrial needs of World War I, opportunities opened for African Americans in the factories of the North, and the so-called Great Migration out of the South began. Not only did migration give the lie to southern white claims that African Americans were content with southern segregationist practices, it damaged the South's economy by draining off an important segment of its working people. Even though African Americans faced racism, segregation, and racial violence in the North, a black American presence soon became proudly visible in American cultural life. Harlem, a section of New York City, attained an almost wholly black population of over 150,000 by the mid-1920s; from this "city within a city," African Americans wrote, performed, composed, and painted. Here as well they founded two major journals of opinion and culture, The Crisis (in 1910) and Opportunity (in 1923). This work influenced writers, painters, and musicians of other ethnicities, and became known collectively as the Harlem Renaissance.

The famous black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois had argued in The Souls of Black Folk (1903) that African Americans had a kind of double-consciousness—of themselves as Americans and as blacks. This doublessness contributed to debates within African American cultural life. The Harlem Renaissance sparked arguments between those who wanted to claim membership in the culture at large and those who wanted to stake out a separate artistic domain; between those who wanted to celebrate rural African American lifeways and those committed to urban intellectuality; between those who wanted to join the African mainstream and those who, disgusted by American race prejudice, aligned themselves with worldwide revolutionary movements; between those who celebrated a "primitive" African heritage and those who rejected the idea as a degrading stereotype. African American women, as Nella Larsen's novel Quicksand testifies, could experience these divisions with special force. Women were very much called upon in efforts to "uplift," advance, and educate the black community, but these communal obligations could feel as constraints upon individual freedom and exploration; meanwhile the white social world, given to excusing and expressing black women, offered few alternatives.

Class inequality, as well as American racial divisions, continued to generate intellectual and artistic debate in the interwar years. The nineteenth-century United States had been host to many radical movements—labor activism, utopianism, socialism, anarchism—inspired by diverse sources. In the twentieth century, especially following the rise of the Soviet Union, the American left increasingly drew its intellectual and political program from the Marxist tradition. The German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) located the roots of human behavior in economics. He claimed that industrializing societies were structurally divided into two antagonistic classes based on different relations to the means of production—capital versus labor. The Industrial Revolution arose from the accumulation of surplus capital by industrialists paying the least possible amount to workers; the next stage in world history would be when workers took control of the means of production for themselves. Because, to Marx, the ideas and ideals of any particular society could represent the interests of only its dominant class, he detested individualism as a middle-class or "bourgeois" value that could only discourage worker solidarity.

Marx's ideas formed the basis for communist political parties across Europe. In 1917, a Communist revolution in Russia led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924) overthrew the tsarist regime, instituted the "dictatorship of the proletariat" that Marx had called for, and engineered the development of Communism as a unified international movement. Americans who thought of themselves as Marxists in the 1920s and 1930s were usually connected with the Communist party and subjected to government surveillance and occasional violence, as were socialists, anarchists, union organizers, and others who opposed American free enterprise and marketplace competition. Although politics directed from outside the national boundaries was, almost by definition, "un-American," many adherents of these movements hoped to make the United States conform to its stated ideals, guaranteeing liberty and justice for all.

Where writers were concerned, a defining conflict between American ideals and American realities in the 1920s was the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were Italian immigrants, not Communists but avowed anarchists; on April 15, 1920 they were arrested near Boston after a murder during a robbery. They were accused of that crime, then tried and condemned to death in 1921, but it was widely believed that they had not received a fair trial and that their political beliefs had been held against them. After a number of appeals, they were executed in 1927, maintaining their innocence to the end. John Dos Passos and Katherine Anne Porter were among the many writers and intellectuals who demonstrated in their defense; several were arrested and jailed. It is estimated that well over a hundred poems (including works by William Carlos Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Carl Sandburg) along with six plays and eight novels of the time created the incident from a sympathetic perspective.
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Technology played a vital, although often invisible, role in all these events. As the amount of space and time that we could control increased, our capacity to shape the world around us expanded. This expansion was not just a matter of building factories and mining ore, but also of shaping culture and ideas. Electricity, for example, not only powered factories and appliances, along with the telephone—nineteenth-century inventions—by late in the twentieth century it was used to light up cities, cook food, and even to power cars. The combination of these technologies allowed for a more connected world, where information could be shared instantly across great distances. This led to a greater understanding of the world and its complexities, which in turn led to new technologies and innovations.

