

## The Younger School

There are many references in the discussions of recent American literature by national critics, as well as by those of our own State, to the "younger school" of Iowa writers. It is, however, not quite accurate to speak of these younger writers as though they constitute a definite group. They are not people who know each other intimately and work in constant contact with each other and under circumstances of mutual criticism and encouragement, as has been the case in many literary movements. Nor is it true that the work of these younger Iowa writers shows any considerable degree of uniformity. There are certain resemblances but these are the signs of the relation of the Iowa writers to the whole movement of Middle Western realism, which in its turn is a part of that nation-wide literary movement called "regionalism"—certainly the most important development in American literature in the past generation. Iowa writers share the fundamental qualities of Middle Western realism and to this extent their work shows resemblance; but individually they differ widely from each other, more than one of them may differ, for example, from a writer of Missouri or Kansas.

If there is one thing more frequently said about the younger Iowa writers than any other, one criti-

cism most frequently leveled against them, it is that their work is drab, prosaic, and sordid, that it does not contain anything that is happy, bright, or romantic, and that because of this it fails to give a fair picture of Iowa life. In so far as it is generally true that the work of the younger Iowa writers lacks bright colors, this is only one of the general characteristics of Middle Western realism as a whole, and certainly no Iowa writer has gone so far in this direction as have some of those of other States. Iowa has produced nothing like Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, or Haldeman-Julius's *Dust*, or Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*. And it is to be noted that no Iowa writer has written in hatred of his material, as so obviously some of the other Middle Western realists have.

Not even in the case of Roger Sergel's *Arlie Gelston*, which has perhaps been more violently condemned for its picturing of Iowa than any other novel, is the treatment that of one who writes in hatred or contempt. As a matter of fact Mr. Sergel is not primarily interested in his Iowa material as Iowan. His novel is not in the narrow sense regional at all. He is concerned rather with a person, a character conditioned by certain psychological limitations as well as by external circumstances, and his work belongs to the world-wide trend of psychological realism rather than to regionalism. In so far as he does present the Iowa landscape and the Iowa small town his work is brilliant and accurate.

*Arlie Gelston* is a novel of great insight. I feel, however, that it is too long, that its results could have been attained more economically.

The same indictment might stand against Walter Muilenburg's *Prairie*. Mr. Muilenburg first came into prominence as a short story writer. His stories published in *The Midland* and elsewhere, in 1915 and since, have been reprinted in Edward J. O'Brien's annual collections of *Best Short Stories* and have been singled out by O'Brien and others for special praise. These stories are characterized by a truly splendid style, remarkably accurate in its response to the emotional demands of the stories, and intrinsically beautiful. All of Mr. Muilenburg's stories show a strong feeling for the Iowa landscape and great firmness and sureness in the presentation of Iowa characters who are at once representative and individual. The same qualities are to be found in his novel, which remains one of the most important contributions yet made to the literary interpretation of Middle Western agricultural life. It is to be noted, however, that this novel is only partly Iowan in its setting and events. The greater part of the story is laid in Dakota.

A writer who has stuck to Iowa and who has brought into his work a great variety of Iowa material is Jay G. Sigmund. If I were asked to mention a writer in whose work I find fully represented all that is racy and authentic in Iowa life, all that is specifically Iowan, I should think of Sigmund at

once. Both in his verse and his prose he has achieved, as it seems to me, significant and living characters and situations. I wish that he had chosen to deal more generously with humorous materials and with the lighter aspects of the life of the State, for he does such work very well. As it stands, however, his most satisfying achievements, in the volume of short stories called *Merged Blood* and in his several volumes of poems, are those which present stark tragedies. Mr. Sigmund's work as a whole is marred by defects due to his astonishing fertility of imagination and to his wide and sensitive response to the dramatic values in his chosen material. He tends to write too rapidly and many of his stories and poems remain arresting and impressive sketches rather than fully realized works of art.

No discussion of the younger Iowa writers would be complete without some reference to some of the youngest of these writers whose work is just beginning to attract attention. One of these, Clarence Sundermeyer, is now a member of the Department of English at Iowa State College at Ames. His story, "World-Gate", dealing with the experience of an Iowa farm boy, was double-starred by O'Brien in 1928. Mr. Sundermeyer's work has psychological depth and a fine structural sense.

Another very promising short story writer is Vernon Lichtenstein, who is teaching English at Coe College in Cedar Rapids. Mr. Lichtenstein's "June Morning" was placed on the roll of honor by

Edward J. O'Brien in his 1929 volume. I like especially the style of Mr. Lichtenstein's stories and the unusually sympathetic presentation of characters whose psychological processes would be inaccessible to most writers.

A young Iowa writer whose work seems to be outstanding is Grace Hunter, an instructor at Grinnell. She has done work both in verse and in prose which is sincere and effective.

Rather the best interpretation of Iowa in lyric poetry which recent years has offered is to be found in the too-infrequent poems of James Hearst of Cedar Falls. Mr. Hearst's work, published in such magazines as *The Independent* and *Poetry*, as well as in *The Midland*, has a fresh recognition and expression of poetic truth in common things, which makes it akin to the best lyrics of Robert Frost and establishes it as poetry of a very high order indeed.

