

# Sherwood Anderson's Story

HARRY HANSEN

WHEN Sherwood Anderson died unexpectedly at Colon, he had been writing his reminiscences with the object of issuing them in book form. From time to time he would describe an event or a period in his life and publish it in a magazine; thus parts of the book had been appearing since 1927. These parts have been assembled, and, together with unpublished chapters judiciously chosen from his manuscripts, are now being issued as "Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs."\* Mrs. Anderson was the principal editor; she had the help of Paul Rosenfeld, who not only knew Anderson well but was one of the first to assess his gifts critically—and accurately; in addition the manuscript was read by such understanding friends as Roger Sergel, Lewis Galantieri, Ferdinand Schevill, and Stanley Young.

Sherwood Anderson was the most self-revealing author of our time; he not only drew on facets of his own personality for his imaginative work but admitted the reader repeatedly to the study of his most intimate writing problems. As a woman recalls her pregnancies, so Anderson was constantly recalling his state of mind before he had completely visualized a character or a situation, for, as he once expressed it, the telling of the tale is the cutting of the natal cord.

He made himself the example, the object of experiment and the springboard for whatever he had to say, contending eternally against the crystallization of an attitude toward life and a rigid pattern in his writing; this gave an imminence to everything he wrote and made him seem to be on the brink of new discoveries in the realm of personality. It also gave the impression that he was groping, and though he resented this word, it was by no means misapplied, nor should any blame be attached thereto. Anderson had the capacity of recognizing his material in what lay close at hand; he accepted every man as an interesting and enigmatic individual, and tried to penetrate his mask.

"Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs"—informal, genial, and dealing more factually with events that he had already kneaded into literary substance—verifies these general remarks. Here Anderson supplies names and dates for his rich adventures in personality, repeats some more in detail than before, and again lifts the veil on the story-teller's hopes, methods, and in-

\*SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S MEMOIRS. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1942. 507 pp. \$3.75.

tentions. Here, again, is his Ohio boyhood, so important in his story-telling career, with illuminating pages on his home life with his sister after his mother's death; here is the beginning of his struggle against American business routine and the emergence of the brooding artist, until, in the 1930s, he joins in concrete forms of social protest. Once before Anderson had combined his worlds of fact and of imagination in "A Story Teller's Story"; there the emphasis was on mental images and moods developed from his experiences. Now he proposes to be more exact, but he can never shake off the conviction that "the self of fancy persists in laughing at the self of fact." It is impossible, says Anderson, for any man to live solely in the world of fact. Men do not exist in facts, they exist in dreams. "My readers, therefore, those who go along with me, will have to be patient. I am an imaginative man."

In Anderson's life-story we have the American small-town version of the eternal battle of the artist with the material concerns of this world. Where Thomas Mann develops the issue on a high intellectual level, Anderson deals with his emotional response and relies on his intuitions to tell him that he is playing a part for which he is not suited. He is frank about his eagerness to ape the successful advertising man. He swaggers, bangs doors, orders subordinates around. He is not above telling lies to ingratiate himself with his employer; he magnifies an accident, so that he appears to have wheedled a client into a larger order, and thus gets a boost in salary. He wears flashy clothes—"I have always been a clothes lover, lover of fine fabrics." But this is not wholly his advertising-man personality. Clothes he will continue to enjoy, even when he is no longer the advertising man. He is original in his attire; he buys bits of odd cloth and runs them through a ring to make a necktie. He is aware that he is something of an actor.

He relates, almost as an afterthought, that five employees of the advertising agency committed suicide while he worked there; his implication is that they went mad from artistic frustration, writing copy in which they did not believe. If this were true, then this agency would have had more than its legitimate share of the artistic temperament.

Van Wyck Brooks blames our literary bankruptcy on "the eternal taboo which the ideal of the acquisitive life



Sherwood Anderson

places on experience." Anderson was uneasy in the presence of this taboo long before he read Brooks and recognized his own ailment. He writes that he wished to make money, yet when he accompanied Ohio business men to Cleveland for a spree involving drinks and women, he found the rewards unpalatable. He became interested in strange, wayward people, and during his first marriage played this interest against the respectability to which he conformed, taking out his frustration in baiting his respectable friends. "I got habitually nasty. I had got stories that would curl the guts of college professors in for an evening with their wives and I wanted to tell them and sometimes did. Painful moments of silence. . . ." In time this made him a willing outcast from the conventional world.

He was the artist, clutching at straws to sustain his belief in himself. When he was invited to meet the young Chicago authors in Margery Currey's Jackson Park home—Floyd Dell, Arthur Ficke, Ben Hecht, Eunice Tietjens, Lucian Cary, Ernestine Evans, Robert Morss Lovett, Llewellyn Jones—he hovered outside, trying to get up courage to go in; yet later he was quite at home, strutting and declaiming. Those who, like Floyd Dell, tried to guide his writing, encountered his rock-like determination to go his own way. "In 'Winesburg, Ohio' I had made my own form. Life is a loosely flowing thing. There are no plot stories in life." Anderson may have been unsure about people, and professed to be unsure about his own conclusions, but he never doubted his star, and he admitted Ben Hecht's charge that he was a colossal egotist.

Many of the stories about people in this book are good entertainment. Some are doubtful literary history. He describes an encounter with Heming-

way in which the latter said he wrote "Torrents of Spring" in order to kill Anderson off as an author. He describes a coolness between Faulkner and himself which seems entirely a part of Anderson's imagination. Did Anderson really berate the critic who has hidden himself under wrong initials, blaming him for calling him great? Or did he develop this scene in retrospect? Only the critic can tell us.

