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Reading in an Age of Catastrophe

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Facing the Abyss: American Literature and Culture in the 1940s

by George Hutchinson

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1.

George Hutchinson's *Facing the Abyss* has bracing and revelatory things to say about American culture in the 1940s; also, by contrast and implication, about American culture today. The book brings into focus intellectual and emotional realities of the decade during and after World War II that current historical memory largely occludes behind heroicizing or condescending stereotypes. On the one hand, popular media serve up nostalgia for a "Greatest Generation." On the other hand, academic dogma rebukes the decade's aspirations for "universality," for an inclusive sense of what it means to be human, portraying those hopes as imperialist cudgels designed to impose Western values on a postcolonial world. Hutchinson's demolitions of these and other recent fantasies typically begin with phrases like "On the contrary" or "This was not the case."

His first chapter, "When Literature Mattered," summarizes a brief era unlike any other, when Americans of all classes and backgrounds turned hungrily to novels, plays, and poems, provoked by a "need to recapture the meaning of personal experience." Soldiers who had never picked up a book now read free Armed Services Editions paperbacks—more than a hundred million came off the presses from 1943 to 1947—first for relief from wartime tedium, then because the books offered them new ways to understand their relationships and inner lives. Educated readers, meanwhile, grew impatient with both the collectivist ethos and the formalist aesthetics that had governed intellectual life a few years earlier. Later, after the 1940s ended, literature lost its importance in general culture—it no longer mattered—partly because, as Hutchinson writes, "other media drew leisure-time attention," but also because it "became increasingly (but not exclusively) a professional specialization supported by universities."

Hutchinson's central theme is that literature mattered in the 1940s because it focused on experiences that happened to everyone and because it made sense of them, not by abstracting

or generalizing, but by recognizing that those common experiences came to everyone in a unique way:

When Richard Wright narrates episodes of his youth in *Black Boy* (1945), he doesn't mean to say that the fear, shame, and hatred that haunted his childhood can only be true for *him*, nor are they only relevant to other African Americans. He writes as an embodied human being to other human beings—who also are afraid, shamed, and hateful for their own reasons—with a faith in the possibility that they will listen and come to a “human” (his term) understanding of his experience and also of themselves, whoever and wherever they are—and that they will be changed by that understanding as he was.



Beinecke Library, Yale University/Van Vechten Trust

Ann Petry, 1948; photograph by Carl Van Vechten

Ann Petry, whose first novel, *The Street* (1946), about a black woman in Harlem, sold a million copies, wrote her second novel, *Country Place* (1947), about a white family who experienced what Petry's African-American family had experienced.¹ Another black author, Willard Motley, wrote his first novel, *Knock on Any Door* (1947), about an Italian working-class family. Humphrey Bogart starred in the film made from it. “Black critics as of 1950 considered these novels...among the most important literary achievements since 1935.”

Hutchinson's two previous books were learned polemics against present-day interpretative habits and cultural presuppositions that insist on placing dark-skinned writers and artists in ethnic or racial categories. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1996) summarizes in its title its argument that category words like “black” and “white” distort historical reality, that the varied sources of the Harlem Renaissance included John Dewey's pragmatism and much else that racial categories conceal. *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (2006) exploded more or less everything that earlier scholars claimed to have uncovered about Larsen's life and work. Those scholars had proven, they thought, that she systematically lied about herself and about her connections to Denmark through her Danish mother. Hutchinson proved, on the contrary, that Larsen told the truth, and, more disturbingly, he maintained that the scholars had insisted that she lied because they were intent on perceiving her through rigid categories of black and white.

Facing the Abyss widens and deepens Hutchinson's demonstrations of what goes wrong when, in his phrase, “categorization precedes interpretation.” Jewish writers of the 1940s typically held views that “fly in the face of more recent efforts to constitute Jewish American literature as an academic field.” Muriel Rukeyser's poems “suggest...how a Jewish woman

can speak for Christians, for all humanity,” because “Jewishness, in Rukeyser’s view, is not a particularist identity but a pathway to a universal subject position, a crossroads, made ethically obligatory in an age of global catastrophe, in which the extermination of the Jews takes on planetary significance.” About the novelist Jo Sinclair, he writes:

If her Jewishness, and queerness, inflected her writing and her choice of subject matter, it made her no different *as a writer* from others whose experience as gentile, as Negro, as straight, as male, inflected their work. This insistence, difficult and contradictory as it may seem, was ubiquitous and indicates a trajectory of shared aspirations, particularly among “minoritized” writers.

