# XVI

## *REVOLT FROM THE VILLAGE*

AMERICAN FICTION had regularly celebrated the American village as the natural home of the pleasant virtues. Certain writers, aware of agrarian discontent or given to a preference for cities, might now and then have laid disrespectful hands upon the farm; but even these hesitated to touch the village. It seemed too cosy a microcosm to be disturbed. There it lay in the mind's eye, neat, compact, organized, traditional: the white church with its tapering spire, the sober schoolhouse, the smithy of the ringing anvil, the corner grocery, the cluster of friendly houses; the venerable parson, the wise physician, the canny squire, the grasping landlord softened or outwitted in the end; the village belle, gossip, atheist, idiot; jovial fathers, gentle mothers, merry children; cool parlors, shining kitchens, spacious barns, lavish gardens, fragrant summer dawns, and comfortable winter evenings. These were images not to be discarded lightly, even by writers who saw that time was discarding many of them as industrialism went on planting ugly factories along the prettiest brooks, bringing in droves of aliens who used unfamiliar tongues and customs, and fouling the air with smoke and gasoline. E. W. Howe in *The Story of a Country Town* had made it plain enough that villages which prided themselves on their pioneer energy might in fact be stagnant backwaters. Mark Twain in *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* had put it bitterly on record that villages too complacent about their honesty might have become a hospitable soil for meanness and falsehood, merely waiting for the proper seed. Clarence Darrow in his elegiac *Farmington* (1904) had insisted that one village at least had known

as much restless longing as simple bliss. But the revolt from the village which brought a new tone into American fiction was most dramatically begun by Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915).

Though it was not a novel, it was the essence of many novels. Masters had imagined a graveyard such as every American village has and had furnished it with epitaphs of such veracity as no village ever saw put into words. The epitaphs seemed to send up a shout of revelation. Readers felt that they had sat down to an incomparable feast of scandal. Where now were the mild decencies of Oldtown, Tiverton, Old Chester, Friendship Village? The roofs and walls of Spoon River were gone and the passers-by could look into every room; the closets were open and all the skeletons rattled; brains and breasts had unlocked themselves and set their most private treasures out for the most public gaze. Masters was particularly outspoken about love, which had rarely been so secretive anywhere as in the American villages of fiction. But about all aspects of behavior in his village he was impatient, if not violent, toward cautious subterfuges. There is filth, he said in effect, behind whited sepulchres; drag it into the light. Spoon River is slack and shabby. Nor is its decay chronicled in any mood of tender pathos. It has been a general demoralization. Except for a few saints and poets, whom Masters hailed with lyric ardor, the people are sunk in greed and hypocrisy and apathy. While inwardly the village dwindles and rots, outwardly it clings to a pitiless decorum which veils its faults till it can overlook them. Again and again the poet went back to the heroic founders of Spoon River, to the days of Lincoln whose shadow lies little heeded across the sons and daughters of meaner days. The town has forgotten its true ancestors.

There were torrents of controversy about the book. The village was defended, the village was attacked, with every grade of relevance. E. W. Howe answered Masters indirectly

and belatedly with *The Anthology of Another Town* (1920). It was not epitaphs in verse for the dead but anecdotes of the living in prose. Howe did not accuse the village at large, nor make a specialty of scandal. He let his memories run through the town, recalling bits of illuminating gossip. Accepting and tolerating its people, he carried on no sentimental tradition. His village is simply a group of human beings of whom some work and some loaf, some behave themselves and some do not, some consequently prosper and some fail, some are happy and some are miserable. His village is not dainty, as in a poem. He believed no village ever was and he knew he had never seen one. Though he appeared to be defending the village, he gave no comfort to those who cherished any idyllic image of it. By 1920 he could have given small comfort if he had tried. The village of the literary tradition had been so long unreal in fact that Masters's angry assault had driven it out of fashion.