The most powerful technological innovation, however, encouraged activity not passivity: the automobile, which had been developed by the end of the nineteenth century, but remained a luxury item until Henry Ford's assembly-line techniques made cars affordable. Automobiles put America on the road, dramatically reshaped the structure of American industry and occupation, and altered the national topography as well. Along with work in automobile factories themselves, millions of other jobs—in steel mills, factories, highway construction and maintenance, gas stations, machine shops, roadside restaurants, motels—depended on the industry. The road itself became—and has remained—a key powerful symbol of the United States and of modernity as well. Cities grew, suburbs came into being, small towns died, new towns arose, according to the placement of highways. The United States had become a nation of migrants as much as or more than it was a nation of immigrants.

It is impossible fully to dissociate technology from science, and certainly one of the most important developments in the interwar period was the growth of modern "big" science. At the turn of the century and soon after, scientists discovered that the atom was not the smallest possible unit of matter, that matter was not indestructible, that both time and space were relative to an observer's position, that some phenomena were so small that attempts at measurement would alter them, that some outcomes could be predicted only in terms of statistical probability, that the universe must be infinite in size and yet infinitely expanding; in short, much of the common-sense basis of nineteenth-century science had to be put aside in favor of far more powerful but also far less commensurable theories. Among many results, scientists and literary intellectuals became less and less able to communicate with each other and less respectful of each other's worldviews. Scientists saw literary people as careless thinkers; literary people, especially those more conversant among themselves, deplored the loss of authority for traditional, humanistic explanations of the real, concrete, experienced world and the felt human life. Poets like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams reacted spiritually to the increasingly prevalent assumption that non-scientific thinking, because it was impractical and value laden, could not explain anything. They questioned the capacity of science to provide accounts of the things that matter, that subjective experience and moral issues. Art, to them, became the repository of a way of experiencing the world other than that offered by science. Their approach put a heavy burden of "meaning" on art and was a sign, if not a contributing cause, of the increased specialization of intellectual activity and the division of educated people into what the British novelist and physicist C. P. Snow was later to call the "two cultures"—science versus letters.

THE 1930s

The Great Depression was a worldwide phenomenon, and social unrest led to the rise of fascist dictatures in Europe, among which were those of Generalissimo Francisco Franco in Spain, Benito Mussolini in Italy, and Adolf Hitler in Germany. Hitler's program, which was to make Germany rich and strong by conquering the rest of Europe, led inexorably to World War II. In the United States, the Depression made politics and economics the talisman issues and overlooked questions of individual freedom with questions of mass collapse. Free-enterprise capitalism had always justified itself by arguing that although the system made a small number of individuals immensely wealthy it also guaranteed better lives for all. This assurance now rang hollow. The suicides of millionaire bankers and stockbrokers made the headlines, but more compelling was the enormous toll among ordinary people who lost homes, jobs, farms, and life savings in the stock market crash. Conservatives advised waiting until things got better; radicals exposed immediate social revolution. In this atmosphere, the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932 was a victory for American pragmatism; his series of liberal reforms—social security, acts creating jobs in the public sector, welfare, and unemployment insurance—cushioned the worst effects of the Depression and avoided the civil war that many had thought inevitable.

