

ARE OUR NOVELISTS HOSTILE TO THE AMERICAN ECONOMIC SYSTEM?

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AMERICAN novelists of the past thirty years would have been unable, even if they had so wished, to avoid things economic because these play a large part in the lives of the people they write about. Novelists are interested in man and society, and this leads to economic and social ideas about the arrangements observed which are communicated to their readers. The writings of leading novelists get a wider reading than those of economists, they evoke emotions in their readers which lead to judgments and actions, and it may well be that the effect of these writings on public policy in a democracy is greater than that of writings by professional economists.

The social justification for economics lies in its contributions to policy making. The economist, therefore, should be interested in the economic ideas of the novelist because he is an interesting and significant competitor in the communication of ideas for policy making.

The outlook of American novelists in recent times is generally taken to be hostile to existing economic arrangements, but this view is highly colored by the phenomenon of the more spectacular novels of social protest such as *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Main Street*, works which are not representative of the entire output of their authors nor the main body of recent American literature. It is difficult to test the generalization that novelists are hostile to the economic system on account of the wide range of work involved and the possible wide range of economic views of the authors, but some insight into the problem can be gotten from a consideration of two representative writers, Fitzgerald and Wolfe, who attained importance for reasons other than writings of outright social protest.

II

Scott Fitzgerald, born in 1896, achieved striking success in 1920 with his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. He was representative of the Twenties, for not only did he participate in its life and write well about it, but he played a large part in creating the spirit of the Jazz Age. Thomas Wolfe, born in 1900, is more representative of the Thirties. His first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, was published at the time of the stock

market crash in 1929 and he came into ascendancy as Fitzgerald, so definitely linked in the public mind with the Twenties, was put aside like a bad dream. But the influence of Fitzgerald and Wolfe has not faded with the decades they represented, for today each continues to attract in an important way critical and popular attention.

Fitzgerald was assured of literary success with the publication in 1925 of *The Great Gatsby*. One of the things that gives the book artistic depth combined with social interest is the theme of the American Dream with its strong economic elements. The Dream is disturbed by conflict between the moralist, Nick, who has the solid, Mid-western, middle class sense of conscience and values, and the dreamer, Jay Gatsby, who has a vision that is incorruptible, uncompromised, and infinite, with no scruples on the means to attain it. Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, and this became the ruling fantasy of his life, in which the beauty of Daisy and the wealth of her setting were hopelessly intermingled. Daisy is also a symbol for the American Dream, "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor". This is the first phase of the Dream; it renounces poverty, will not compromise with a middling place, but aspires to the top. This, too, epitomizes the view of the author and the majority of the public in this period toward the kind of social reform that was later to engage American interest. One does not sense from reading *The Great Gatsby* that this decade had opened with the defeat of the workers in the Great Steel Strike who were seeking relief from the 12 hour-day, 6 day-week, with 24 hours duty at the changing of the shift! The typical young American had little interest in improving the lot of the poor or others; his cause was a Cadillac.

Gatsby's death symbolizes another truth concerning the Dream—that wealth does not fulfill, but remorselessly crushes Dream and Dreamer. Wealth is destructive because it is devoid of human values and those who have it lose the capacity to feel for others. Nick said about Tom and Daisy as he left the East to return to the stable world of the Mid-west "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness." To Fitzgerald the social process is remorseless toward the individual: it is unthinkable for him to sink to "the hot struggles of the poor" but wealth, if attained in this society, destroys him. In this

there is despair of reform that can heal the individual and his society.

The American Dream has social dimensions that extend beyond the struggles of the individual. In this dimension the story presents a contrast between the corporation of the East and the sanity of the heart-land of America. Nick, the moralist in Fitzgerald, never fully approves the gaudy spree that he moves through in the "grotesque" East and eventually returns to the solidity of the Mid-West where "dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name."

Fitzgerald, like Nick, was brought up in the pre-war period of Puritanism but saw in the Twenties a broad revolt against it. The Puritan production ethic described by Tawney—that life should consist of hard work, abstemious living, thrift and the investment of capital—was replaced by a new consumption ethic, that life should consist of having a good time. This view of things helped set the stage for the Keynesian revolution in economics that proclaimed that the private virtue of thrift is not always a public benefit.

Tender Is the Night repeated the basic ideas found in *The Great Gatsby* of conflict between the values of human decency and the values of an acquisitive society, and the remorseless crushing of the human spirit by the forces of material wealth. The human spirit crushed is that of Dick Diver who had made a brilliant start in psychiatry. His downfall begins with his marriage to an American tycoon's daughter, Nicole Warren, whose schizophrenia he had helped cure. Diver was secure and "thoroughly his own man" when he married Nicole. "Yet he had been swallowed up like a gigolo, and somehow permitted his arsenal to be locked up in the Warren safety-deposit vault."