Once Anderson was telling his friends what had happened on a fishing trip, and Marco Morrow, a companion on the trip, announced that he was the champion liar, misquoting a character. Anderson says in justification: "If he had not said some of the things I made him say, he should have said them." I don't wish to emulate Marco Morrow, but one chapter, entitled "All Will Be Free," affords me much amusement. A man who runs a box factory comes to Anderson and Hecht in a restaurant, buys drinks, and announces that he means to run a dance hall free on the second floor. The next day it is learned that he has jumped into the river; he was bankrupt and penniless. Ben Hecht told the story in "1001 Afternoons in Chicago"; Anderson's story seems to derive from Hecht's. I sat beside the lads in Schlogl's Chicago restaurant when the box-factory man bought the drinks and both stories were conceived. At that time I was surprised to hear Ben say he didn't want to hear more; "I've got my story." In Ben's story, Anderson calls him up to tell him the man is a suicide; in Anderson's story he hears the news from Ben. Anderson's recollection seems to have been refreshed by the story in Ben's book; he has added his characteristic embellishments, and the box-factory man becomes a brooding Andersonian. My own prosaic version wouldn't interest anybody.

His book is more than literary gossip, though it has the flavor of that; it is revelation. Here the man who was forever trying to penetrate the human enigma, reveals himself. He is consistent in his vagaries, his gropings, his hesitations. He is authentically home-grown, home-town. He took no words from Hawthorne and Shakespeare, cribbed no characters from Dickens. His people are Ohio, Chicago, Marion, Va., and ourselves. Invariably he recognizes the tremendous influence on human behavior of the elements that lie below the navel. What, he asks, were the hidden lusts and loves of these men and women? What were their amorous experiences? His search was never furtive. One episode of his boyhood is characteristic. A lad leads him to a lighted window on a dark night, to view a girl undressing for bed. Anderson hits his friend and runs

away, violently disturbed. All through life, he made no bones about his frank interest. He had no sophisticated attitude toward the life process. It has been said that Anderson was affected by psychoanalysis, and he describes how Floyd Dell analyzed him and his friends. But Anderson had an intuitive understanding of hidden forces long before analysis became a parlor game. He was merely a ready example for the analysts. His deep concern with human qualities in ordinary people—ordinary to the conventional novelist

—and his ability to convert to literature the words of common speech, gave Anderson his great influence on young writers. The book closes with Anderson's desire to have inscribed on his grave, the reverse of Barrie's famous line in *Peter Pan*: "Life, not death, is the great adventure." Love of life was implicit in everything he wrote.

*Harry Hansen was associated with the Chicago writers in the 1920's, and his study of Sherwood Anderson in "Midwest Portraits" (1923) was one of the first to appear in book form.*

## The Thirst for Freedom

*THE EDGE OF DARKNESS. By William Woods. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1942. 334 pp. \$2.50.*

Reviewed by B. P. SCHOYER

THIS is not only a war novel of distinction but a lesson of man's unconquerable spirit under the heel of an invader. Written with simplicity and vigor, it tells the story of a Norwegian fishing village that rises against the local German garrison. The plot is an exciting one, full of mounting suspense, but it is the author's portrayal of the villagers that gives the story strength and conviction. It has no central character unless it be the village as a whole, whose will to freedom raises men to a stature they do not normally possess.

Mr. Woods knows Norway and the Norwegians, but his people are any people caught in the tragedy of invasion and war. There is Dr. Stengard, the pompous little mayor who knew he must plot and fight with his stronger-willed compatriots though he hasn't the courage for the task. There is imperturbable old Sixtus Andresen who told the German commander exactly what he thought of him. "If I were afraid," he says, "there might be hope for you, but I am not. Do you think you can stop the working of our brains and hearts? We are not animals. We are men." Nor are the Germans any less flesh and blood. The Captain is a harsh, lonely man who works out a masterly scheme of defense for the village, which he thinks will win him a better command. When Berlin reports it unsatisfactory, he is bewildered. Having no friends, he pours out his heart to an army prostitute, only to leave her in a rage when he finds her interest is not in his troubles but in getting his permission to leave Norway.

Mr. Woods sees one effect of the war very profoundly. You are either a Norwegian or a German. Those who try to cross the line invite nothing but tragedy. Such is the case in the poignant love affair between one of the

Germans and Karen, Dr. Stengard's daughter. Gerd Bjarnesen sees the situation more clearly. When another German who expects to return to civilian life proposes marriage, she resists temptation. She can see the inexorable tyranny of war. There is no hope of escape, of freedom for either of them, or for anyone, as long as others are denied that freedom.

Mr. Woods has drawn his characters very simply. He has a talent for bringing them to life with only a few strokes of his pen. Consequently, one wishes he had drawn them in greater detail. Because of this treatment, their number, and the rapid change of scene, there is at times a confusion to the story. But out of it, as sharp and clear as his picture of the little Norwegian town, rises the truth of his theme, that no amount of suffering and hardship will keep free men passive under the yoke of a conqueror. It is this that gives his title significance; there can be only an edge of darkness in Norway as long as the thirst for freedom lives on. If for no other reason, his success in driving this idea home makes the book an important one.



William Woods

*The Saturday Review*