The terrible situation in the United States produced a significant increase in Communist party membership and prestige in the 1930s. Numerous intellectuals allied themselves with its causes, even if they did not become party members. An old radical journalist, The Masses, later The New Masses, became the official literary voice of the party, and various other radical groups founded journals to represent their viewpoints. Visitors to the Soviet Union returned with glowing reports about a true workers' democracy and prosperity for all. The appeal of Communism was significantly enhanced by its claim to be an opponent of fascism. Communists fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 and 1937. Hitler's nightmare policies of genocide and racial superiority and his plans for a general European war to secure more room for the superior German "folk" to live became increasingly evident as European refugees began to flee to the United States. In the 1930s, and many believed that the USSR would be the only country able to withstand the German war machine. But Soviet Communists showed another side to Americans when American Communists were ordered to break up the meetings of other radical groups; when Josef Stalin, the Soviet dictator, instituted a series of brutal purges in the Soviet Union beginning in 1936; and when in
1939 he resigned a pact promising not to go to war against Germany. The disillusionment and betrayal felt by many radicals over these acts led to many 1930s left-wing activists becoming staunch anti-Communists after World War II.

AMERICAN VERSIONS OF MODERNISM

Used in the broadest sense, "modernism" is a catchall term for any kind of literary production in the interwar period that deals with the modern world. More narrowly, it refers to work that represents the transformations of traditional society under the pressures of modernity, and that breaks down traditional literary forms in doing so. Much modernist literature of this sort, which critics increasingly came to see as "high modernism," is in a sense antimodern: it interprets modernity as an experience of loss. As its title underlines, T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land—the great poem of high modernism—represents the modern world as a scene of ruin.

Modernism began as a European response to the effects of World War I, which was far more devastating on the Continent than they were in the United States. It took other art forms—sculpture, painting, dance—as well as literature. The poetry of William Butler Yeats; James Joyce's Ulysses (1922); Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past (1913-27); Thomas Man's novels and one-story novel, The Magic Mountain (1924)—these were only a few of the literary products of this movement in England and on the Continent. In painting, artists like Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, and Georges Braque invented cubism; in the 1920s the surrealist movement, known as dadaism emerged. The American public was introduced to modern art at the famous New York Armory Show of 1913, which featured cubist paintings and caused an uproar. Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase, which, to the untrained eye, looked no more than a mass of crudely drawn rectangles, was especially provocative. Composers like Igor Stravinsky similarly produced music in a "modern" mode, featuring dissonance and dis-continuity rather than neat formal structure and appealing tonal harmonies.

His Composition The Rite of Spring provoked a riot in the Paris concert hall where it was premiered.

At the heart of the high modernist aesthetic is the conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had been destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or, at best, arbitrary and fragile human constructions. Order, sequence, and unity in works of art might well express human desires for coherence rather than reliable intuitions of reality. Generalization, abstraction, and high-brow modernism might conceal rather than convey the real. The form of a story, with its beginnings, complications, and resolutions, might be an artifact imposed on the flux and fragmentation of experience. To the extent that art incorporated such a false order, it had to be renounced.

Thus a key formal characteristic of high modernist works, whether in painting, sculpture, or musical composition, is its construction out of fragments—fragments of memory or history, fragments of experience or perception, fragments of previous artistic work. Compared with earlier writing, modernist literature is notable for what it omits: the explanations, interpretations, connections, summaries, and distancing that provide continuity, perspective, and security in traditional literature. A typical modernist work may seem to begin arbitrarily, to advance without explanation, and to end without resolution, consisting of vivid segments juxtaposed without cushioning or integrating transitions. There will be shifts in perspective, voice, and tone. Its rhetoric will be understated, ironic. It will suggest rather than assert, making use of symbols and images instead of statements. Its elements will be drawn from diverse areas of experience. The effect will be surprising, shocking, and unsettling: the experience of reading will be challenging and difficult. Faced with the task of intuiting connections left unmarked, the reader of a modernist work is often asked to participate in the actual work of making the poem or story.