He redraws the cultural map of the 1940s by tracing connections that critics and historians have mostly ignored:

Championing gay or lesbian identity as such...was rarely the point of the work of gay, lesbian, or “queer”-oriented writers; they attacked homophobia and the need to “label” people according to their desires or sexual practices. And this critique, surprisingly often, connected with related, explicit critiques of racism and anti-Semitism. Identity politics is what fascists and anti-Semites practice, what homophobes practice, what white supremacists and segregationists practice. Again and again the intersection of such attitudes—how they “interlock,” as James Baldwin would put it in 1949—emerge in the work of the 1940s.

Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, a bildungsroman of sexual self-discovery, is, as Hutchinson observes, as much concerned with racial prejudices as with sexual ones: “The heritage of slavery and whites’ disavowal of the humanity of African Americans resounds throughout the novel so insistently it is amazing how little attention has been paid to that theme.... Perhaps our categorizations are at fault.”

Hutchinson’s moral point throughout is the difference between a sympathetic sense of another person’s inner life and an objectifying sense of another person as a member of a category. Ethnic, sexual, and racial hatreds are always directed collectively against categories of persons, but anyone who is the object of such hatred experiences it subjectively and uniquely, as a direct assault on that person’s self.

Mary Douglas’s anthropological classic *Purity and Danger* (1966) identifies the terror of category-crossing as the source of many deep and otherwise puzzling taboos, such as the prohibitions in Leviticus against wearing cloth woven from wool and linen—animal fibers and plant fibers—and against eating animals like the rabbit or the camel that chew the cud but do not divide the hoof.² The same terror seems to be at large in a culture that anathematizes as “cultural appropriation” the ordinary exchange of manners and techniques that have shaped every culture at all times. “Cultural diffusion,” Hutchinson writes, has always been the case: “cultures developed in relationship to one another.” He points toward the irony that academic

and media cultures convinced of their own enlightenment are driven by the same sort of terrors that drove Southern gentlemen to make a crime of what they called “miscegenation.”

Jewish writers in the 1940s, Hutchinson observes, had little interest in the “cultural-identity politics” espoused everywhere today. “Who, after all,” he asks,

were the greatest exponents of identity politics in the 1930s and early 1940s? Mussolini, Hirohito, Hitler. At home: Father Coughlin, the German *Bund*, Southern senators, nativists, racists, and anti-Semites.

The answer to category-hatred of all kinds is not, in Hutchinson’s view, category-celebrations or category-pride. He quotes Bob Jones, the protagonist of Chester Himes’s novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), refusing his girlfriend’s vision of racial progress, in which

you simply had to accept being black as a condition over which you had no control, then go on from there. Glorify your black heritage, revere your black heroes, laud your black leaders, cheat your black brothers, worship your white fathers (be sure and do that), segregate yourself; then make yourself believe that you had made great progress....

Bob Jones refuses the fatalism that sees categories as immutable.³ His real enemy

is racialization as such. He hates white people for their racism, but what he wants is not a separate sphere for blacks. The boundary between white and black is his ultimate antagonist, an affront to his manhood. He does not pose as a black man fighting for his people but as a humanist at odds with racial identity.

Hutchinson writes of “the violence of categorization”—and in civic life, categorization can take violent, lethal effect when the categorizer is holding a gun. In academic life its effects are sometimes comic. Hutchinson reports that “a distinguished scholar of Southern literature” used a novel about black life by Bucklin Moon “to advance his argument that black and white Southern authors cannot fit under the same umbrella of ‘southern literature.’” The distinguished scholar had failed to notice that Bucklin Moon was white.

2.