The year after *Spoon River* Sherwood Anderson (1876- ) published his first novel—*Windy McPherson's Son*—and the next year his second—*Marching Men*. In both of them the heroes detach themselves from their native villages to seek their fortunes in some city. In both they succeed without satisfaction, unable to find a meaning in the world which has let them have what they thought they wanted. The novels ache with the sense of a dumb confusion in America. Anderson wrote as if he were assembling documents on the eve of revolution. Village peace and stability have departed; all the ancient American customs break or fade; the leaven of change stirs the lump. In *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) Anderson turned to a village which he knew as Masters knew Spoon River. But Anderson was less satirical than Masters. The central figure of the Winesburg stories is a young reporter about to leave the place where he has always lived. He has not greatly hated it, and now because he is going he views it with a good deal of tenderness. It seems to him that most of his old neighbors

are cramped spirits, repressed by village life. This part of their natures distorted beyond all symmetry, that part wasted away in desperate disuse, they have become grotesques. Their visions have no chance to be realities, and so make visionaries. Their religion, without poetry, is either rigid or cloudy. Love, lacking spontaneity, settles into fleshly habit or is stifled and malicious. Heroism of deed or thought either withers into melancholy inaction or else protects itself with a sullen or ridiculous bravado. If Masters in Spoon River looked cynically at the stealthy life there, Anderson in Winesburg looked sympathetically at the buried life, buried and pitiful.

In the short stories collected in *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921), *Horses and Men* (1923), and the later *Death in the Woods* (1933) Anderson did his most lasting work. Touching American life at many places and always throwing a warm if sad light upon it, the stories had a point and impact which he sometimes lost when he wandered and brooded through novels like *Poor White* (1920), the contorted *Many Marriages* (1922), and *Dark Laughter* (1925), with its rich, deep background of instinctive life among the Negroes who make white life seem thin and dry in comparison. *A Story Teller's Story* (1924) and *Tar: A Midwest Childhood* (1926) have Anderson himself as a hero, but the same kind of hero as in most of the other books. Perhaps there is as much fiction in his autobiography as there is autobiography in his fiction. In any case, his own life was the chief source of his art. Born in Ohio, he had little formal schooling, served in the war with Spain, and settled into business without any definite aim or any consciousness of his gifts or desires. Gradually the conviction came over him that he could no longer find happiness in the routine life of his time. He gave up business, went to Chicago, and wrote stories and novels about heroes like himself, with thoughts like his. The nation, he thought, had reached its goal of material prosperity but did not look ahead to intellectual and spiritual completions. It had grown fat

with overfeeding and slowed its march. It was dead-alive. Men ought to be full of vitality, full of beauty and heroism. Anderson went beyond the revolt from the village to an imaginative criticism of the whole American world. But he did not outgrow his earlier confusions. His revolt and his criticism were hardly more than a warning to men not to be too sure and smug in their opinions. After a while, this seemed negative and tenuous. He retired in 1925 to Virginia, became a country editor, and put less of himself into his books, though he still puzzled over how to get at what was true and simple in human life and to make it clear.

The village invented by Zona Gale (1874-1938) of Wisconsin to be the setting for *Friendship Village* (1908) and *Friendship Village Love Stories* (1909), was one of the sweetest of all literary villages. Its views of life were rosy as well as homely, and happy endings were orthodox in its stories of self-reliance and self-sacrifice. But *Birth* (1918) told the story of a man who in spite of a good heart is always inept and unlucky and who bores all who can be bored. No miracle comes to reward him for his genuine merits. Born a blunderer, he dies one. It implied a kind of revolution in village fiction that Zona Gale at no point sweetened or softened her story. In an American village, no less than elsewhere, good hearts might not be enough. In *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920) she brought a delicate malice to bear on the story of the heroine, who is a dim drudge in the house of her silly sister and her sister's pompous husband, but who has a brief adventure into freedom and comes back, though temporarily defeated, better for her rebellion. Zona Gale did not pile up accusations against the town of Warbleton in general. She concerned herself principally with the tedious affectations of the Deacon household. "In the conversations of Dwight and Ina," the husband and wife, "you saw the historical home forming in clots in the fluid wash of the community." With a spare plot and a staccato style Zona Gale set forth a lively, intelligent drama

which with few changes could reach the stage and have a striking success. In her later books she did not return to the sweetness of Friendship Village. *Preface to a Life* (1926) was a speculative and mystical novel which deserved more notice than it got, and there were exquisite crisp short stories in *Yellow Gentians and Blue* (1927) and *Bridal Pond* (1930).

