

The New Realism

Meanwhile another kind of regional fiction had begun to appear in the United States. For understanding of its purposes and methods we must look in part to influences from England and from Europe which were making themselves felt strongly in all American literature in the years of the first World War and those following it: to Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy, to Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield, to Proust and Thomas Mann, and, later, to Joyce. Discarding romantic conventions, the writers of this "new realism," as it came to be called, sought in fiction, often quiet and outwardly uneventful, to realize values of inner experience. Beginnings in this direction appear in the work of some of the contributors of distinguished short stories to the early volumes of *The Midland* (founded in 1915), whose longer work falls outside the limits of this study. Walter J. Muilenburg's very fine novel, *Prairie* (1925), carries only briefly in Iowa before the scene shifts to Dakota. R. L. Sergel's *Arlie Gelston* (1923) is primarily about Iowa small town and city life, though the Iowa countryside is everywhere felt in it.

In the work of Ruth Suckow, also, the Iowa

small town is central; but many of her most memorable characters are people who have retired from the farm, or are the children or grandchildren of farmers; and the sense of the interdependence of the country town and the country, a deep realization of their profound relationship, marks all of her work.

Miss Suckow's only novel which deals chiefly with farm people and farm life, *Country People* (1924), still seems to me, as it did when I first read it, somewhat too bare a chronicle of a German farm family. It depends too largely on generalized narration, and rarely achieves genuine dramatic poignancy. Miss Suckow never made that mistake again. Such later novels of Iowa small town people as *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* (1925) are wholly realized as dramatic experience, and are deep in sympathetic penetration of their characters. Miss Suckow's longest novel, *The Folks* (1934), though it has little direct presentation of farm life, carries a constant sense of the nearness of farm concerns to the interests of its characters. Perhaps it is significant that both of the Fergusons, father and son, who are major figures of the novel, go back to the land temporarily in time of stress. The younger thinks for a time that he could find happiness there, in work with his hands. In Miss Suckow's latest novel, *New Hope* (1942), the farm and farm life again are matters of background, but of integrated and essential background. On re-

reading I have recognized the remarkable achievement of this novel more fully than I did on its appearance: the marvelously rich and complex tissue of personal attitudes and emotions and of family and community relationships, all revealed through the consciousness of a child — and always with ease, with naturalness.

In *New Hope* Miss Suckow suggests the essential differences in the feeling of men toward the land and toward farming:

Andy had sometimes remarked, even to Dave, that Dave didn't care about farming. "You look upon this piece of land," Andy had told his brother, "as an investment first of all." And when Dave had then demanded, "Well, don't you? Isn't that the way you look at it?" Andy had replied shortly, "No, I don't. I look at it as the place where we live and are going to raise our crops."

In *New Hope*, too, we find recurringly — though always integrated and necessary to the whole impression of the work — those portrayals of the Iowa land itself in which no one has equaled Miss Suckow:

Across the trampled barnyard, hard and dry in Autumn sunshine, they had a view of fields brown or dark gold, rising slowly toward that limitless horizon. . . . They looked over trampled stubble, plowed earth, uncultivated pastures, here and there the brushy softness of a planted grove — all rough and new, yet thriving; hazy in the dusty, golden air; and beneath the freshly turned soil, that ancientness, archaic, inscrutable; kind, but with a savage mystery, almost hidden.

It is in her short stories, however, that Miss Suckow has given us her best portrayals of the Iowa farm in fiction. Relatively few of the stories deal wholly or primarily with farm life and farm people. But such stories as "A Start in Life," "Retired," "Four Generations," and "A Rural Community" perform the miracle of which the short story at its very best is capable: their revelation is at once extended and profound. Within the space of a few pages, they open for the reader the significant outward circumstances and the inner tensions, the quality and the meaning of experience, for a family, a community, a whole way of life. In these stories of Ruth Suckow, the Iowa farm has received its highest literary expression thus far.

One other writer whose work marked the decade of the 1920's is worthy of consideration with Miss Suckow: J. G. Sigmund, whose stories appeared in *The Midland* and were collected in *Select Poetry and Prose* (1939), edited by Paul Engle, and in the earlier *Wapsipinicon Tales* (1927). Sigmund's stories seem without art. They are utterly simple and natural in their response to the demands of his material. They are marked by unerring choice of the revealing detail, by profound sympathy. Sigmund had a keen eye for the eccentric, the comic, and a warm sense of humor. He had also a deep sense of the tragic reality which often underlies a surface seemingly dull and prosaic. Sigmund's poems, often fictional

in effect and actually highly condensed short stories, possessed the same qualities. His interpretation of Iowa farm people and experience in poetry has been surpassed only by the work of James Hearst. Sigmund's fame has never spread widely beyond the borders of Iowa. In his own state it should be kept green as long as readers remain who value self-forgetting devotion to truth, and utter sincerity.

The volumes of *The Midland* for the 1920's contain no small number of genuinely distinguished stories of Iowa farm life, the work of writers who did not, for one reason or another, attain book publication. I remember especially the work of Alma Hovey, Clarence Sundermeyer, and Vernon Lichtenstein.