Some high modernist works, however, order their discontinuous elements into conspicuous larger patterns, patterns often drawn from world literature, mythologies, and religions. As its title advertises, Joyce's Ulysses maps the lives of its modern characters onto Homer's Odyssey; Eliot's The Waste Land borrows the Christian narrative of death and resurrection over a broad range of quest myths. The question for readers lies in the meaning of these borrowed structures and mythic parallels: do they reveal profound similarities or ironic contrasts between the modern world and earlier times? For some writers and readers, the adaptability of ancient stories to modern circumstances is validated by their deep truth, underlying the surface buzz and confusion of modernity; for others, such parallels indicated Christianity to be only a myth, a merely human construction for creating order out of chaos and finding purpose in, history's flux.

If meaning is a human construction, then meaning lies in the process of generating meaning; if meaning lies obscured deep under the ruins of modern life, then it must be effortfully sought out. Modernist literature therefore tends to foreground the search for meaning over didactic statement, and the subject matter of modernist writing often became, by extension, the poem or literary work itself. While there have long been paintings about painting and poems about poetry, high modernist writing was especially self-reflexive, concerned with its own nature as art and with its questioning of previous traditions of literature. Ironically—because this subject matter was motivated by deep concern about the interrelation of literature and life—this subject often had the effect of limiting the audience for a modernist work, high modernism demanded of its ideal readers an encyclopedic knowledge of the traditions it fragmented or ironized. Nevertheless, over time, the principles of modernist became increasingly influential.

Though modernist techniques were initiated by poets, they transformed fiction in this period as well. Prose writers strove for directness, compression, and vividness. They were sparing of words. The average novel became quite a bit shorter than it had been in the nineteenth century, as a novel was supposed to fill two or even three volumes. The modernist aesthetic gave a new significance to the short story, which had previously been thought of as a relatively slight artistic form. (Poems, too, became shorter, as narrative poems lost ground to lyrics and the repetitive patterns of rhyme and meter that helped sustain long poems in previous centuries lost ground to free verse.) Victorian or realistic fiction achieved its effects by accumulation and saturation; modern fiction preferred suggestion. Victorian fiction often fes-
tured an authoritative narrative; modern fiction tended to be written in the first person or to limit the reader to one character's point of view on the action. This limitation accorded with the modernist sense that "truth" does not exist objectively but is the product of the mind's interaction with life. The selected point of view is often that of a naive or marginal person—a child or an outsider—to convey better the reality of confusion rather than the myth of certainty.

The contents of modernist works may be as varied as the interests and observations of their authors; indeed, with a stable external world in question, subjectivity was even more valued and accepted in literature. Modernism, in general, however, emphasized the conscious sensory image or detail over abstract statement. Allusions to literary, historical, philosophical, or religious details of the past often leap company, in modernist works, with significant contemporary life, chunks of popular culture, dream imagery, and symbolism drawn from the author's private repertory of life experiences. A work built from these various levels and kinds of material may move across the space, shift from the public to the personal, and open literature as a field for every sort of concern. The inclusion of all sorts of material previously deemed "unliterary" in works of high seriousness involved the use of language and might previously have been thought improper, including representations of the speech of the uneducated and the inarticulate, the colloquial, slang, and the popular. Traditional realistic fiction had incorporated colloquial and dialect speech, often to comic effect, in its representation of the broad tapestry of social life; but such speakers were usually framed by a narrator's educated literary voice, conveying truth and culture. In modernist writing, William Faulkner's "I Lay Dying," these voices assume the full burden of the narrative's authority; this is what Ernest Hemingway had in mind when he asserted that the American literary tradition began with Huck and the LCS.

"Serious" literature between the two world wars thus found itself in a curious relationship with the culture at large. If it was attacking the old-style idea of traditional literature, it felt itself attacked in turn by the ever-growing industry of popular literature. The reading audience in America was vast, but it preferred a kind of book quite different from that turned out by literary high modernists; tales of romance or adventure, historical novels, crime fiction, and westerns enjoyed a success the serious writer could only dream of. The problem was that often he or she did dream of it; unrealistically, perhaps, the Ezra Pounds of the era imagined themselves with an audience of readers, this dream came true—almost as did for F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway—writers often accused themselves of having sold out.