The year of *Miss Lulu Bett*, *Poor White*, and *The Anthology of Another Town* is memorable in the history of American fiction. It was the year also of Upton Sinclair's *100%*, Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*, Floyd Dell's *Moon-Calf*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*. It was the year of James Branch Cabell's ironical romance *Figures of Earth* and Sinclair Lewis's epoch-marking *Main Street*. Whatever differences there were among them, they had in common a lively critical temper. That temper had been rising since before the war, and was soon to take a concerted stand in the acid symposium *Civilization in the United States* (1922) by thirty inquiring Americans. The change in attitude toward the village was only one symptom of the general change going on in fiction, and the change in fiction was only one aspect of a wide-ranging shift in accepted values. The simple provincialism of the older America no longer met the needs of the Younger Generation, which had come to think of the country as dusty and dull. They attacked fundamentalism in religion, capitalism in industry, commercialism in education, science, and the arts, chauvinism in international affairs, reactionism in public opinion at large. Most of them had eagerly read George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. The Russian revolution seemed to have shaken the world. Various foreign cultures were held up as examples to backward, standardized America. In particular the native Puritan strain was called responsible for many modern American defects and faults. Mary Austin in *The American Rhythm* (1923) argued that the Indians had understood America better, and had adjusted themselves to it better, than the

white men. Stress was laid upon the share of the Negroes in American life—especially its music, dancing, folk-lore—and a group of writers, most of them of African descent, produced the panoramic volume *The New Negro* (1925) edited by Alain Locke.

As the overwhelming bulk of American literature had been written in English, so had it been written by men and women of British stocks. Now there appeared an increasing number of writers who belonged, usually, to the second generation of newer immigrants. They brought qualities not common in the Anglo-American literature; they also insisted that the racial and national diversity of American culture be recognized. The arts were touched by the melting-pot. Some of the immigrants had little literatures in their own language, like the Yiddish in New York and the Scandinavian in Minnesota, as the Germans had long had in Pennsylvania and the French in Louisiana. But the most notable of the immigrant novels before 1920, Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), was written in English. It records the making of an American, originally a reader of Talmud in a Russian village and eventually the principal figure in the garment trade in America; it traces the evolution of an industry. In the end Levinsky, with all his New World wealth, lacks the peace he might have had if he had not sacrificed his Old World integrity and faith. This was an immigrant who knew he had lost something by his change of country, and could not be wholly proud of changing or wholly grateful to America for changing him. Sholem Asch, who wrote in Yiddish, and chiefly on European themes, belongs to American literature only by virtue of his later residence in the United States and his high rank among the American writers who have used other languages than English.

The criticism that Cahan implied was clearly stated in *Up Stream* (1922), the autobiography of Ludwig Lewisohn (1883- ). Though born in Germany, he had come to

America as a child and had grown up in American circumstances. But, a scholar and a critic of learning and taste, he found he could not join in the ordinary immigrant chorus of praise. He liked neither Puritanism nor vulgarity. From being one of the most effective critics of the newer literature he turned to being a novelist. In his powerful *The Case of Mr. Crump* (1926), published only in Paris, he created the most unpleasant woman in American fiction, or perhaps in any. In *The Island Within* (1928), *Stephen Escott* (1930), and *Last Days of Shylock* (1931) he studied with much subtlety, if with occasional melodrama, the relations between Jews and Christians.

The immigrant novels called attention to a new frontier in America. Its pioneers do not, like the earlier ones, face hostile savages and stubborn nature. They are more likely to be set down in shop or mill or mine, herded in slums, exploited by the descendants of pioneers who came first. With the newer stocks an ancient process begins over again. Even those who, like Lewisohn's characters, do not live on the plane of bare survival, have to endure prejudice and insult. Yet one of the immigrants dealt with the old frontier, but dealt with it in a new way. Ole Edvart Rölvaag (1876-1931) came from Norway at twenty to South Dakota, and for most of his mature life was professor of Norwegian at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. He strongly defended the right of Norwegians in America to keep their racial culture, deplored their inclination to drift away from it. The best of his novels, and the best of all immigrant novels in the United States, was written in Norwegian, first published in Norway in two parts (1924-25), and translated into English with the title *Giants in the Earth* (1927). Completely naturalized, the book is as much a part of American literature as of Norwegian. The scene is South Dakota in the seventies. The chief characters are Per Hansa, an inland viking with a fated passion to conquer the wilderness, and Beret Holm, his terrified companion who is always

homesick for the land and the folkways she left behind. If the frontier was heroic, so was it tragic. For whatever it gave it asked hard prices, in loneliness, pain, insecurity, barren living. Men must live for the future, and perhaps never see it. A few ruthless wills drive all the rest. Rölvaag dramatized the conflict between the willing and the unwilling pioneers as intensely as that between men and nature. Compared with *Giants in the Earth* most novels of the frontier seem thoughtless romances. But it is, for all its profound realism, rich in matter and magical in style.