I should note at this point that the self-imposed limitations of this article exclude writers whose work is not peculiarly Iowan in the material as well as in origin. This prevents me from paying more than a passing tribute to the superlatively fine lyrics of J. G. Neumann or the rapidly maturing work of Thomas Duncan, and from mentioning at all a number of very interesting and promising young Iowa writers whose work is not especially associated with the State by their choice of material.

Undoubtedly "Iowa Literature" is identified most generally in the minds of American critics and

readers with Ruth Suckow. Miss Suckow first began to publish verse, and some memorable unpretentious lyrics are to her credit. Her first short stories appeared in *The Midland* in 1921 and in the *Smart Set*, then edited by H. L. Mencken, in the same year. She has continued to write short stories and is now a regular contributor to *Harper's* and other magazines. Her collected short stories were published in 1926 under the title *Iowa Interiors*.

Miss Suckow's first novel, *Country People*, appeared in 1924. It is a compact epic of the Iowa soil, conveying a very strong sense of the movement of agricultural life in Iowa in the last three generations. In her succeeding novels, *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl*, 1925, and *The Bonney Family*, 1928, she came closer to her characters and presented them with greater completeness. There is a marvelous wealth of accurate and revealing details in her story of the young girl in the "Odyssey". Many readers have told me how remarkably this story parallels their own experience. "I am that girl", is not an uncommon comment. In *The Bonney Family* we have a stronger central character and one with whom readers are likely to be less sympathetic. The minor characters in this novel are much better than those in the earlier books. It presents a magnificently realized family group.

In Miss Suckow's latest novel, *Cora*, 1929, the central character is still stronger and attains a triumph denied to most of Miss Suckow's protagonists

—though it proves to be a triumph that is robbed and defeated by forces within Cora herself. This is a rich and glowing dramatic novel, poignant in its emotion, and full of meaning. It includes an especially impressive study of an old man, Cora's father. Miss Suckow shares with Dreiser, it is interesting to note, an extraordinary ability to present old men.

Against all of Miss Suckow's work the charge of drabness has been directed again and again. One thing which is overlooked by those who find this fault is Miss Suckow's intensely poetic feeling for the Iowa landscape. This is never absent from her work though it is never allowed to intrude or to overbalance the effects she desires. But certainly the writer was not unattuned to loveliness who could describe an Iowa landscape in these terms:

The "lay of the land" — something in that to stir the deepest feeling in a man. Low rolling hills, fold after fold, smooth brown and autumnal, some ploughed to soft earth-colour, some set with corn stalks of pale tarnished gold. Along the farther ones, the woods lay like a coloured cloud, brown, russet, red and purple-tinged. As he walked on, the houses grew fewer, everything dwindled into pasture land. The feeling of autumn grew more poignant. There was a scent of dust in the stubble. The trees grew in scattered russet groups. One slender young cottonwood, yellow as a goldfinch and as lyric in its quality, stood in a meadow, alone. Not even spring beauty was so aching and so transient — like music fading away. Yet, under everything, something abiding and eternal.

“But Miss Suckow’s people”, the objector will say, “are all dull and unhappy”. I can only reply that I do not find them so. As I study the gallery of Miss Suckow’s characters in my own memory of her books, I do not find that tragedy and unhappiness are more general among them than in the lives of the Iowans I know in the flesh. Among them I find many who are happy and many human relationships which are beautiful and adequate. Take, for instance, the matter of the Iowa small-town or rural church. Miss Suckow can show the tragedy of the narrowness and pettiness of the small town in such a story as “Wanderers”, in which the aged minister is forced out of his charge because he has refused to flatter wealthy members. But she also gives us the deep and genuine love of Mr. Bonney for his church and of his parishoners for him. This is a fine tribute indeed to an institution which has been the object of much unfair criticism. It shows how far Miss Suckow is above the range of the ordinary exploiters of the imperfections of Middle Western life.

I feel that many of the objections to Miss Suckow’s work are due to her method, not to her material at all, although readers may not realize this. As a writer she is so objective, so reserved, so careful not to put herself into the picture, that she often seems unsympathetic toward her characters. But this is the method of true realism. When we indict Miss Suckow on this ground, we

are indicting Tchehov and Turgenev, Tolstoy and Flaubert, Conrad and Hardy.

Miss Suckow has her limitations, I think. I feel that she has not yet realized quite all of the possibilities of her materials. I grant that there are contrasts, colors, intensities in Iowa life which she has yet to fit into the patterns of her work. It is possible that she is not aware of these qualities; if so, this will constitute a permanent limitation in her work. I think, rather, that she has chosen not to use them, because she shrinks so strongly from such over-dramatizing of the Middle Western material, as one can see illustrated in the work of Martha Ostenso. With this attitude of Miss Suckow's I am in the heartiest sympathy. Her work seems to me to show a steady growth and I feel confident that she is bringing into it, with an artistic judgment of the surest acuteness, more and more richly all the significant values of her material. She seems to me very definitely the greatest figure, not only among young Iowa writers, but in the whole Middle Western and regional movement in America to-day. Her position is at the very front in American letters.

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