necessarily carried on within the context of American literary history with its tradition of autobiographies and self-criticisms, it might lead to a closer understanding of a specific use of narrative within one particular culture. But whether in this way or in other ways, our criticism must find something more substantial than mist-ridden metaphysics to be responsible to if it would be taken seriously and if it is to be in a position to assign credible value-judgments.

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I MUST CONFESS to initial puzzlement upon receiving this assignment from the book review editor of this journal, because the books deal with different periods. The era with which French is concerned is that which came to a close with the outbreak of the Second World War. Quentin Anderson's foreword to Mr. Berthoff's book, however, suggested a reason for the comparison. "To read it," says Anderson, "is to renew one's faith in literary history as a genre" (viii). He goes on to say that had the book been written within the confines of a specialized school of criticism, Berthoff would have been unable "to come to such a clear and disposing account of the meaning of 'realism' for its practitioners . . ." (viii). If this seems to imply an hostility to the New Criticism, to myth criticism, to Freudian criticism and so forth, the truth is, that while Mr. Berthoff's tone is like that of the old school of literary scholars, he has, in fact, learned a great deal from each of these more recent schools. Like the best of the older scholars, Berthoff writes very well; like the critics, he likes to look directly at the text, and to make evaluations. Unfortunately, like the Old Scholars, he also feels obliged to make pronouncements about the nature of art, in which he is sometimes contradictory. A single example serves to suggest of the danger in such pronouncements. For Howells, Berthoff insists on formal aesthetic criteria, and finds his subject wanting, whereas when he discusses Mark Twain, he claims the art can just pop out of the work of an entertainer.*

* "Howells," he writes, "conceived of the novel as a segment of actuality extracted from life . . . whereas it is in fact a form imposed upon life . . ." (p. 56). In imposing such abstract criteria on Howells, Berthoff masks the novelist's real strength. He objects to Howells' "petty facetiousness in describing the particulars of human con-
A trouble with the older literary history was that its authors were never able to explain adequately why it was that they liked the works which they said were good. The best they could do was to refer characteristics of the works under discussion to Aristotle or some other body of abstract formulation. Berthoff does this too, but he is so perceptive that en route to his pronouncements he provides the kind of insights which can only come from good close reading and analysis. His book, in short, would be very dull in abstract; it is very good in texture.

A sampling of Berthoff's insights and judgments suggests critical good sense and sensitivity: Robinson's "Captain Craig" uses a "manner of address" which appears in a "remarkable quantity of subsequent American writing" (p. 276); "Lindsay's vaudeville-show montages . . . [are] among the native forerunners of Dos Passos' experiments in the novel or Thornton Wilder's in drama" (p. 283); New Orleans writers all possess a "firm interior grip on an actual social order" (p. 84, note); Lafcadio Hearn looks back to that side of Poe which pursued "the margins and rarities of consciousness" (p. 81).

This alertness to nuance and similarity enables Berthoff to avoid another pitfall of his craft. Many literary historians, since they trace trends, tendencies, movements and developments, tend to overemphasize works which are significant in any of these terms, even when the works are, aesthetically, less than successful. Mr. Berthoff, in contrast, knows that however important late Mark Twain is as a part of "The tortuous natural history of the American spirit" (p. 76), the works of this period are not artistically successful. Pudd'nhead Wilson suffers because of Mark Twain's "limited store of artistic patience" (p. 72); "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" "is too grossly contrived, and the characters are too cypher-like" (p. 75).

Sensitivity to style seems the key both to the strengths and to the weaknesses of this study. Berthoff calls a large central chapter "Literature of Argument"; in it are discussed William Graham Sumner, Thorstein Veblen, William James, Charles Peirce, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, George Santayana, John Fiske, Henry Brewster, the Adamses and other historians, Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd and a group of literary critics. While one has to agree that these social scientists, philosophers, social and literary critics and historians belong in a book of literary history for reasons stronger than mere "background," one would...

duct," but notes that Howells' audience "found his humor charming and just" (p. 59, note). The truth is that when a novelist is as thoroughly committed to his characters as is Howells, and when his characters do funny things, readers do not object to his chuckling at them. If Howells has more fun than Hawthorne does, more for that matter than do many contemporary novelists, I see this less as a fault than as a fact.
not like to have to explain the function of this chapter in the book. Cer­
tainly Berthoff has the right not to provide us with textbook-like sum­
maries of the "positions" of his figures, but he should at least indicate
their relation to the "ferment" of his title. What he gives us, instead, are
impressionistic responses, generally limited to style. Although this reader
heed ed the author's warning to read the whole book before judging the
portions, I am still unsure of what this 75-page chapter accomplishes. In­
deed, to the extent that the entire book is like the chapter under discus­

Warren French's book is more catholic in approach and method. He
can praise Warren and the New Criticism for "replacing a timeworn
combination of gush and gossip with . . . close reading . . ." (p. 185),
but he demonstrates abundantly that he is a good literary historian as
well. This and the fact that Berthoff, writing under the banner of the
Old Scholarship, is also a good critic makes the point for us once again
that these labels by now are foolish. Just as the tendency in American
history today is away from the narrower professional specialities, so in lit­
erature we seem to be passing beyond the time when scholars identified
themselves as New Critics, Chicago Aristotelians, literary historians, or
what have you.