Nevertheless, serious writers in these years were, in fact, being published and read as writers had not been in earlier times. The number of so-called little magazines—that is, magazines of very small circulations devoted to the publication of works for a small audience (sometimes the works of a specific group of authors)—was in the double figures. Poetry: A Magazine of Verse began in 1912. The Little Review followed in 1914. Then came the Seven Arts in 1916, the Dial in 1917, the Frontier in 1920, and the Broom and in 1922, This Quarter in 1925, Transition and Hound and Horn in 1927, and many more. The culture that did not listen to serious writers or make them rich still gave them plenty of opportunity to be read and allowed them (in such neighborhoods as Greenwich Village in New York City) a freedom in lifestyle that was quite new in American history. In addition, such major publishers as New Directions, Random House, Scribner, and Harper were actively looking for serious fiction and poetry to feature alongside best-sellers like Grouse and Anthony Adverse.

Some writers in the period were able to use these opportunities to cross over the hierarchies separating high modernism from middlebrow and popular culture—and they crossed them in both directions. Kay Boyle's early short stories and poems appeared in little magazines like Broom and Transition in the 1920s; in the 1930s, however, as she began writing the rise of fascism in Europe, she found a receptive larger audience in the New Yorker and Harper's Magazine. Raymond Chandler began his career in the early 1930s writing crime fiction for cheap popular magazines, moved into authoring film scripts and full-length novels issued by mainstream publishers, and by the 1950s had earned enough respectability to be interviewed about his artistic principles in Harper's. Where writers like William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald experienced Hollywood as a graveyard of serious literary ambition, Chandler found in the film industry not only financial rewards but also a powerful new medium for his distinctive popular modernism—a modernism as elliptical and innovative, in its own terms, as Hemingway's.

MODERNISM ABROAD AND ON NATIVE GROUNDS

The profession of authorship in the United States has always defined itself in part as a patriotic enterprise, whose aims were to help develop a cultural life for the nation and embody national values. High modernism, however, was a self-consciously international movement, and the leading American exponents of high modernism tended to be permanent expatriates like Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, H. D., and T. S. Eliot. These writers left the United States because they found the country lacking in a tradition of high culture and refinement, if not downright hostile, to artistic achievement. They also believed that a national culture could never be more than parochial. In London in the first two decades of the twentieth century and in Paris during the 1920s, they found a vibrant community of dedicated artists and a society that respected them and allowed them a great deal of personal freedom. Yet they seldom thought of themselves as deserting their nation and only Eliot gave up American citizenship (sometimes, too, the traffic went in the other direction, as when the British-born poet Mina Loy became an American citizen). They thought of themselves as bringing the United States into the larger context of European culture. The roles of these permanent expatriates were swelled by American writers who lived abroad for some part of the period: Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Claude McKay, Katherine Anne Porter, Nella Larsen, Robert Frost, Kay Boyle, and Eugene O'Neill all did so, as did many others including Sinclair Lewis and Djuna Barnes.

These writers who came back, however, and those who never left took very seriously the task of integrating modernist ideas and methods with American subject matter. Not every experimental modernist writer disconnected literary ambitions from national belonging: Hart Crane and Marianne Moore and
William Carlos Williams, for example, all wanted to write "American" works as such. Some writers—as the title of John Dos Passos's U.S.A. clearly shows—attempted to speak for the nation as a whole. Crane's long poem The Bridge and William's Paterson both take an American city as symbol and expand it to a vision for all America, following the model established by Walt Whitman. F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is similarly ambitious, and many writers addressed the whole nation in individual works—for example, E. E. Cummings's "next to all god and America" and Claude McKay's "America." And a profoundly modern writer like William Faulkner cannot be extracted from his commitment to writing about his native South.