Dick Diver had an accumulated bank account of moral values inherited from his clergyman father but these were squandered in teaching "the rich the ABC's of human decency." His failure is epitomized in Nicole, who, regaining health, reverts to the robber baron pattern of her grandfather, and snatches a new life with a military adventurer. Dick Diver returns to America drifting from one small town to another, a broken-down, alcoholic, village doctor.

In *Tender Is the Night* Fitzgerald allows the human spirit, crushed by acquisitive society, hope of redemption through personal reformation. The society that Fitzgerald criticizes may scorn the end of Dick Diver as a shiftless, alcoholic village

doctor but Fitzgerald intended this as a way of redemption. In his Notebooks he gives an analysis of this novel and entitles the last 185 pages as "Escape" and "The Way Home." Diver is working his passage to redemption by struggling to attain the solid values taught by his father through serving the poor and the suffering, as well as he can under the conditions of his own human weakness.

The theme of conflict between the values of human decency and the corruption by material acquisition is told with more sting and based on a surer conviction of the disintegration of the social order than in *The Great Gatsby*. This is shown in the incident involving Lady Caroline who is arrested for impersonating a French sailor, picking up a French girl and taking her to a lodging house. When Lady Caroline refuses to pay back the bribe that Diver and a hotel-keeper had to give the police to release her, the hotel-keeper, recalling his days of abuse by the wealthy when he was a busboy in London, "whipped a string of condemnatory words about her, and as she turned away with a frozen laugh, he took a step after her and swiftly placed his little foot in the most celebrated of targets. Lady Caroline, taken by surprise, flung up her hands like a person shot as her sailor-clad form sprawled forward on the sidewalk."

III

Wolfe's first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, was written in the closing years of the Twenties, but its approach, in contrast to Fitzgerald's was through the working-day lives of the lower and middle classes, their jobs, food, and amusements, and hence was to have an appeal to the proletarian decade of the Thirties that Fitzgerald lacked. The story of the boyhood of Eugene Gant, protagonist of the first novel, interests the economist not only through its economic details but because it is autobiographical and thereby explains the later economic outlook of the author. In 1912 the parents of Eugene Gant (or Thomas Wolfe) had assets of about \$100,000 and an annual income of \$8,000 to \$10,000. (Wolfe was not adverse to putting price-tags on things and his audience had the ability to grasp this kind of description.) Statistics reveal that this income placed the family in the top 1 or 2 percent of the income pyramid, yet they never conceived themselves as "Rich Folks," or entitled to the luxuries of good living, with the exception of the bountiful table they sat down to. For the rest, the Puritan way of

economic life was followed: They worked hard (the mother ran a boarding-house at the expense of decent living for the family), expenditures were made penuriously, and thrift devoutly proclaimed and practiced. Wolfe felt he was much influenced by the books he read, the *Algers* and others, and especially by the "fat money-getting of these books (a motif in boys' books that has never been sufficiently recognized)". The parents were strong advocates of economic independence, and Eugene at a tender age was prowling through dark streets in the early morning on a newspaper route when he should have been in the deep sleep of youth. Wolfe vividly pictures the moral and physical dangers of this, which his mother disregards because the boys are earning their own pocket money. "This undoubtedly, was a consideration of the greatest importance," Wolfe points out.

Wolfe stressed the speculative mania of the times as the central evil, which he saw as the full-flowering of the earlier Puritanical thrift. He called it compulsive greed, a form of irrational behavior of acquiring wealth not to consume, but to be consumed by it. Americans lost the heritage of the American Dream by settling for economic fulfillment instead of striving for spiritual fulfillment. How the speculative mania destroys spiritual values is best dramatized in the death scene of Ben, the elder brother whom Eugene loved most. The mania for real estate speculation so gripped the mother that the expressions of warmth and affection were blocked and Ben died through neglect,—specially that of delay in calling a doctor. As Ben lay dying he did not want to see his mother and turned his head when she came into the room. When she returned to the kitchen, bustling around doing useless things, Eugene, realizing the horror she was facing, kissed her hand. "And Eliza stripped suddenly of her pretenses, clung to him burying her white face in his coat sleeve weeping bitterly, helplessly, grievously, for the sad waste of the irrevocable years—the immortal hours of love that might never be relived, great evil of forgetfulness and indifference that could never be righted now."

