

A New Note in Fiction

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In a much earlier day, so it is recorded, every one said unto his brother, "be of good courage." Of late, the remark might be changed to read, "and everyone said unto his brother, have you read *Anthony Adverse*?"² I have to confess that when I selected this topic for consideration today, I had not read *Anthony Adverse*, but I have found upon reading it that it fits into one phase of what I want to say today. I know not what was the prime driving power of the author of this remarkable book; nor do I know just where to draw the line between what was essentially germane to the time and setting of the story, and what the author has projected back into the picture of those tumultuous years during and following the French Revolution. But after discounting the personal equation of the author there remains so much that is contemporaneous that every once in a while one blinks his eyes and pinches himself to try to discover whether he is reading a story whose setting is at the close of the eighteenth century or in the very present through which we are passing. The note of contemporaneousness is so striking that it serves to suggest the point that I have in mind in speaking of *Anthony Adverse* at this point. Whether the mind of the author knows itself on this point, this at least, is certain, that nowhere in the book does [the character of] *Anthony Adverse* come clear of the uncertainties and confusions which were, not only within himself and those about him, but within the pomp and circumstance of his time and ours.

¹ This manuscript is not dated, but given the reference in the first paragraph to the novel *Anthony Adverse*, published in 1933, and the fact that no reference is made to the movie of the book that came out in 1936, a reasonable date for the manuscript would be 1934 or 1935.

² Hervey Allen (1889-1949), an American educator and author, wrote *Anthony Adverse*, published in 1933, and made into a 1936 movie that won four academy awards.

This, I would like to assert as a fundamental assumption and background of what I wish to say today; the dramatic events of the last quarter of a century are but phases of a titanic struggle through which our Western World at least is passing in its attempt to break through the restraints, complexes and defenses by which we became bound in an age that is past. The world uprooted in our day is dealing for the most part with the same forces that were in the background of the closing years of the 18th and the opening years of the 19th centuries. There are some additions and some variations; new wrappings, new words and slogans, but essentially the same. In every nook and corner of our modern world one can find the new life breaking through the old dying and disintegrating stubble. In politics, in industry, in religion, in commerce, in social life, in our own internal struggles for adjustment and peace, we can recognize elements of the conflict. Not a book that one reads, not magazine or a daily paper, not even a casual conversation, but bristles with evidences of this conflict. Every page of *Anthony Adverse* is alive with the struggle. The kindly priest who cared for him, the ascetic and Christ-like figure of Father Francois, whom he could not follow and never could forget, the little Madonna that he cherished all is life—all these are not alone symbols of, but forces in, his baffled life from the days when he played in the fountain in the convent, to the tragic, majestically tragic, end of his earthly career. He could not cleave unto the old, nor did he find peace in the new, yet somehow he felt that [in] the heart of each there had been, and there must be, a completely absorbing essence that could command his whole being. When one comes to see and feel that in and through all these common events of living there runs a current of tendency that may rise to the dignity of purpose, then even the most ordinary event takes on the grandeur of cosmic proportions.

Doubtless you are wondering why all this stage-setting for so casual a theme as "A New Note in Fiction." Well, this is the reason. Our fiction, at its best, is a thoughtful presentation in terms of human beings of this drama of change. It is interesting because it is, so to speak, the unstudied mirror of the process. At its authentic best in the masters of fiction, it reveals the vital processes of living. At its worst, it is a cheap

imitation, a crown of the best, produced for the changing demands of the marketplace of letters. Altogether fiction becomes a sort of portraiture of living, off the record, so to speak, unguarded, at ease.

The world from which we seek to escape is that characterized by a set of patterns suggested in the field of religion and morals by the two words, Revelation and Obedience; in the world of political and economic interests by the words, the Divine Right of King's, and again the word of loyal and unquestioning obedience. From that set of life patterns, and the institutions, habits and customs which they had created, we are seeking to escape.

In the process there have been three great dramatic eras and the fourth one, complicated by the survivals of the other three, we are even now in the midst of. The outbreak of the Protestantism was the first great shattering convulsion. It broke the solid walls by which the Western World was imprisoned. The job is by no means complete, but the process and results are encouraging. From a negative point of view, the religious institutional life and tradition that you inherit belongs to this struggle for freedom of the spirit. From the point of view of constructive contribution, our task is to create in the midst of a society of freemen, a satisfying equivalent for the loyalties and values that have been undermined. That is the first break—the Protestant Reformation—not merely an event in history, but a process.

The second great act of the drama is symbolized by two scenes, the American Revolution in this new world, and the French Revolution in Europe, the shattering of the old patterns, and the building of new. This also is not simply an event, but a process. The extent to which the two lines of development cross and recross each other and carry through into most recent struggles is well revealed in current history.

The third great struggle is in the field of industry and commerce, the machine age. The initial conflict may be dated to the second quarter of the 19th century, culminating in the revolution of 1848. This too is a long process, and is very much a part of our momentary struggles and uncertainties.

The fourth act in the drama is quite different in character, and turns from the world of institutions and patterns to the very inner processes by which those institutions are created. One rather hates to use the word psychology at the moment because there is so much rubbish associated with it, but still, at its best, it does cover the matter, from the world of mental images, we have turned to the inner processes by which all our conscious life is created. Sometimes I think that, in the investigations of the mind, man has shown his adventurous courage at its very zenith. This process is still young, still uncertain, but it is under way.