Like Faulkner, many writers of the period chose to identify themselves with the American scene and to root their work in a specific region, continuing a tradition of regional American writing that burgeoned in the years following the American Civil War. Their perspective on the regions was sometimes celebratory and sometimes critical. Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, and Willa Cather worked with the Midwest; Cather grounded her stories in the Midwest; Black Elk's Lakota autobiography recalled the high plains of South Dakota and Wyoming; John Steinbeck and Carlos Bulosan wrote about California; Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost in the New England. An especially strong center of regional literary activity emerged in the South, which had a weak literary tradition up to the Civil War. Thomas Wolfe's was an Appalachian South of here that Katherine Anne Porter wrote about her native Texas as a heterogeneous combination of frontier, plantation, and Latin cultures. Zora Neale Hurston drew on her childhood memories of the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, for much of her best-known fiction, including her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. William Faulkner depicted a South at once specific to his native state of Mississippi and expanded into a mythic region agnished by racial and historical conflicts. As the pairing of Hurston and Faulkner suggests, the history of race in the United States was central to the specifically national subject matter to which many American modernists remained committed. Although race as a subject potentially implicated all American writers, it was African Americans whose contributions most significantly differentiated American modernism from that of Europe. The numerous writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance made it impossible ever to think of a national literature without the work of black Americans. Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston attained particular prominence at the time; but others, including Claude McKay and Nella Larsen, were also well known. All were influenced by the values of modernism: both Hughes, for example, with his incorporation of blues rhythms into his poetry, and Hurston, with her poetic depictions of folk culture, applied modernist techniques to represent twentieth-century African American lives. From time to time, writers associated with the Renaissance wrote plays—Hughes, in particular, wrote a number of powerful anti-racism and anticapitalist poems; but in general the movement was deliberately upbeat, taking the line that racial justice was about to become reality in the United States or, like Hurston, focusing more on the vitality of black culture than on the burdens of racism. As part of this approach was strategic—the bulk of the readership for Harlem authors was white. The note of pure anger was not expressed until Richard Wright,

who had come to literary maturity in Chicago, published Native Son in 1940. Contributions to the Harlem Renaissance came from artists in many media; an influence equal to or greater than that of the writers came from musicians. Jazz and blues, African American in origin, are felt by many to be the most authentically American art forms the nation has ever produced. African American singers and musicians in this period achieved worldwide reputations and were often much more highly regarded abroad than in the United States.

American literary women had been active on the national scene from Anne Bradstreet forward. Their increasing prominence in the nineteenth century generated a backlash from some male modernists, who asserted their own artistic seriousness by identifying women writers with the didactic, popular writing against which they rebelled. But women refused to stay on the sidelines and associated themselves with all the important literary trends of the era: H. D. and Amy Lowell with imagism, Marianne Moore and Mina Loy with modernism; Willa Cather with mystic regionalism, Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen with the Harlem Renaissance; Katherine Anne Porter with psychological fiction; Edna St. Vincent Millay and Kay Boyle with social and sexual liberation. Many of these writers concentrated on depictions of women characters or women's thoughts and experiences, yet few labeled themselves feminists. The passage of the suffrage amendment in 1920 had taken some of the excess out of feminism that would not return until the 1960s. Some women writers found social causes like labor and racism more important than women's rights; others focused their energies on struggles less amenable to public, legal remedies, as when Mina Loy sought to link motherhood to an energetic vision of female sexuality. Nevertheless, these literary women were clearly pushing back the boundaries of the possible, demanding new cultural freedom for women. Equally important, they were operating as public figures and taking positions on public causes.

DRAMA

Drama in America was slow to develop as a self-conscious literary form. It was not until 1920 (the year of Eugene O'Neill's Beyond the Horizon) that the United States produced a world-class playwright. This is not to say that theater—productions and performances—was new to American life. After the American Revolution theaters—at first with itinerant English actors and companies, then with America—opened throughout the East; among early centers were Boston and Philadelphia as well as New York City. As the country expanded westward, so did its theater, together with other kinds of performance: burlesques, showboats on the Mississippi, minstrel shows, pantomimes. As the nineteenth century went on, the activity became centered more and more in New York—indeed, within a few blocks, known as Broadway. Managers originated plays there and then sent them out to tour through the rest of the country, as Eugene O'Neill's father did with his Count of Monte Cristo.