Hutchinson’s ambitions extend beyond the 1940s to larger questions about American culture. Critics and philosophers who interpret American culture in a vocabulary learned from European culture mislead themselves and their professional disciples. In the 1940s Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno wrote still-influential essays about



Marlene Dumas/David Zwirner

Marlene Dumas: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Chester Himes, from her ‘Great Men’ series, 2014–2018. The drawings are on view in ‘God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James

the debased American popular-culture industry, but as Hutchinson observes, they had assumed—naively and provincially—

Baldwin, ' an exhibition curated by Hilton Als, at David Zwirner Gallery, New York City, through February 16, 2019.

that the American class system matched the Central European class system, that American mass culture, like European kitsch, had been imposed on the lumpen masses by their economic overlords. In reality, American mass culture arose from different classes producing, out of their own varied sources, cultures of their own, most famously in the rise of jazz, which Adorno loathed. At the same time, American popular arts absorbed visual and verbal techniques from the most rarefied avant-garde in ways that had few European parallels.

The *Batman* comic books, Hutchinson reports, adopted the styles of expressionist film and modernist typography. (This was not a new development: the *Krazy Kat* comic strip showed comparable influences twenty years earlier.) Popular culture became receptive to self-conscious modernism in ways unique to the decade. Gertrude Stein, “no longer a joke in the newspapers and popular magazines,” had become “a respected cultural icon,” commissioned by *Life* magazine in 1945 to travel with American troops while gathering material for a long photo essay on postwar Germany. Hutchinson reproduces the magazine’s photo of Stein posing with a half-dozen soldiers at the wreck of Hitler’s bunker.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, “mass culture threatened the ‘negative’ function of art, which is to evoke a critical perspective on the everyday workings of ideology from a relatively autonomous, alienated position.” But the war had provoked even determinedly autonomous aesthetes like Wallace Stevens out of alienation into “passionate engagement.” Stevens, Hutchinson writes,

spoke before Pearl Harbor of poetry as “resisting or evading the pressure of reality”; by August 1943 he had changed his mind: poetry required an “agreement with reality.”

Hutchinson quotes Stevens’s “Of Modern Poetry” (1942):

*It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war....*

In his chapter on the labor movement, Hutchinson traces a change in working-class writing from the collective partisan sensibilities of the 1930s to a new sense of everyone’s unique personal experience of labor. Writers who turned away from the Communist Party and its collective truisms had, ironically enough, learned from Marxism to value their individual labor as writers. The party’s demand for party-line writing had the effect of commodifying art, of alienating writers from their own experience. Hutchinson notes that writers who abandoned Marxist dogmas in the 1940s did so in the hope of achieving the integrity and purpose that Marxism had promised, but that no collectivist ideology could provide. Richard Wright was one of many writers driven away from dogmas that “would require him to

sacrifice his intellectual and artistic integrity.... Wright split with the Communist Party over a question of labor—his labor.”

Hutchinson’s chapter on the war emphasizes its effect on inward rather than collective experience: “Throughout the literature of the war one finds an attempt to capture the changing phenomenology of time.” A “sense of separation, of loneliness and unreality” was everywhere, in the barracks and at home: in Saul Bellow’s novel *Dangling Man* (1944), about a draftee in the timeless-seeming interval before being inducted; in Charles Jackson’s novel *The Fall of Valor* (1946), about a civilian discovering his homosexuality in the wartime interval when “only one thing,” the war itself, “had ‘duration’”; in a poem by Karl Shapiro where induction is “the summons to end time.”

A persistent theme in this book is the difference between power and freedom—and the fantasy that, for those who have neither, power can bring both. A chapter titled “Women and Power” traces unsettling explorations of this theme in novels by Mary McCarthy, Dawn Powell, and Ann Petry, each writing about women whose power over men depends on power that they derive from other men. Eleanor Roosevelt’s influential status as a newspaper columnist is one of Hutchinson’s many variations on this theme. His chapter also explores changing ideas of women and power in novels and plays by men such as Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, and Chester Himes, in which old sexual stereotypes become newly tangled and contradictory. At the end of the chapter Hutchinson extends his theme into racial power relations through Eudora Welty’s story “Powerhouse” (1941). The title character—a singer modeled on Fats Waller—clowns for his white audience, but his fury at doing so “redoubles the performance beyond their ken as a self-affirming act of defiance.”

The book ends with two paired chapters, one on the ecological vision that emerged among writers in the 1940s, partly in response to the war, the other on the thinking that led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948. Both chapters describe visions of interconnectedness, one between nature and human beings, the other among all human beings. Hutchinson points to a telling difference between ecological thinking in the 1940s and in later decades, with the 1940s more concerned with understanding nature (“the land”) as integral with human culture, less focused on nostalgic hopes of restoring the land to its prehuman condition.