Twelve chapters of *You Can't Go Home Again* comprise a section entitled "The World That Jack Built" which was written as an analogy of the Great Depression. The central figure is Mr. Jack, a Wall Street financier, whose name is a well known pun on the word "money", which makes this an account of the house of cards which money built in the Twenties. Wolfe,

despite his economic interests, does not provide an economic explanation of the depression, but blames it on the mad manipulation and speculation of business leaders like Mr. Jack. These men in their offices "in the clouds" on Wall Street regarded themselves as the most practical and hard-headed of men, yet they built on values that were false and theatrical, and the shaky structure they erected eventually had to collapse. Wolfe's views were shared by many in the early Thirties. The Securities Act of 1933, the Banking Acts of 1933 and 1935, The Securities and Exchange Act of 1934, and the Public Utility Holding Company Act of 1935 were popular New Deal reforms dealing with speculative excesses and the unsound financial structure of the Twenties. Wolfe's criticism of this aspect of the conduct of business leaders is constructive, but his over all attitude toward business leaders, as well as toward all classes other than "the workers" is hostile and derives from the idea found in much socialist thought that economic gradations can only be explained by the expropriation from the workers of a surplus value. When Wolfe observes the wealthy and talented leaders in business and art he concludes: "In the secret and entrenched resources of their lives they had all battened on the blood of common man, and wrung their profits from the sweat of slaves, like any common overseer of money and of privilege that ever lived."

IV

The approaches of Fitzgerald and Wolfe to economic problems are in sharp contrast. Fitzgerald feels only despair for the impact of the economic on the individual and society, while Wolfe is fundamentally optimistic. It was this high degree of optimism that led Wolfe to break away from the editorial direction of Maxwell Perkins when the latter could not share fully in Wolfe's faith that man could make everything all right if he would only apply good sense and energy to his problems. Wolfe's ideas are not incompatible with the practical, constructive reforms of the period, but his ultimate political goal lies beyond New Deal type reforms.

There is further contrast between the two authors in that Wolfe has a greater social consciousness and sympathy for the lower classes than Fitzgerald. This led Wolfe to the conviction that the misfortunes of the lower classes came from their exploitation by the more fortunate members of society and that

this was an inevitable result of "the system". Wolfe's writing suggests an underlying conviction that the answer to this is some kind of socialism.

Despite these contrasts in viewpoints and methods Wolfe and Fitzgerald share a kind of hostility to the economic system that runs so deeply beneath surface phenomena as to put them in fundamental agreement. Their hostility is not limited to abuses in economic arrangements observed in their times. If each were writing today the same kind of hostility would be expressed despite economic reforms that have brought steadier employment, better distribution of wealth and income, and a significantly higher standard of living.

What are they hostile to? It is clear that neither Wolfe nor Fitzgerald, nor for that matter any of the eminent American writers, has glorified advertising, the intricacies of the corporation or the stock exchanges; nor has any expressed admiration for the unorganized, spontaneous co-operation that underlies the economic organization of a free market system. It was a French economist, Bastiat, who on entering Paris a century ago was led to comment: "Here are a million of human beings who would all die in a short time if provisions of every kind ceased to flow towards this great metropolis. Imagination is baffled when it tries to appreciate the vast multiplicity of commodities which must enter tomorrow through the barriers in order to preserve the inhabitants from falling a prey to the convulsion of famine, rebellion, and pillage. And yet all sleep at this moment, and their peaceful slumbers are not disturbed for a single instant by the prospect of such a frightful catastrophe. On the other hand, eighty departments have been labouring today, without concert, without any mutual understanding, for the provisioning of Paris."¹

If the artist cannot share the wonder of Bastiat, is it because he favors an alternative to the market system, a planned system or some kind of socialism. Some artists cannot be otherwise classified,—for example, Upton Sinclair,—but the basis of the hostility of both Wolfe and Fitzgerald does not lie in a deep conviction of the need for socialism? In his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, published in 1920, Fitzgerald inserted a long statement in favor of socialism, which is so outspoken a propaganda tract that it might have been culled from an election pamphlet of the Socialist Party of the time. Biographical sources show that Fitzgerald later in life had no important political interest in the Socialist party, or in any party, and

study of his work reveals that the theory of the art of the novel which he gradually developed held that the novel was primarily an expression of experience of life and not of borrowed ideas.