Changes in American theater are often in reaction against Broadway, a pattern observable as early as 1915 with the formation of the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players (organized by Susan Glaspell and oth-
ers), both located in New York's Greenwich Village and both dedicated to the production of plays that more conservative managers refused. The Provincetown Players would shortly be producing the first works of Glassell and Eugene O'Neill. These fledgling companies, and others like them, often knew better what they opposed than they wanted. European influence was strong. By 1918, Henrik Ibsen in Europe and George Bernard Shaw in England had shown that the theater could be an arena for serious ideas; while the psychological dramas of August Strindberg, the symbolic work of Maurice Maeterlinck, and the sophisticated criticism of Arthur Schopenhauer provided other models. The American town of Provincetown, connected in particular to the Moscow Art Theater in 1923, further exposed Americans to the theatrical avant-garde. American playwrights in the 1920s and 1930s were not united so much by a common cause of ideas, European or American, as by the new assumption that drama should be a branch of contemporary literature.

Just as his contemporaries in poetry and fiction were changing and questioning their forms, so Eugene O'Neill sought to refine his. He experimented less in language than in dramatic structure and in its new production methods available through technology (e.g., lighting) or borrowed from the stylized realism of German expressionism. Almost as famous as the time was Maxwell Anderson's, whose best plays—the tragic Winterset (1935) and the romantic comedy High Tor (1937)—embodied a stylized blank verse, a language attempted by few modern playwrights. Playwrights such as Sidney Howard, Lillian Hellman, and Robert Sherwood wrote serious realistic plays. George Kaufman and his many collaborators, especially Moss Hart, invented a distinctively American form, the wisecracking domestic and social comedy, while S. N. Behrman and Philip Barry wrote comedy of ideas. The musical comedy was another distinctively American invention; beginning as an amalgam of jokes, song, and dances, it progressed steadily toward an integration of its various elements, reaching new heights with the work of George and Ira Gershwin in the 1920s and 1930s and of Oscar Hammerstein in collaboration with Jerome Kern or Richard Rodgers from the 1920s on into the 1950s.

Social commentary and satire had been a thread in the bright play of American drama since the early 1920s, beginning, perhaps, with Elmer Rice's fiercely expressionistic play about a rebellious nonentity, The Adding Machine (1923). During the Depression social criticism became a much more important dramatic theme, with political plays performed by many radical groups. Perhaps the most significant was Clifford Odets's Waiting for Lefty (1935) which dramatized a taxi-drivers' strike meeting and turned the stage into a platform for argument. Many poets and fiction writers of the interwar period wrote plays—among them Ernest Hemingway, E. F. Cummings, Willa Cather, Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Langston Hughes, T. S. Eliot, John Steinbeck, and Robert Lowell. It was in this period that drama moved decisively into the American literary mainstream.
1931 E. E. Cummings, "Newsong of Oldglad and Big" • F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Dulles Revived"

1932 Black Elk and John G. Neihardt
Black Elk Speaks • Stella A. Brown, "He Was a Man"

1934 William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say"
1935 Kay Boyle, "The White Horse of Vermont"

1936 Ernest Hemingway, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro"

1937 Thomas Wolfe, "The Last Boy"

1939 Richard Wright, "The Man Who Won Almost a Man"

1940 Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night

1941 Japan invades Pearl Harbor, Hawaii • United States enters war against Japan and its allies, Germany and Italy
1942 President Roosevelt creates internment of Japanese Americans in camps
1944 D-Day, Allied invasion of Normandy
1945 German forces surrender in spring; Japan surrenders in August following escalation of two nuclear bombs over Japanese cities