His chapter on the Universal Declaration refutes, systematically and in detail, current academic dogmas through which it “has been routinely critiqued as an instrument of Western imperialism,” built from Enlightenment doctrines of personal autonomy. By disentangling the history of the declaration from later myths about it, and by pointing to passages in it that are often ignored, Hutchinson shows that it derives from a combination of Confucianism and Dewey’s pragmatism, and that, far from celebrating personal autonomy, it emphasizes mutual relations of persons and communities. This “pragmatist pluralism” emerged from a collaboration between Eleanor Roosevelt and the philosopher-diplomat Zhang Pengchun (then known as P. C. Chang).

3.

Hutchinson is a professor in an English department (at Cornell), a fact that may help to explain why, in a book written with angry moral passion throughout, he sounds especially exasperated when reporting academic intellectual follies, and also why he sometimes slips into the professionalized vocabulary (“the performance of power,” “the pervasive gendering of power relations”) in which those follies get written. He makes a point of naming celebrated academics who purvey simplifying stereotypes, or declare theoretical prescriptions about what literature ought to do, or confuse English department culture with culture at large. He holds his fire with nontenured offenders, who are named only in laconic endnotes. Adorno figures in this book as a faintly comic figure, unconscious of the New World’s cultural riches because he understood only the Old.

Contemporary culture, having learned that anyone who stereotypes cultures that are remote in space—on another continent or across the tracks—risks shunning and contempt, has also learned to honor and reward anyone who stereotypes cultures that are remote in time by a half-century or more, as in *Mad Men* or *The Shape of Water*, cultures populated by the dead who never feel offended. The motive that drives today’s stereotypes about the past is the same motive that once drove imperialist stereotypes about “lesser breeds without the Law”: the urgent need to convince oneself that one’s own culture has ascended into the light, that its injustices are trivial and ignorable, unlike remote unjust cultures sunk in outer darkness, passively waiting in the distance of time or space for our culture to arrive and correct them.

Cultures incline either toward virtue or penitence: either toward declaring their own virtue by shaming others for lacking it, or, as in Hutchinson’s portrayal of the 1940s, by seeking inwardly to correct their own faults and failures. The war against fascism, he writes, “brought a shameful self-consciousness about the fascist and racist qualities of Americans themselves, including those who were engaged in the fighting”:

Yes, Hitler is a monster, and yes, the United States had no choice but to enter the war, but this is not what writers focus on. More often, one finds doubts about the self, existential guilt, a probing for the disease in the human heart that causes war.

Writers who had seen combat bore witness to “sickening levels of racism, anti-Semitism, and senseless brutality among the soldiers,” and their work makes “almost no suggestion of moral superiority of the Americans to their antagonists.” Marianne Moore wrote, “There never was a war that was/not inward.” Hutchinson describes a literature and culture in which outer disasters provoked inward crises, in which writers and artists were urgently aware of what W.H. Auden, in a poem from the 1940s, called “the pantocratic [universe-ruling] riddle”: “Who are you and why?” Hutchinson’s book is, among many other things, a study in the ways virtue cultures get almost everything wrong while penitence cultures have at least some hope of getting things right.

Hutchinson has no wish to return to the decade of the 1940s—its profligate injustice is one of his recurring themes—but he admires its culture, which made room for uncomfortable truth-telling about the motives and costs of its own injustice, and which found real though partial ways to lessen it. His closing paragraph is mostly elegiac: “The world-government movement died in the late 1940s, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights never developed into a covenant with legal force.... Ecological thinking did not get far, either, in the atmosphere of the Cold War.” But in the rebellions of 1968 and after he hears “reverberations” of the 1940s’ most generous motives and promising energies.

The culture and literature of the 1940s were, Hutchinson found when writing about them, “both unexpected and inspiring.” As is this book.

1 Two of Petry’s novels, *The Street* and *The Narrows*, have now been reprinted in a single volume by the Library of America. ↵

2 She later renounced this interpretation of rabbinical laws, but it retains its force in other contexts. ↵

3 See Darryl Pinckney, “The Afro-Pessimist Temptation,” *The New York Review*, June 7, 2018. ↵