V

From the standpoint of the economist, the hostility of the novelist to the economic arrangements of American society may appear socialistic because the novelist has failed to speak kindly of the spontaneous co-operation of the market system and its values of freedom: economic freedoms of consumers' and producers' choice, and political freedom. The economist may hastily conclude that the novelist must favor the chief alternative to this system, the planned economy of socialism. But this hostility cannot be judged from the standpoint of the economist alone; there must be consideration of the artist's view of what is art. A good statement for this purpose is given in a recent essay, "To Whom Is The Poet Responsible", by Allen Tate.² Tate poses two questions:—*To whom* is the poet responsible and *for what*. (What is said of the poet applies to the novelist insofar as his novel is an art-form and not merely a propaganda tract or an essay on social problems.) Tate says the poet is responsible to his conscience, which is defined as the joint action of knowledge and judgment. He "is not responsible to society for a version of what it thinks it is or what it wants." For what is he responsible? He is responsible for a full report of reality conveyed to him by his awareness. The poet must face the human condition and embody it in language; it is not his duty to "further this cause or that, good or bad, depending upon whose political ox is being gored." The work of the artist is not barren of social implications. "If the report of the imagination on the realities of Western culture in the past century was as depressing as the liberal mind said it was, would not the scientist, the philosopher, and the statesman have done well to study it."

What Tate says gives a clue to the nature of hostility in the novelist. The poet reports on human welfare and he has turned in a bad report on the social organization because it violates the natural order of the poet. This natural order is one that recognizes the importance of human values and provides freedom for their exercise and for personal reformation to develop them fully. Because Western culture in the past century has not met these requirements, its poets have been hostile to it. Basically the hostility of Wolfe and Fitzgerald is of this nature.

Historically the novel has developed a scope that goes beyond the poem and often carries with it a great deal of social criticism. If we agree with Tate that the true poet as creative artist is in touch with reality in a way that the philosopher and scientist is not, and that what he does in this realm of art cannot be scientifically analyzed, can the same be said for the extra social criticism of the novelist? On this point a comparison of Wolfe and Fitzgerald is of interest because Wolfe's novels contain a large body of social material not touched by Fitzgerald. The extraneous social criticism contained in the novel of broad scope cannot be said to be spoken with the authority of the creative artist; it enjoys no special status and should be subjected to the testing of the social sciences. For example, Wolfe attributes the Great Depression to speculation and the mad manipulation of financial leaders. An economist can analyze this statement and agree that some of the activities criticized had undesirable economic effects and that regulations to curb them were socially justified. The economist would also point out that it is erroneous to attribute the depression to speculation, which is more a symptom than an underlying cause. The elimination of speculation, if this were feasible, would not eliminate cyclical fluctuations while other factors continue to operate.

VI

The novel of broad scope has social significance but it must be recognized that its power is exercised under a condition that may be called the social irresponsibility of the novelist. This irresponsibility stems from the fact that the method of art does not contain the safeguards of the method of science. The novelist may not even be conscious of the social products of his work, and yet this work may be widely read, may affect emotions which influence judgments, and lead to acts of public policy. For example, the picture of society which the novelist presents may give the impression that the low incomes of the poor are due to the selfishness of the upper classes, and this may lead to retaliatory political action against the upper classes that decreases national income, and aggravates the economic position of the poor.

Social irresponsibility of the novelist cannot be eliminated in a society that permits freedom of expression; but freedom of criticism can serve as a check and balance. This suggests an important function for the critic, whose place in literature and society has not always been honorific. Performance of this

critical function requires more than the critic's offering his opinions on the questions raised by the novelist; it presumes adequate interpretation of the social material of the novel, and criticism in terms of the knowledge afforded by the social sciences.

Social irresponsibility does not necessarily lead the novelist to be hostile to the economic system. Wolfe's criticism of the kind of speculative activity that went on in the Twenties cannot be called hostile to the economic system anymore than Professor Taussig's account of the economic evils of these practices. Hostility to the economic system means an enmity that is directed toward the destruction of that system, and this must be distinguished from criticism that is directed toward improvement of the system. Although the novelist is not socially responsible in the way a social scientist is, he may with sound judgment arrive at the same appraisal of an economic practice as a scientist. Furthermore, it is possible for a novelist without a knowledge of the methodology of science to communicate to his audience a more accurate picture of a purely social phenomenon than a meticulous economist armed with a great load of charts and statistical tables, for what the novelist lacks in the stage of analysis may be more than compensated for by superior performance in the stage of communication.