1931 Scottsboro trial
1932 Francis DeLancey Rooks's "New Deal" introduction social security, welfare, and unemployment insurance
1933 Adolf Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) party comes to power in Germany • 11th Amendment repealed
1934 Whelen Howard (Indian Reorganization Act) passed, ending Dawes era
1936 Hitler begins armed occupation of Europe
1936–39 Spanish Civil War: U.S. volunteers among those fighting against General Francisco Franco, who becomes dictator of Spain
1937 Stalin's purges
1939–45 World War II • the Holocaust

BLACK ELK
1863–1950

JOHN G. NEIHARDT
1881–1973

Nicholas Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota, was born on the Little Powder River in Wyoming. Although every traditionally raised Lakota male engaged in a vision quest—sometimes, literally, "crying for a vision"—a search for spiritual guidance in his life, Black Elk was granted a particularly powerful vision by the Thunder beings (Wakinyan), the powers of the west, at the early age of nine. He said nothing of this until he was seventeen, when he began to fear that continued silence might lead to his being struck by lightning—a particular danger for the Thunder Dreamer. It was most unusual for the Thunder Dreamer to perform the beshooya ceremony and become a "sacred clown," one who, for a time, did things worldwide and foolishly. But Black Elk was advised to have the horse dance enacted instead. Once this had been done, Black Elk began to practice as a shamanic healer.

Some years earlier, in 1876, although he was too young to fight, Black Elk had witnessed the defeat of General George Custer and his Seventh Cavalry on the Little Bighorn River by the Lakota and their Cheyenne allies, an event that did not, however, slow the encroachment of the whites onto Indian lands. Black Elk joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in 1886, traveling to New York's Madison Square Garden and then to England where the show performed for the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign. By that time, Black Elk had become an Episcopalian, forgetting in that the Wild West Show required all its Native American employees to be Christians. Black Elk returned home in time to encounter the Ghost Dance movement at Pine Ridge. Skeptical at first, he eventually came to understand the Ghost Dance to be consistent both with his own great vision and with Christian teaching. The massacre of Big Foot's Miniconjou band at Wounded Knee Creek in December 1890 put a tragic end to the hopes of the Ghost Dancers and, as well, to any hopes Black Elk might have had that his vision could restore the sacred hoop of his people and help them to live in a manner consistent with traditional ways. Black Elk was baptized a Catholic at Holy Rosary Mission on December 6, 1904, the feast of St. Nicholas, at which time he took that saint's name. He never engaged in traditional healing practices again.

In August 1930, John G. Neihardt, poet laureate of Nebraska, on a trip to research material for the final volume of his epic poem, A Cycle of the West, drove up to Black Elk's cabin outside of Manderson, South Dakota. With Neihardt were his son, Sigurd, and a man named Emil Aka of Hawk who had agreed to act as Neihardt's interpreter (Black Elk spoke little English). From all accounts, the two men responded strongly to each other. Neihardt told Black Elk that he was a writer of epic poetry, which, in Lakota, translated roughly to beshooya, or "vision telling." As Raymond DeMallie has put it, "Neihardt perceived Black Elk's religion in terms of art; Black Elk perceived Neihardt's art in terms of religion." Although Black Elk was then a Catholic catechist, he had not forgotten the promise of the great vision that had been granted to him. In Neihardt, he believed he had found one who could make that vision known to the world.

In May 1931, Neihardt again visited Black Elk; with him now were his two daughters, Hilda and Emid, the latter an accomplished stenographer. The two men began work at daybreak on May 10. Serving as interpreter this time was Black Elk's son, Ben, who had studied for a time at the Carlisle Indian School. As was the custom when any warrior gave his "hill talk"—"cout talks," accounts of brave deeds in war—contemporaries of Black Elk (the elders Fire Thunder, Standing Bear, Chase in the Morning, and Holy Black Tail Deer) were present to listen and to comment on his narration. Black Elk told the story of his life in Lakota; Ben translated roughly into English; Neihardt repeated Ben's words in standard English; and Emid wrote it all down as best she could.