If one had to say something about the tendency represented by Mr.
French's approach, it would have to be not what Anderson says, that lit­
ery history is still a viable approach (of course it is), but rather that
literary history has learned so much from American Studies that it itself
has become a far richer medium than it ever was. One might argue that
French's book is a little rougher than Berthoff's, that he misjudges a char­
acter here, or makes a hasty statement about a novel there. But there is
nothing in Berthoff's as intellectually exciting as French's jaunt into the
literature of "back-to-the-soil" writings which appeared during the time
that Grapes of Wrath was making its greatest impression. French admires
both good literary history and good close textual analysis but is equipped
and disposed to do even more; he will walk the path of the cultural his­
torian or the critic of popular culture if there is something to be pointed
out along the way pertinent to the literary works which he is discussing.
French tells us about Mississippi politics and we see a new side of Faulk­
nner; he tells us about the back-to-the-soil movement, and Steinbeck gath­
ers new meanings. Similarly, he takes a good long look at the almost for­
gotten works of Dalton Trumbo, and, being knowledgeable about cinema,
explains Trumbo's career after Trumbo ceases to produce novels and be­
comes a film writer. French gets the reader worried during the discussion
of the political background of The Hamlet by appearing to make too
close and allegorical a series of comparisons ("Ratliff uses his strength—as the Bourbon Party did in the secret caucus—to frustrate Lancelot Snopes' vicious scheme to profit from alerting the hamlet's idly curious when his feeble-minded cousin is about to make love to a cow. Certainly by sending Vardaman to Washington, Mississippi provided the curious of the nation with a similarly edifying spectacle" (pp. 35-36). But while one half suspects that French has a sneaky notion that the book really does contain an allegory, he bails out safely at the end by concluding, "Thus while *The Hamlet* is not a story of Mississippi politics, it is a revelation of the inner workings of the culture that produced the politics."

In handling Hemingway's attitude toward the Spanish War he makes the point, through examining the kind of things which Hemingway was writing in *Esquire* and in Hearst's *Cosmopolitan*, that Hemingway's commitment to the Loyalist cause was an eyes-open business. He knew precisely what the Republic was, and was moreover almost uncomfortably close in some ways to the position of American isolationists at the time, though he felt that isolation as a national policy did not preclude participation on an individual basis.

French's fusion of techniques of close analysis with cultural history is well illustrated in a discussion of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: he points out that "the novel both opens and closes with pictures of Jordan prone on the pine-needle-covered ground in the most intimate association with nature." This and other passages in the story he relates to his discussion of the "good-earth" flavor of much writing in the thirties, suggesting "that Hemingway may have been writing a kind of primitivistic idyll in which an equation is made between the Loyalist camp and the pine-needled goodness of Nature..." (p. 110).

In the course of his discussion of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, French establishes definitively the development of Hemingway's political and social feeling which had occurred, to the extent that there had been any change, since *A Farewell to Arms*. While his ultimate judgment in this chapter, which deals with Faulkner as well, is less important than some of the insights revealed in the course of getting to it, it is in itself worth repeating, especially in these days in which, because we know so much more about the "mythic" Faulkner, we are likely to forget some important things which we knew in the good days when Faulkner was understood simply as a social novelist: French says that Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* "continues to be regarded as one of the principal efforts in American fiction to shed light on a particular sequence of events, while Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, which sheds so much light on particular events, continues to be regarded principally as an epic embodiment of ancient human truths" (p. 124).
A summary chapter says that the three novels considered at greatest length, *The Hamlet, For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Grapes of Wrath* "are . . . grounded in the same long American literary tradition of individualism. [They] . . . expound through Ratliff, Robert Jordan, and Tom Joad some version of the doctrine of self-reliance that distinguished the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman . . ." (p. 157). That this is now an impractical point of view "is suggested by the novels' focusing upon a remote and dying hamlet, a disintegrating and uprooted family, and a deteriorating band of wanderers visited by a foreigner with a death-wish" (p. 164). World War II and the military technology which came with it made the individualism of these writers—and it was not a very hopeful individualism—an untenable position; these three novelists, French feels, have fared better because unlike John Dos Passos and Dalton Trumbo each has "attempted—with varying success—to make a statement about the possibility of man's enduring in an atomic age" (p. 166). His final chapter looks at Richard Wright, Pietro di Donato and Robert Penn Warren. It concludes with the judgment that Warren survived the war as a major writer, whereas most authors did not, because he went on growing and learning. There are critics who feel that this is precisely Warren's problem, that he is so eclectic, skillful, current and "rich" that one can question the sincerity of his commitment to his material. Yet one has to concede the accuracy of French's judgment.

These two books, had they been prepared a decade ago by practitioners of different schools, might have made a sharper contrast than they do now. The differences which remain are due less, I think, to the influence of schools than to a difference in personality and interests. The differences may perhaps be categorized, albeit over-simply, as follows: French's book sets up contrasts and comparisons, sometimes a little arbitrarily, and then reacts brightly to them, utilizing material from any field which seems relevant. Out of the contrasts comes insight. Berthoff tries to find exactly the right phrases to characterize his subjects, who stand far more in isolation from one another than they do in French's book. Our literary historian, then, ultimately achieves goals more explicitly critical than does our general critic, whose discussions tend to begin in analysis and end in social history.

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