The novelist displays only one of the forms of the social irresponsibility of modern intellectuals or "clerics"; social scientists are guilty of it in another form. Their social irresponsibility is based on a reluctance to engage in discussion of the values that novelists deal with and which are fundamental to a good society. Social scientists excuse themselves from these difficult tasks on the ground that their work will have greater certitude if they confine themselves within the limits of objective science. Traditionally the social sciences have occupied a position between the humanities and the natural sciences but the prestige of the latter has been a strong attraction and the social sciences have been drawn closer to them, and consequently today in larger part than formerly, share the spirit, methodology, and positivistic philosophy of science. Positivism denies the usefulness of values in science and this particular denial soon leads to general disdain. Society has largely adopted this value-attitude and has put the humanities in their place, an isolated position in an obscure corner.

This culture is unfriendly but not murderous; it has not

killed artistic creativity nor have its institutions seriously hampered the artist, although he may complain that it has forced him into the place of an independent businessman selling his wares on the market. The important fact is that literary works have been freely created and circulated, and intellectuals, at least, in this mass society, read them and think seriously about them. That there is real conflict between artist and society, testifies that society has not suppressed him. But the provision of artistic freedom is not cause for complacency, for this conflict is a dangerous form of cultural schizophrenia which is not a promising foundation for a healthy society anymore than for the individual.

VII

The totalitarian world has recognized this problem and has provided a solution: the suppression of real artistic creation. The artist is told what values he is to discover, what morals he will teach and what themes he will use to tell his story. This is not a new phenomenon. Roy Campbell, the South African poet, points out that the Zulu tribe of Africa was collectivized and militarized by some of their leaders early in the nineteenth century and that "the present Zulu name for a poet, Isibongo, the 'thank-you Man,' or, as we should say, the 'Yes-Man', prefigured the role of the artist under Stalin and Hitler today."² A perspective longer than this century shows that suppression of the artist is not a permanent solution. The force of artistic creation in man has been strong enough to survive all his past political and economic blunderings, which provides a basis for belief that it will eventually break out again whenever suppressed.

Social reform which has as its goal the diminution or elimination of conflict between artist and society should not proceed by wiping out artistic creation; rather it must start by placing greater trust in him and his work. This trust will be increased by a recognition that the basic hostility of the artist is neutral politically and does not represent advocacy of either the planned or unplanned economy.

It is not the responsibility of the true artist to solve social problems. Where the artist has attempted to meet these problems, as in the novel of broad scope, he operates under conditions of social irresponsibility and the potential harm here must

be checked by sound social science. But the welfare of society cannot be left entirely to the social scientists because they are irresponsible in large part of a treatment of the values important to a good society.

No simple, single program will solve this problem but any approach toward a solution must deal with the gap between the humanities and the social sciences created by these two kinds of social irresponsibility. A fracture in the backbone of a culture will be a long time healing but before healing can commence the broken ends must be brought together. For the humanities, this means making them more real, more concerned with the ordinary problems of human life in this society; and for the social sciences, this means making them more humane, more concerned with the values of humanistic culture.

Lewis Mumford in an essay on "The Plight of the Humanities" points out that the School of Humanities at Stanford frequently received letters from poor and often illiterate people seeking help in their difficulties of life. Mumford believes that the humanities should serve these people and raises the question: "Why should there be such a gap between the teaching of literature, art, or philosophy and the daily needs of ordinary men and women?"⁴ The humanities can meet these needs by using a play by Shakespeare and a poem by T. S. Eliot to help even the ordinary man to understand himself better and to live more fully, rather than using the great works of art merely as vehicles for advanced scholarship and pedantry.

From the side of the social sciences the gap cannot be closed by positivistic or merely positive social science. For this task a normative social science is required to examine and use the humanistic values of the culture and to concern itself with ends as well as means. Social science has not completely satisfied its obligations to the good society by its contribution to economic progress, great as this contribution has been that has resulted in a tripling of real income per capita in the America of this century and in promoting simultaneously greater leisure. There still remain the questions: Does work in the economy yield a full quota of human satisfactions? Are the joys of creation maximized for all? Is the art of good living promoted along with the art of making a living? The answers to these questions by our humanists would be largely in the negative, typified by

this succinct statement of George Orwell: "We live in an age in which the average human being in the highly civilized countries is esthetically inferior to the lowest savage."

NOTES

References for the quotations from the novels are: F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925) and *Tender Is The Night* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934); and Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940).

1. Cited by Hubert D. Henderson, *Supply and Demand* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922), pp. 5-6.
2. Allen Tate, "To Whom Is The Poet Responsible," *The Forlorn Demon* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), pp. 28-30.
3. Roy Campbell, *Light on a Dark Horse* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), p. 134.
4. Lewis Mumford, "The Plight of the Humanities", *Values for Survival* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1946), p. 221.
5. George Orwell, *Such, Such Were the Joys* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), p. 115.