If one follows the tradition of the great fiction writers, it is easy to discover that the characters and the events are centered about, or live and move and have their being in, the midst of the onrushing life of the age. Emphasis changes from personal story and narrative on the one hand to an almost historical or philosophical treatise on the other. Balzac³, with his purpose of giving a complete picture of the human comedy in his novels not only presents life as he sees it about him with all its local and personal colorings, but one finds there also the abiding human qualities and experiences. Victor Hugo⁴, melodramatic and almost what we in our day would call a propaganda novelist, carries his political and social ideas into our midst on the shoulders of his characters. Who can ever forget the picture of Thenardier crawling onto the battlefield of Waterloo in the early morning hours, robbing the dead and dying of whatever valuables to be found on their persons.⁵ The picture has always remained with me as a perfect delineation of that sort of person who expects all the pleasures and satisfactions of a selfish life without sharing in the responsibilities and dangers, rat-like, repulsive, and foul—whether then or now. Then one passes over to the romantic story teller, Dumas⁶, but again the picture of the times, and if one reads thoughtfully one can see running through them all the undercurrent of force and power, the promise of the age to come.

³ Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) French novelist and playwright.

⁴ Victor-Marie Hugo (1802-1885) French poet, novelist and playwright.

⁵ Monsieur and Madame Thenardier were fictional characters in Victor Hugo's 1862 novel, *Les Misérables*.

⁶ Alexandre Dumas (1802-1844) French novelist.

Each age carries within its pregnant womb the growing embryo of the age to come.

If we come to consider our own time through the medium of its fiction, I am sure that we have to add to baggage which we carry over from the past, the struggle for freedom in religion, initiated by the Reformation, the conflict between monarchy and democracy, which first came to grips with the past in our Revolution, and the harnessing of nature to our use in the form of machines, I am sure that we have to add that present revolutionary word, "Psychology." It has always seemed to me the most daring and courageous thing we have ever done, this turning of our attention in upon the workings, the mechanisms, and the nature of human personality. In the name of psychology, it seems to me, a great deal of half-truth and even serious error has been fed to us with a dogmatic assurance that would make even the medieval theologian bow down in humble admiration. But discounting all the excesses, and holding only as tentative truths some of the results thus far obtained, I still think that our adventures in the field of psychology are destined to become the most important of the four factors mentioned.

At the present moment, the main contribution of psychology [has been] confusion. But even in the midst of the confusion there are one or two points that are being cleared up. I imagine that these points constitute what seem to me to be the new note in fiction. The substance of it is that each personality has a quality and integrity of its own; and that quality and integrity cannot be tampered with with impunity. The seat of authority is within, and what is within must be disciplined and nurtured in terms of its own genius. One of the striking illustrations of the tragedy of confusion at this point is found in the life and letters of Count Tolstoy.⁷ Born in an environment too sordid for the quality of his personality, he struggled all his life to effect an adjustment by changing the externals. Born in the Orthodox Greek Church environment which did not satisfy, he sought to escape by substituting for his birth-right religion another set of dogmas which he called the religion of Jesus. It

⁷ Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) Russian novelist, famous for many novels including *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878). Earl Davis wrote a relatively long piece specifically about Tolstoy, "Count Leo Tolstoy: A Tragedy of the Times," sometime shortly after Tolstoy's death in 1910.

did not occur to him that what he really should have done was to work out Tolstoy's religion, let that be what it might. Born in the circles of a ruling class, he sought escape again, not by becoming Tolstoy the man, but by the rather pathetic and tawdry device of wearing a peasant's garb and eating a frugal diet. He escaped from nothing by this method. His books, great and commanding as they are, nevertheless reflect the confusion of his time and life. But he was pushing through the enclosing walls.

But another book, not so pleasant to read, but at bottom more encouraging and less tragic than Tolstoy's is Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*.⁸ That, it seems to me, marks a distinct step forward. It tells the tale of the growth of a pioneer community from the very beginning, but it is freed from the old restraints. I know that you who have read it had a feeling of repulsion, and yet a certain sense that here is something that is powerful, an attempt to portray human life of a sort as it behaves—a sort of picture of the raw material of society. As I see it, it is [a] very careful job of realistic fiction. Of late, in particular since the way, we have had plenty of that sort of thing. Some of it has been very beautifully done. One recalls the *Forsythe Saga*.⁹ The *Jalna* series,¹⁰ and many others of less note. Then we have had our Sinclair Lewis with his *Main Street* and *Babbitt*.¹¹ Clever and practically true to life. When I read the book I hardly dared to speak to some of my friends lest I might call them by a character in Lewis' books. While his books have made their contribution, I doubt if they have any great survival value. Yet again, there is something of a promise of the new note in them.

⁸ Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) a Norwegian writer who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1920. His novel, *Growth of the Soil*, was published in 1917.

⁹ *The Forsythe Saga*, published under that title in 1922, is a series three novels and two interludes published between 1906 and 1921 by English author John Galsworthy (1867-1933) who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1932.

¹⁰ The *Jalna* series comprises 16 books published between 1927 and 1954 written by Canadian author Mazo de la Roche, neé Maisie Roche, (1879-1961).

¹¹ Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951), American novelist, and the first to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930. His novel *Main Street* was published in 1920, and *Babbitt* was published in 1922.